Sharing the Doctoral Experience: Using Peer-to-Peer Relationships to Enhance the Doctoral Student Experience

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The national attrition rate for doctoral students is not favorable for institutions as some studies indicate that 50% to 65% of doctoral students do not finish their degree (National Research Council, 1996). Losing doctoral students is costly to faculty, departments, and the institution, while also negatively impacting the number of qualified and educated individuals to fill vacant jobs (Lovitts, 2001). Therefore, understanding how to prevent attrition should be of concern to those currently in academia and those considering a doctoral degree. Two reasons for doctoral student attrition are: (a) isolation of the student, and (b) student poor fit of expectations between student and department (Golde, 2005). Literature suggests mentoring, especially peer-to-peer mentoring can help combat these two factors of attrition. This symposium will use an existing peer mentoring network to discuss ways to minimize contributors to attrition.

Mentoring is a topic that has not gone unnoticed in relation to the growth of doctoral students (Costa, 2005; Pastore, 2003) and has commonly been discussed as a means to assist students in developing the personal and professional attributes needed for a successful career in academia (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007). Two commonly studied relationships in the mentoring literature are the advisor-student relationship and the peer-to-peer relationship. These two types of relationships are important to every doctoral student, but they have varying characteristics. Pastore (2003) notes “the psychosocial functions of peer relationships [are] more intimate, longer in duration, and involving self-disclosure and trust” (p. 4). While the faculty-student mentoring relationship must also involve an interpersonal connection, students are often more comfortable confiding in their peers (Hadjioannou et al., 2007). Additionally, Austin (2002) notes that the experience of current doctoral students reflects recent changes in higher education, as the demands on graduate teaching associates are often greater than current faculty experienced as graduate students, especially at larger institutions (Austin, 2002). While the added responsibility can help prepare students for their careers in academia, it can also create stressors to which faculty advisors may not be able to relate (Austin, 2002). The support and shared knowledge of peers may assist in overcoming these stressors and enhance the graduate teaching experience.

In relation to the former of the two reasons for doctoral attrition (i.e., student isolation) mentoring relationships have been found to alleviate the seclusion often experienced by doctoral students. Peer mentoring among doctoral students provides a community to prevent the feelings of loneliness and isolation they commonly experience (Hadjioannou et al., 2007). This is especially important as doctoral students face their greatest challenges (e.g., comprehensive exams and dissertation) while at the same time moving away from the coursework and the regular interaction the classroom setting provides (Hadjioannou et al., 2007). As noted by Hadjioannou and colleagues in their account of their own peer mentoring experiences, the “demands of doctoral work clearly indicate the need for a robust support system” (2007, p. 161) and a network of peer mentors is an integral part of providing that support.

The use of peer-to-peer relationships among doctoral students to help alleviate the poor fit of expectations between students and department is an understudied area. However, this notion has been explored amongst an advisor-student mentorship. Turner, Pastore, Lyons, Brown, and Czekanski (2011) suggest using doctoral contracts as a means to negotiate what is expected from one another. A contract of this sort helps eliminate differing expectations between the critical advisor-student relationship, however it does not completely fill the gap between equalizing the expectations between a department and an incoming student, as faculty may not fully understand the demands of current graduate students (i.e., teaching load, research output, and industry involvement; Austin, 2002) and other common graduate student stressors (i.e., time management and financial strain; Hadjioannou et al., 2007). It is quite possible then that peer-to-peer relationships could be very valuable to help incoming students understand what is
currently expected of graduate students. This symposium will explore this point.

The literature highlights the benefits of mentoring, however, there is a lack of understanding about how to foster meaningful peer-to-peer relationships and how to sustain a peer-to-peer network system within a department to limit isolation. It was also formerly mentioned that the use of peer-to-peer mentoring relationships should be explored to help limit differing expectations between prospective students and the department. This symposium will help fill in the mentioned gaps through discussion lead by an existing peer-to-peer network within sport management, allowing current and former students from three successive graduating classes (i.e. 2010, 2011, 2012) to discuss their mentoring relationships. The panel members will call on their own experiences as doctoral students to suggest methods to encourage peer relationships that help reduce poor fit of expectations between student and department and isolation of the student. More specifically, topics that will be discussed are how and when to foster a peer-to-peer relationship, the type of expectations that were shared amongst current and incoming students, and the social interactions and activities that helped alleviate isolation. Additionally, the panel will encourage dialogue among attendees as to the practices and challenges of establishing peer mentoring relationships at their own institutions.