In this issue:

Cultural Influence on Social Isolation in Doctoral Programs and Doctoral Attrition - A Case Study

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the influence that cultural practices has on feeling of social isolation and student attrition in doctoral programs. It has been established that doctoral programs have a high percentages of attrition or dropping out of the program among their students before completion. This phenomenon has been studied repeatedly and a number of findings were concluded from these studies. One of the findings is that social isolation contributes significantly to the student dropping out of the doctoral programs. This paper take it a step further by studying the effects that cultural practices have on the feeling of social isolation and as a sequence on the decision of the student to drop out of the doctoral program. It takes the doctoral program in Information Systems and Communication (DISC) at Robert Morris University as a case example for this study. The paper begins by summarizing the findings of previous studies and then shifts to focus on the effect that culture has on the feeling of social isolation among doctoral students.

Keywords: Culture influence and social isolation, Culture Social Isolation and Doctoral Attrition, Social Isolation in doctoral programs and culture, Culture effect on doctoral attrition

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Cultural Influence on Social Isolation in Doctoral Programs and Doctoral Attrition – A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the influence that cultural practices has on feeling of social isolation and student attrition in doctoral programs. It has been established that doctoral programs have a higher percentage of attrition or dropping out of the program among their students before completion. This phenomenon has been studied repeatedly and a number of findings were concluded from these studies. One of the findings is that social isolation contributes significantly to the student dropping out of the doctoral programs. This paper take it a step further by studying the effects that cultural practices have on the feeling of social isolation and as a sequence on the decision of the student to drop out of the doctoral program. It takes the doctoral program in Information Systems and Communication (DISC) at Robert Morris University as a case example for this study. The paper begins by summarizing the findings of previous studies and then shifts to focus on the effect that culture has on the feeling of social isolation among doctoral students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Doctoral attrition has been the subject of numerous studies and been the center stage for many forums (Lewis, C. 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Hawlery, 2003). The bulk of the studies that have focused on this phenomenon concluded that a high percentage of students drop out of doctoral studies prior to completing their doctorate degrees. The studies initially focused on the background of the student and their lack of preparedness for the rigor of the doctoral program as the main reason for dropping out (Lewis, 2004; Kohun & Ali, 2005, Hockey, 1994).

Additional studies focused on the design of the programs and noted that some programs do not take into consideration the social aspect for the students enrolled in the program. The same studies noted further that the feeling of social isolation among doctoral students is a prime reason that makes doctoral students drop out of their program prior to completing their doctorate degrees. In other words, most doctoral programs do not provide facilities that accommodate this social aspect and do not attempt to have steps for social inclusion of the doctoral students.

A number of programs have took a not about the effect that social isolation has on the students and have taken active steps for social inclusion. Among these programs is the doctoral program for Information Systems and Communication (DISC) at Robert Morris University. This program has taken active steps from the beginning to deal with the issue of social isolation among their students and was successful in maintaining a higher percentage of graduating their students from their programs.

Despite their efforts, there remain a number of factors still influences the feeling of social isolation and thereafter the decision to drop out of the doctoral programs. Among these factors is the influence that cultural backgrounds have on the students and then the feeling of social isolation.

This paper conducts an ethnographic study on a group of students on the influence of cultural on the feeling of social isolation and the decision to leave doctoral programs prior to completing it. The basic premise of the paper is that students with similar cultural background tend to congregate together in the doctoral program. This kind of congregation impedes efforts to socially integrate the students into the program, thus increases the chance for feeling of social isolation and then dropping out of the program prior to obtaining the doctorate degree.

Put t in other words, students who stay with their same cultural group have a higher chance of feeling socially isolated and do less effectively in the program. By the same token, students who are more socially open and mix with students from different backgrounds have more of a chance to be socially integrated into the program and a better prospect for completing their doctorate degree.

2. PRIOR STUDIES IN NUTHSELL

The following is the basic conclusion/findings of the previous studies that were conducted regarding the same subject:

- The percentage of students dropping out of doctoral programs prior to completing their degree is very high. It is estimated that about 50% of students start studying for their doctorate degree but drop out prior completing it Lovitts, 2001; Ali & Kohun, 2006, Hockey , 1994).

- Students who leave the doctoral programs leave silently, thus this problem did not receive the attention it deserves from many programs (Hawlery, 2003).

- Some programs blamed the background of the student as the main reason for dropping out.

- It has been noticed that the feeling of social isolation among doctoral students is a prime reason for making students drop out of the doctoral programs (Lewis, 2004; Kohun & Ali, 2005).

- Most doctoral programs do not have formal policy for socially integrating the students into the doctoral program, thus the percentage of doctoral attrition is higher (Bess, 1978).

- Some programs have taken active steps to deal with the issue of social isolation among students in the doctoral program. These programs were able to graduate a higher percentage of their students than national average. Among these programs is the DISC program at Robert Morris University (Ali & Kohun, 2006).

- Despite this effort to socially integrate students into doctoral programs, some cultural background remains as impediment in this social integration. Students with similar cultural background remain limited in their social contacts to their own social group, thus limits getting a feedback from a wider range of their peers in the program (Bentley, 2004; Ali & Kohun, 2006).

- The students who stick to their own group of social culture have a higher chance that they will be socially isolated and thus drop out of the doctoral program.

3. THE DISC PROGRAM AT RMU

The Doctorate of Science in Information Systems and Communications program at Robert Morris University started in 1999. This program was able to graduate students at higher rate and with less time than the national average. Over the nine years since this program started, the rate of graduation in this three year program was above 90%. In a prior study conducted by the authors of this paper, the success of the graduation

rate and time of completion was attributed to the following factors (Kohun & Ali, 2005):

1- Three years lock-step program: The program is designed to be completed in three years. The students take specified number of courses each semester and registration and all administration procedures are taken care by staff from the university.

2- Cohort approach: The students are accepted as cohorts. All students in a given cohort start the program at the same time, take the same courses each semester and are supposed to complete the program together.

3- Residency week and weekends: The program is taught in a residency week at the beginning of the semester and three residency weekends during the semester. Students stay at a nearby hotel to simplify commuting from the hotel to the university to take courses all day long during their residencies.

Further, a survey conducted for three cohorts enrolled in the program found out that the students enrolled in the program recognized the role that the feeling of isolation had on their studies. The students further felt that the residency program and the cohort approach helped minimize attrition among the students (Kohun & Ali, 2005).

4. METHODOLOGY AND DISCUSSION

There has been much written in the literature regarding the role of isolation with the high rate of doctoral program non-completion or attrition among doctoral students (Ali and Kohun, 2006; Lovitts, 2001). While these literature has focused on isolation as one of the numerous factors attributed to doctoral attrition, this paper take it a step further to report on a nine year case study following 9 doctoral cohorts and associating isolation with demonstrable student difficulty in one or more of the areas defined in Table 1.

The DISC doctoral program, while in its tenth year, has graduated 110 students. Overall, due to the structured nature of the program as listed above, there has been a 90% success rate (defined as graduating within the published three-year time frame

of the program). Although the program is structured to minimize one of the leading factors in doctoral program attrition—social isolation—there is still an approximately a ten percent attrition/prolonged course of study rate. In order to study the basis for this attrition/prolonged course of study rate the following analysis was undertaken. Metrics for this analysis were derived from both the literature and as a result of the doctoral faculty committee participating in a modified Delphi technique (Lovitts, 2001). The metrics derived are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 1: Areas of Student Performance

1. Attendance
2. Course grades
3. Lateness of assignments
4. Qualifier exam performance
5. Date of research proposal defense with respect to the rest of the cohort
6. Date of final research defense with respect to the rest of the cohort.

Table 2: Metrics Defining Doctoral Isolation

1) Whether or not student stayed in the included residency hotel accommodations
2) Established personal relationships with more than 3 cohort members
3) Regularly comes to class late/leaves early
4) Regularly brings a friend/spouse to residencies
5) Participation in class discussion/exercises is limited or removed

These metrics were used to evaluate each of the 110 students of the nine doctoral cohorts to determine which of any of the students met the criteria that operationally defined isolation. Each of the past and current students was individually assessed by the doctoral faculty to determine which if any of the metrics applied. Only if 3 of the 5 metrics were applicable were the students determined as being "isolated." 18 students were identified among the students enrolled on the program. Then the records of those 18 students identified as meeting the characte-

ristics of isolation were evaluated in terms of the areas of student performance as defined in Table 1 above. From the data in Table 3 below it appears that nearly all of the 18 identified students as being isolated reflect performance issues in regards to lateness for submitting their research proposals.

Table 3 Student Isolation/Performance Analysis

Co-hort/ Stu-dent	At-ten-dan-ce	Gra-des	Late-ness	Pro-pos-al	Fi-nal De-fen-se
C 1 / 1	Fair	OK	Frequent	Late	Late
C 1 / 2	Fair	OK	Frequent	Late	Late
C 1 / 3	Good	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C 2 / 4	Good	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C 3 / 5	Fair	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C 3 / 6	Fair	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C 4 / 7	Good	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C 4 / 8	Fair	OK	Frequent	Late	Late
C 5 / 9	Fair	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C5/ 10	Fair	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C6/11	Fair	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C6/ 12	Fair	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C6/ 13	Poor	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C7/ 14	Fair	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C7/ 15	Good	Low	Frequent	Late	Late
C8/ 16	Good	OK	Frequent	Late	NA
C8/17	Fair	Low	Frequent	Late	NA
C9/ 18	Good	Low	Frequent	NA	NA

5. SUMMARY

This study builds on two previous studies identifying factors in student attrition from IS doctoral programs. While it has been established that one of the predominant factors of attrition from doctoral programs is student isolation, few studies have at-tempted to identify specific factors that cha-racterize isolation and how it is manifested with respect to the students that are not considered isolated. As a case study, this research used data from the past nine years in an IS doctoral program that had graduat-ed 110 students with only a 10% attrition rate. This doctoral program is in executive format, extremely structured, lock step, re-sidency based, and milestone driven. Using these criteria and applying them to the 110 students yielded 18 students that fit an "iso-lation" profile. One can conclude that there is a relationship, at least among these 18 students, for those students that meet 3 of the 5 metrics that define isolation, to display performance characteristics below those of the other students. Further research will explore how program structure can be mod-ified to minimize the potential for a student to display those isolation metrics.

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