

■ XENOPHON KOUFTEROS, Feature Editor, Texas A&M University

The 10 Mistakes Students Make in Their Doctoral Program Revisited: The Student Response (Part Two)

by Varun Grover and Jason Bennett Thatcher, Clemson University

In Part 1, we presented recent Ph.D. program graduate's comments on the first five of ten mistakes identified by Varun Grover in 2001. In this installment, we provide their insight into the remaining mistakes. Generally speaking, our respondents confirmed that they witnessed many of these mistakes while completing their doctoral programs. However, our respondents also identify additional, useful, strategies for current students that can help them successfully navigate their doctoral programs. We believe that their "street-level insight" provides invaluable guidance for students seeking to complete their doctoral studies in a timely and effective manner.

"Students with limited facility in the language of instruction and those with only modest interest in doctoral studies: the former tend to isolate themselves thereby compounding their difficulties while the latter simply exit the program."

In contrast, some students reported being overly reliant on their advisor. For example, one reported that:

"I made the mistake of never acting without the permission of my advisor—i.e., I would ask my advisor if it was okay for me to contact someone who was an expert in a particular area of theory or methodological practice, without just doing it on my own. Since the answer was often "Why don't you wait and try to solve the problem on your own first?" I probably missed out on a lot of networking opportunities, in addition to spinning my wheels and wasting days (if not weeks) worth of my very valuable time. If I had my educational experience to do all over again, I would have reached out to experts (both at my own school and at other institutions) much quicker, and would not necessarily have felt that I needed to get permission from my advisor to do so every time."

Another underscored this intuition, that in conjunction with trying to solve the problem on his own, seeking help was a useful, necessary, and learning experience, he recalled that:

"I used to seek help with difficult technical and theoretical problems all the time. However, I used to try to solve the problems myself first and spend significant amount of time to do research on the problem before seeking help from someone else. I would always ask senior doctoral students and junior faculty members first before talking to my advisor



Varun Grover

is the William S. Lee (Duke Energy) Distinguished Professor of Information Systems at the College of Business & Behavioral Sciences, Clemson University. He has published extensively in the IS field, with

over 160 publications in refereed journals. Five recent articles have ranked him among the top five researchers based on publications in major IS journals over the past decade. He currently serves as senior editor of MIS Quarterly, Journal of the AIS, and Database and associate editor for JMIS, JOM, and IJEC, among others. He is a recipient of the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Decision Sciences Institute, and has also received numerous recognitions for his research and teaching.

vgrover@clemson.edu



Jason Thatcher

is an associate professor in the Department of Management at Clemson University. He holds BA's in history and political science from the University of Utah as well as an

MPA from the Askew School of Public Administration and Policy, and a PhD in business administration from Florida State University. His research examines the influence of individual beliefs and characteristics on faithful and ironic uses of information technology. His work appears in MIS Quarterly, Journal of Management Information Systems, and Journal of Applied Psychology.

jthatch@clemson.edu

Mistake 6: Doctoral Students Do Not Seek Help.

Doctoral students invest inordinate amounts of time in topics or methods for which expertise is available.

In reacting to this issue, we received mixed responses from our informants. Ranging from "I have this problem 😊" to "I don't know whether I was a successful doctoral student or not." One offered the insight that willingness to seek help varied. She commented that:

"This is partially true. Some students have a lot of pride and won't ask for help. I think a lot is grounded in their cultural backgrounds. Others prefer to prove they can do it on their own. I believe sometime the knowledge dissemination is not encouraged, and students also don't know that help is available."

Consistent with this observation, another noted:

and other senior faculty members. I even did not hesitate to contact faculty members from other departments and schools (outside my university) if they were the experts in the area.

In one case, there was a ready way of obtaining collective help.

"I think the students at my PhD institution were very lucky in that we had regular weekly research workshops for the duration of my time there Our department was very open and encouraging of doctoral students presenting their work in order to get feedback from a diverse group of people. In fact, this outlet for obtaining feedback is so popular that the available slots are normally all gone within a few weeks of the start of a semester. PhD students use the workshops to practice their job talks, to practice for upcoming conference presentations, and to solicit ideas about their proposed dissertation topic Whenever one of the students would encounter a problem with their research, all they really had to do was contact the workshop coordinator and say, 'Hey, can I please have a slot this semester to discuss this paper I'm struggling with?' I myself presented in our workshop three or four times over the course of my time in the program."

Caveat: The panelists agree that soliciting help can compress cycles of frustration—but often personality characteristics, the advisor's disposition, or institutional structures can facilitate or inhibit this. This is where students need to figure out when too much self-reliance is hurting them in the longer run, particularly when help points can be identified.

Mistake 7: Doctoral Students Do Not Build an Asset Base.

Doctoral students should invest time to build their personal value as a co-author . . . doctoral students should assess their assets and how they can leverage the "learning" in the program in order to create unique (inimitable) value for themselves.

Our respondents noted that building an asset base required a forward-thinking mindset that for some students could be challenging because they:

"Start their PhD programs because they want to become teachers. Their focus is not so much in building any research assets for future career. They also feel that a PhD is just another degree."

To remedy this mindset, faculty had changed programs to:

"put more focus during the induction days to inform PhD students that they are here mainly for research, hence they should think about writing from day one of their PhDs. This should create more awareness of the portfolio that needs to be built while studying."

To leverage their knowledge, another student suggested that:

"Once you've spent a lot of time learning a particular topic area or working through a particularly challenging methodological issue, you do want to seek out ways to leverage that knowledge in the future, so all the time and effort don't go to waste by being used on just one paper."

Once an expert, an additional student observed that:

"Co-authors greatly appreciated their expertise. For example, one doctoral student became an expert in social network analysis and started writing papers with different faculty members that required social network analysis. Another student became an expert in polynomial and response surface analysis."

Rather than narrowly focusing their skill sets on research methods, other students built theoretical asset bases by:

"dialoging with a very wide range of faculty in a range of specializations. Initiating these dialogs generally required that the students have a base of credibility (apparent knowledge of a new topic or previous work with a respected individual). In most cases such efforts were only effective if the student was willing and able to provide the "heavy lifting" for their "collaborators." Students who treated the relationships as true collaborations often found themselves waiting for input from their collaborators. This impeded rather than enhanced their overall effectiveness."

One student felt that these assets were not really cultivated.

"Most of the students in our program had some sort of informal label attached to themselves, such as the "stats expert" or "XXX methodology expert" or something. I don't know if they cultivated these labels intentionally, or if it just sort of happened. I would guess the latter."

Caveat: The respondents clearly see the advantages of building an asset base. However, this requires a longer term mindset that often gets lost amidst the projects and deadlines, various roles on projects, and perhaps most importantly, decisions about

which skills to acquire—be it methodological or conceptual. In some cases it just happens—but it might be worthwhile for students to take stock of their assets about halfway through the program.

Mistake 8: Doctoral Students Are Too Ambitious.

Doctoral students invest a tremendous amount of time in proposing projects that are extremely ambitious.

One respondent suggested that the tendency to overextend is likely:

"just a normal learning process. I believe in most situations students start with a bigger project than they can handle. The more they progress into the program, the more they realize how much is achievable. I won't consider this a mistake, just part of the learning process."

While doctoral students may be initially ambitious, our informants suggested that the tendency to overextend was tempered through time and advising. By the time a proposal is defended, one respondent noted that:

"The ambitious projects are re-scaled with the help of the advisors and the confirmation committee. Specifically, students are informed what should be part of a PhD project and given the timeframe for completion the project is scaled down naturally."

Another acknowledged that:

"My dissertation was initially like this. However, with the help of my committee members, I was able to scope it down. It was a monumental task for me from a data collection, analysis, and writing point of view. I think, with the help their committee members, most of my fellow doctoral students were able to develop a manageable dissertation topic."

However, whether a project was rendered manageable depended on the faculty advisor. A particularly keen observation by one informant was that:

"In most cases the dissertation proposal process serves here to limit the extent to which overly ambitious dissertations are undertaken. This is, however, dependent on individual supervisors and the dynamics of the committee but I have seen few supervisors in our faculty that will pass an excessively ambitious proposal. The same is not true of other faculties that I have observed and in those cases timely completion was only possible through revised

expectations that in one case necessitated the removal of a committee member.”

Caveat: The panel agreed that students are too ambitious—but it is only a mistake if they are not effectively advised, and the ambitious project comes back to haunt them. This observation underscores that selecting an advisor who has successfully managed the dissertation process and has the experience to help properly scope a project is an important, and perhaps even a necessary condition for completing a doctoral program.

Mistake 9: Doctoral Students Are Not Politically Astute.

Students should be friendly, receptive, and responsive to faculty; professional in their demeanor; and carefully choose their committees.

Our informants agreed that being politically astute, or aware, was a frequently observed characteristic of doctoral students. They observed that being astute was a necessary skill to succeed within the program as well as for furthering a research agenda.

Within a Ph.D. program, one observed that:

“Politically astute students tend to be very effective in identifying those individuals that control the outcomes that they seek and then accommodating the needs of these stakeholders. Less astute students tend to insult, battle, or otherwise antagonize people that have notable control over their fate. While these students can still succeed, they often make the process more difficult.”

Another offered a few “definite no-no’s”:

“Implying to a faculty member that you know more than them, implying to a faculty member that you think you are as good a researcher as them and thinking that a tiff you have with a faculty member won’t get back to your advisor within hours.”

Being astute involved more than simply managing your own faculty, one student suggested that political skill influenced broader career outcomes:

“Research is not done in a vacuum. There is a need for peer reviewers, referees, and editors; and doctoral students need their committees. It is critical that you are always friendly, receptive and responsive to anyone at conferences, in the hall, in the classrooms (both as a student and instructor) and especially the department secretary (as they truly run the place). I’ve seen countless project opportunities arise not from

research prowess but rather from friendly conversations. Having said this, hard-selling projects via friendly interaction is probably not appropriate either. Just like dating, if someone is interested in your ideas they will ask, if they aren’t leave it alone.”

Even when students are astute, one informant observed that political skill is not a replacement for hard work:

“I think the most successful students were those who just kept their mouth shut and worked hard. I think the students who tried to do too many things to “manage” their programs and faculty members who spent too much time in things that were not necessarily helpful did not succeed in the doctoral program.”

Caveat: While most respondents agreed that political skills are important—for some it was simply a matter of working hard and avoiding friction. This is generally good advice. The problem occurs when the politics comes to the student—who gets entangled in power struggles between faculty. This unfortunate situation might require political acumen on the part of both the student and a faculty champion who is looking out for the best interest of the student.

Mistake 10: Doctoral Students Leave Too Early.

Our respondents provided an unequivocal response to leaving early. One boldly stated:

“Dumb! Why would you start tenure early when you haven’t finished your dissertation? It is a good way to get fired from your first job. If you want to leave early, finish early.”

Another observed that:

“There were at least three such incidents when I was in the doctoral program. In all three cases, the implication was the same. It took the students a long time to come back and finish their dissertation. The quality of their dissertation also suffered. They told me how difficult it was to work on dissertation while trying to settle in a new place and teaching new classes.”

A student who is currently working in a job and lacked a degree suggested that she:

“would strongly encourage everyone to finish their dissertation before they start a new position!!! There just isn’t any free time once you become a faculty member, and it is difficult trying to balance the need to finish your dissertation with the need to be an active

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Deans’ Perspective & Editor

Krishna S. Dhir, Berry College
kdhir@berry.edu

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xkoufteros@mays.tamu.edu

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ken@thekendalls.org

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sugumara@oakland.edu

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john.davies@vuw.ac.nz

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rlandrew@vcu.edu

Production/Operations Management

Daniel A. Samson, University of Melbourne, Australia
d.samson@unimelb.edu.au

Research Issues

Miles Nicholls, RMIT University, Australia
miles.nicholls@rmit.edu.au

member in your new department and a good instructor. If I had known before leaving my previous institution what I know now (regarding how hard it is to balance a dissertation and new job), I would not have stayed another year (because it wasn't really necessary in my case), but I would have worked ten times as hard as I did to get done before leaving."

Finally, a student noted that not all students leave because they have secured an academic job. She suggested that students leave (and don't finish their Ph.D.'s) for a variety of reasons.

"Generally speaking, PhD students here leave the degree because they have a critical situation that does not allow them to continue; e.g., critical illness, family problems, relocation overseas, financial constraints, etc. . . ."

Caveat: While there is strong agreement that leaving too early is indeed a mistake, there are exigencies that might "force the hand." This is where the advisor and student must carefully evaluate tradeoffs (there are always tradeoffs) that give weightage to work remaining, the nature of the exigency, the nature of the student, potential work demands in the job, and particularly high weightage to the downside risk.

Conclusion

The 10 "mistakes" identified seem to be largely endorsed by the panel. Doctoral students who create synergy, are proactive in their approach, evaluate opportunities carefully, avoid a deep lull period, manage the interaction with their advisor, seek help and criticism of their work, build a particular skill set, temper ambitious projects with reasoned reality, consider political realities, and don't leave the program prematurely tend to be successful in the program.

However, while identifying mistakes is easy, our respondents seemed to indicate that addressing them is easier said than done. There are extenuating circumstances that are unique to individuals and their context that could make it difficult not to commit certain mistakes. These unique factors could pertain to the institution, the advisor or the doctoral student. For instance, mistake 6 (don't ask for help) could result from certain programs where faculty are not readily accessible, the advisor forces the student to "look within" for assistance, and the student hates any kind of obligation. Collectively, these factors might

interact and promulgate the mistake across groups of graduate students. Further, certain institutions could mandate post-comp requirements that prevent the lull period (mistake 4). Also, certain doctoral students may come in with little knowledge of the field and would like to spend time exploring various research areas before creating synergies (mistake 1).

Such contingencies might be prevalent for all mistakes—raising or lowering their incidence and intensity. However, what the panel seems to be saying is that a heightened sensitivity to the possibility of such mistakes can help the doctoral student work to minimize their occurrence or impact. Competent and motivated students, with the skills of "mistake management and minimization" in the context of the institution, advisor and their innate personality, will dramatically increase their chances of success in the doctoral program. ■

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Feedback somewhat similar to a 360-degree appraisal emphasizes the human value system integrated with the functional performance. In an effort to improve in both their individual presentations and their team participation, students have the opportunity to give and receive feedback on the effectiveness of their performance. Assessment in the feedback allows for an examination of an individual's personal sense of meaning. One of the more important elements is the development of relationships. Networks evolve through close contact. Trust is essential. And students who are evaluating the leader in the group based upon actions and then giving and receiving group feedback realize the strength of doing quality work contributing to the well-being of all.

Conclusion

This approach is neither a particular ethical nor value structure. Rather it is the develop-

ment of the kinds of customs and conduct that the individuals and the group find desirable or appropriate. It is not relativistic, but virtues driven and concerned with what leaders do, how they do it, and why they do it. And it is integrated with the functional skills of daily work experience. It is through the discussions, the readings, the role plays, the constant communication, the feedback, and the exercises that students recognize their own need to grow and develop.

The incremental value is that of exhibiting and enhancing the values currently necessary for success that are so often lacking in modern organizations. Leadership involves values, and one cannot be a successful leader without being aware of one's own values, and the values of one's followers. By implementing the leadership teaching strategy, students have the opportunity to learn and practice theory and "what works" in becoming transformational leaders. Rel-

evant articles, presentations, and exercises help in the development of customs and culture appropriate for leading an effective organization. ■

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