Chapter 9
Developing a Doctoral Identity:
Strategies to Help Online Students
Move From Student to Scholar

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ABSTRACT

To complete a doctoral program, students must develop the skills and knowledge of their field of study as well as a doctoral identity. However, there are many factors that can impede a student’s ability to develop this identity, including the imposter phenomenon, connectedness, and self-efficacy. As researchers have shown, online doctoral students may face additional challenges as they can experience barriers when trying to interact with peers and faculty formally and informally. This reduced interaction can limit the opportunities that researchers have shown can facilitate doctoral identity development, such as participating in research projects. The purpose of this chapter is to share specific strategies that students, faculty, and institutions can use to support the doctoral identity development of online students.

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral students may not be prepared to handle many aspects of their program (Hunter & Devine, 2016), experiencing anxieties related to mastering content, their competency compared to others, and what it means to be a scholar (Coffman, Putman, Adkisson, Kriner, & Monaghan, 2016). If unprepared or unsupported, these
anxieties could lead to a poor experience or even a withdrawal from the program. In fact, the attrition rate for doctoral students has been estimated to be as high as 50% (Pyhalto, Toom, Stubb, & Lonka, 2012). To complete the marathon that is a dissertation, students need proper training. While doctoral students must gain skills in research and become proficient with the language of their chosen field of study (Baker & Pifer, 2011), they must also go through “personal transformation and change, which extends beyond methodological rigour, epistemological understanding, and socialization into a discipline” (Bitzer & Bergh, 2014, p. 1047-1048). That is, doctoral students must go beyond learning research and discipline-specific information; they must also transform themselves from student to scholar by building their own doctoral identity.

In this chapter, the authors will discuss the concept of doctoral identity and why this is a crucial part of the doctoral journey. Also, the authors will provide an overview of factors important to the development of a doctoral identity, as well as specific challenges of online doctoral students. The authors will then share their narratives on their doctoral identity development as online students. The chapter will conclude with suggested strategies for students, faculty, and institutions to support doctoral identity development within the online setting.

Background

In a general sense, identity focuses on individuals asking themselves, who am I? For students, a doctoral identity focuses on what it means to be a doctoral student and scholar in their field of study. It is often viewed as “a complex phenomenon that is neither purely individual nor purely social in its construction; rather, it is co-constructed through dialog embedded within a context of relationships” (Koole & Stack, 2016, p. 43), meaning that a student’s identity is influenced by those around them. For doctoral students, this means that the relationships with peers, advisors, and others in the university will cause them to reflect on their self-perceptions (Koole & Stack, 2016), leading to a number of identity transitions from entering doctoral student to a scholar in the discipline (Foot, Crowe, Tollafield, & Allan, 2014). Students can experience self-doubt as they balance these transitions (Baker & Pifer, 2011), as well as internal conflict between their doctoral identity development and other existing identities (Eisenbach, 2013; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007); a student’s inability to develop and embody new identities can impact their persistence or increase the likelihood of leaving a doctoral program (Baker & Pifer, 2011). Therefore, internalizing a doctoral identity is a key factor when examining doctoral student success.
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