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Forming an Adaptive Network for Doctoral Student Success

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Earning a doctoral degree is typically a long, arduous process of offering a variety of experiences that significantly affect the careers of those who pursue membership in “the club.” Among other factors, student experiences in doctoral programs vary widely in terms of completion time (two to ten years or more), developmental opportunities (teaching, research, service, and funding), reliance on distance learning, and exposure to talented others. We have observed that doctoral students who are able to use their experiences to build or participate in adaptive networks better capitalize on available opportunities. Thus, doctoral students who successfully form adaptive network teams during their studies can gain many more opportunities and hence produce more than those who may not be a part of such teams. This column should prove useful to doctoral students in forming adaptive networks with faculty mentors and doctoral student peers.

An adaptive network is an interpersonal network subject to change in culture, productive nature, structure of those who participate, and other characteristics. It adapts in order to accommodate new people and ideas, but usually has reasonably stable goals. To illustrate, a doctoral student may work with mutually inclusive groups during statistics coursework, field, or dissertation phases of the program. Adaptive means that these groups may change characteristics (e.g., from rigid hierarchical or to peer thinking), depending on the situation. The basic motivation for adaptive networks derives from the need for doctoral students to achieve

maximum effectiveness, which is complicated by the requirement to interact with a diverse group of people, over a long period of time, and on a variety of tasks. In short, we believe students who are able to successfully form and manage adaptive networks will achieve greater learning and goal attainment and, in doing so, will enhance the brand name of the doctoral-granting institution.

Within their chosen adaptive network, we encourage doctoral students to form situation-dependent, peer-oriented virtual teams. Our combined experiences have been informed by observing a variety of colleagues in multiple disciplines at several schools for over 30 years. To articulate our perspective, we will discuss three primary forms of adaptive networks as well as the relevant issues they embody.

Forming Adaptive Networks

During your doctoral program, you will have many options regarding who you include in your adaptive network. The network will serve as a strategic support unit and may cross many hierarchical, disciplinary, and cultural boundaries. What is not always apparent to many doctoral students is the option to exclude undesired members from their ongoing network.

Many peer network members are “automatically” assigned based on the nature of doctoral programs. A peer student (or even a faculty mentor) in the network may be a potential stumbling block in building the network. This result is often because of the students’ failure to recognize the personal cultures and blends of cultures that exist among

the faculty. Students may also recruit network members via selection among peers and faculty based on cultural orientations. Network cultures are mainly a function of the will of their faculty mentor(s) and may be characterized by mutual respect, fear, and/or neglect.

We propose that, by far, the most productive network culture is based on *mutual respect*. This culture is characterized by a faculty mentor who shares knowledge, is open to criticism, is motivated to learn, and is trustworthy. Communication in this cultural type may be characterized as a many-to-many peer relationship, which is a sharp contrast to the top-down-driven, monolithic, autocratic style of mentorship. In the mutual respect culture, the mentor facilitates learning. In this case, the faculty member respects information flow between members without demanding undue recognition, rewards, authorship, or other credit. For instance, in a network based on mutual respect, a faculty mentor would insist that order of authorship be based on level of contribution, rather than formal status.

When the faculty mentor motivates with *fear*, common tactics may include (1) the appeal of working with a perceived 'MIS star', (2) the threat of failing a program requirement (e.g., a comprehensive exam or the dissertation), and (3) fear of reputation reprisal. Certainly, working in a fear-driven relationship is not generally accepted in academia, where "psychological safety" is highly sought and valued. Because such relationships may occur and seem unavoidable, students should use their networks to consult for ideas to adapt accordingly. For instance, one option is to avoid or change structure of a program or dissertation committee. Unless the goals are highly compatible, students should disassociate with mentors who motivate by fear.

Faculty mentors characterized as *neglectful* are typified by working only at home or behind closed office doors. Working in academic units that accommodate such a style can result in a "ghost town" effect that is characterized

by distrust, lack of sharing, and the withholding of information from all sources. Such mentors may be characterized by dismissive attitudes towards students, including being tied to more important projects or issues, lack of concern for productivity, and work characterized by peaks and valleys of participation and support. These mentors may be able to offer verbal input and guide short-term success. However, the long-term commitment and consistent availability necessary for sustained academic success will not be offered by the neglectful mentor. Finally, it is important to also note that neglectful mentors may very well be highly personable, trustworthy, and ethical as academics. Use caution when considering chronically neglectful people for your network.

Students forming networks should be wary of falling into the common trap of status seeking. Often, students striving to gain credibility in the profession are willing to subject themselves to network arrangements that may indeed provide status gains (e.g., top journal publication). However, these benefits may never accrue, despite the student being subjected to tremendous fear and neglect in the process. In addition, the negative results of engaging in fearful and neglectful network cultures may have long-lasting consequences, such as delayed graduation, poor performance on some program requirements, etc. For this reason, we would also caution students to make program requirements an absolute priority over independent projects, regardless of network arrangements. Enduring status will come to you only through years of commitment and productivity at a high level of quality. As mentioned, we strongly encourage doctoral students to engage in networks centered on mutual respect in order to achieve sustained status in their field.

The Promise of Peer Work

In academic work, the network that is highly functional without hierarchical leadership is a treasured prize. In this view, the optimal adaptive network is

one that promotes goodwill within and beyond the network though positive competition.

"Peer Work" and the Importance of Competitive Style

We all encounter competitive situations at some point in our lives, and the doctoral program is no exception. Faculty and doctoral students are high achievers, and most are competitive in some way. You will observe three types of competitors in this profession. First, *positive* competitors compete by adding value to artifacts, themselves, others, programs (i.e., Ph.D.), department, and generally, any other element of their environment. As positive competitors learn, they use their knowledge to benefit others—even direct competitors. Thus, these people may compete heavily for any reward, but do so in a way that is largely beneficial to the network and therefore acceptable to those in and outside their own adaptive network. Second, faculty mentors may be *negative* competitors, who hope to benefit themselves by reducing the productivity or image of those around them. Third, academic faculty mentors may certainly be a hybrid of the other two types. For instance, *hybrid* competitors may act as positive competitors when key decision makers are observing and negative when they believe no one is watching.

Certainly, we encourage you to be a positive competitor and lament the other two types, which are self-defeating long-term. Encouraging and facilitating the success of faculty and other doctoral students involved in your program can be richly rewarding to any doctoral student. Observing the careers, spanning many decades, of past colleagues, we see a large gap between the successes of positive and negative competitors. Typically, positive competitors have far more opportunities than they ever will be able to manage during their careers. Because of what negative competitors proliferate in their own environments, they often become isolated, unaware and misguided, less academically motivated, and much less produc-

tive. In summary, we believe the chosen competitive style largely determines success or failure in academia.

“Peer Work” and Interpersonal Skills

As a doctoral student, and even as an untenured faculty, there are four primary interpersonal skills you should develop: productivity, personality, politics, and presence.

Productivity. As you mature in your doctoral program, make it a primary goal to seek out understanding as it pertains to the three hallmarks of academic productivity: research, teaching, and service. Success at your eventual institution will depend on your experiences in any of these areas. In particular, teaching will be critically important in the vast majority of faculty positions. Extending your adaptive network to your students can also provide tremendous benefits. Interacting with students is helpful to understanding good course design for future versions of the course as well as any immediate issues. Overall, it will be very difficult to succeed as an academic without excelling as a teacher and socially (through students) learning about delivering your assigned courses. Generally, even to achieve moderately ambitious goals in a doctoral program, productivity must be at the core of your adaptive network.

Personality. To successfully engage in teamwork and develop an adaptive network, you must learn to work well with a wide range of personality types. In our opinion, this is what makes academia a potentially addictive profession! Value people for how they can contribute to productivity and you will forgive personality differences. If you must, an excellent strategy for dealing with personality conflict is simply to avoid interacting with that person.

Politics. In simple terms, the source of politics is the aforementioned “negative competition” for perceived organizational reward, such as pay, credit (e.g., order of authorship, awards), or image. It is generally agreed among faculty that doctoral students should try to avoid involvement in politics while

earning a doctorate. The best defense against political involvement is the promotion of “positive competition” and teamwork in your adaptive network.

Presence. We have observed a wide range of scenarios where being present in the same office space as faculty and peer doctoral students has had a tremendous impact on network effectiveness. Academia appears to have a natural “attendance policy,” whereby those who cluster together in adjacent offices, at lunch, in the same building, or after hours tend to be more effective. We suggest you prioritize independent projects based on the level of physical presence of associated group members. Academia is notorious for faculty who do not go into the office to work and for those that go to work, but remain isolated behind closed doors. Such a style can be devastating to the career of the aspiring or early-stage academic. We find that a critical mass of colleagues committed to being present and available has greatly enhanced academic programs as well as the careers of the individuals who participate. As previously mentioned, the best networks are characterized by members who are physically present.

Forming Within-Network Teams

Within this larger network, we suggest the creation of shorter-termed virtual teams, which may dissipate and reform with different members based on situational factors (whether you are working on one of several independent research projects, the dissertation, comprehensive exams, etc.).

Decisions that students make regarding the selection and de-selection of team members may have a tremendous impact on career outcomes. Given the variety of optional personalities and capabilities, decision making can be demanding. The key to accepting and working with chosen team members is an appreciation for diversity. In short, a lack of tolerance will destroy the team concept and, as a result, its potential. We anticipate that different within-net-

work teams will be formed several times during doctoral studies. Situations such as individual course assignments, tests, presentations, development of the program of study, statistics and field comprehensive exams, dissertation, publishing independent research, and job placement may require separate teams within the overall adaptive network.

Search for network members who represent diversity yet share values and goals. Because the team is peer-oriented, formal hierarchical positions (doctoral students, assistant professor, associate professor and professor) should not be the guiding principle. We have observed that generally, the best teammates work as follows:

1. Work regularly in their school office
2. Value productivity over personalities and politics
3. Make themselves available to students and faculty
4. Value commitment

At a minimum, each team member should be able to competently perform discretely defined tasks.

Conclusion

We hope this column illuminates some of the performance barriers that may affect doctoral students in their pursuit of higher learning. We propose that doctoral student productivity will be much greater in peer-oriented adaptive network teams, compared to other possible arrangements. In the Business Information Systems doctoral program at Mississippi State University, we have observed that students who employ such strategies learn more, publish more, and graduate on a timelier basis. Regardless of your circumstances, fitting in with group of faculty and doctoral students with good practices may be as important as any book you read or paper you author. ■

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