


Chapter 2

Considerations for Exercising Researcher Agency for the Doctoral Dissertation Student

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ABSTRACT

A book chapter addressing doctoral student agency can be critical to explore. Students and educators may benefit by understanding the context of higher education backdrops. The author explores agency through grit, meaning, mindset, and leadership. Students can progress through the stages of development, access meaning, consciousness, and self-efficacy by cultivating growth mindsets and grit. Case studies to reflect on student, faculty, and institutional issues are explored. Advice for student application is provided. Students should consider the impact of their ideas to reach local and global communities. Students can benefit via clear thinking and writing through reflection, expression, and creativity. Students can direct their own experiences with supportive mentors, selecting institutions that have quality, cutting-edge resources, and their best interests in mind. Students can develop skills to adapt through challenges, pessimism, or low esteem. Institutions and faculty can help cultivate agency through their dedication and responses to students seeking to realize their goals.

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INTRODUCTION

The current demands for doctoral students to navigate global job markets, align their knowledge, skills, and abilities with jobs in their fields, while keeping pace with global trends in technology and business are for many cumbersome. Rising stress levels due to global uncertainty, the economy, political climate, and physical or mental wellness, can cause students to feel overwhelmed instead of inspired to achieve their educational goals (Stress in America, 2022; Stress in America, 2023; Stress in America, 2024). To meet the demands, pace, and complexity of global market trends, students must seek out and utilize all available resources, networks, strategies, and be quick to adapt.

High attrition rates, between 50-60% across major degree programs for doctoral students in high income countries, make it difficult for them to remain above the curve (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; National Research Council, 2011). To remain competitive in their fields, doctoral students must develop a strong mindset, be savvy and sophisticated, both professionally and personally, globally aware, and emotionally resilient. Student success requires supportive faculty, research advisors, and institutions that support and value students with their time and resources. Doctoral students drop out for a variety of factors such as: personal, financial, and health challenges, interest and motivation concerns, mediocre or misaligned supervision and mentorship, commitments outside of school which distract or do not align with student life, time pressure, feelings of isolation, programs and study foci that do not align with student goals, lack of skills, confidence, preparation, purpose, or determination to complete their research (Castelló et al., 2017; Cornér et al., 2021; Glorieux et al., 2024; Leijen et al., 2016; Shur, 2024). The primary focus of this discussion will be to understand more about the challenges and barriers to success experienced by doctoral students conducting dissertation research, while considering the critical determinants of success.

In this chapter, an examination of the topic of doctoral student researcher agency will seek to go beyond general notions of completion, success, and satisfaction, but instead toward the optimization of the doctoral student experience. This is indeed necessary during a time where career uncertainty, global instability, rapid changes in technology, the prevalence of complex societal pressures, and demand for professionals to meet global skills deficits pervue. Directed toward the individual, a critical examination of doctoral student personal development, agency, resilience, physical/mental/spiritual preparation, continuous learning, personal initiative and responsibility, and awareness of global market demands will help to position doctoral students to achieve personal and professional outcomes that exceed expectations. On an external level, specific frameworks and approaches that can be fostered at an institutional level, by faculty, and through departmental planning and programming

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