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Where does responsibility reside for creating a solid educational experience in a Ph.D. program? We know that being a doctoral advisor is both a burden and a joy, and this column has often visited the responsibilities of the dissertation advisor in helping their students meet their goals. The author of this issue's column, Professor Varun Grover of the University of South Carolina, takes up the other side of the equation, the behavior of the doctoral student. Are their tangible actions that doctoral students can take that will improve their chances for success in their doctoral program and later in their academic career? Professor Grover, who is one of the most prolific and oft-cited researchers in MIS, strongly believes that doctoral students hold much of their academic and career fate in their own hands. With his insightful and straightforward column on mistakes that doctoral students make, you can find out what the 10 biggest mistakes are, and how to avoid them.

# 10 Mistakes Doctoral Students Make in Managing their Program

Varun Grover, University of South Carolina



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systems field, and has consistently been recognized in a variety of recent studies as one of the top few researchers in the field based on publications in top IS journals. Dr. Grover's area of interest is the effective deployment of IS including electronic commerce, business process change, and organizational and inter-organizational impacts of IT. His work has appeared in MIS Quarterly, Information Systems Research, Journal of MIS, Communications of the ACM, Decision Sciences, IEEE Transactions, California Management Review, among others. He recently co-edited his second book entitled Making Business Process Change Payoff: Guidelines for the 21st Century, and two special issues of the JMIS on the topic of business process change. Dr. Grover has also served as the special editor for issues of Database which focused on IT Future, celebrating the 50th anniversary of ACM, the International Journal of Electronic Commerce, and Decision Sciences. His most recent editorial project (with Tom Davenport) is on knowledge management. Dr. Grover is the recipient of the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Decision Sciences Institute and two-time winner of the Alfred G. Smith Award for Excellence in Teaching. He is currently serving on the board of editors/associate editor of a number of journals.

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In the previous column, Dan Robey offers some excellent advice to doctoral students (see "Answers to Doctoral Students; Frequently Asked Questions," *Decision Line*, March 2001) pertaining to dissertation and publication strategies. For those of you who have not read Dan's article, I would strongly recommend that you do.

In my dozen or so years at the University of South Carolina, I have had the privilege to work with numerous doctoral students in various roles. Each one of these experiences has been rewarding in their own special way. Every doctoral student has been unique in his or her attitude and ability, and consequently in the management of their tenure through the program. I have often been asked that between motivation and competence, which characteristic better differentiates successful from unsuccessful students. My answer is that while one might compensate for the other, a minimum threshold of both is needed. In my mind there is clearly an interaction effect between motivation and competence. Motivation is required in order to be willing and enthusiastic about engaging in the unstructured process of knowledge creation, particularly when many avenues of pursuit reach frustrating dead ends. Competence allows students to be efficient in

knowledge absorption, integration, deployment of tools, and ultimately deliver a quality product. Together, they form a winning combination. However, one underemphasized predictor of success in my mind is the ability of students to effectively manage their doctoral education.

In reviewing my experiences, I have compiled a list of what I believe to be "mistakes" that students make in managing their doctoral program. These risks are not mutually exclusive, but can hopefully provide guidance on what should be avoided as well as what ought to be done proactively by a Ph.D. student in managing their education.

### Doctoral Students Do Not Create Synergy

Doctoral programs offer students a variety of opportunities to create pedagogical value. These could be in the form of teaching experiences, course research projects, and individual projects with colleagues or faculty, or reviews of articles and topics. Many students often take a piece-meal approach to these opportunities—doing what is practical, expedient or expected. While I believe that it is useful for students to have a breadth of knowledge in the field and create your own "schema" or understanding of key areas and their relationships, it

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is just as important to start building depth in an area. Students who consciously manage their opportunities, and attempt to create synergy between them, are often successful at homing in on a research area of interest. For instance, creating synergy between course projects that require a research paper can facilitate the creation of better products, enhance in-depth study of literature in an area, help in time management, and possibly get students a head start on a dissertation topic.

### **Doctoral Students Are Too Reactive**

Doctoral students need to recognize early on that *they* are in charge of their program. It is not their advisor nor their colleagues, but the student who has to earn the degree and create the foundation for their future. And this degree is more than just taking a series of courses and checking off a list of boxes. It forms the fundamental grounding for a career. Students who go through the program in reactive mode by merely reacting to program requirements tend to get less out of their doctoral education than students who are proactive. By that, I mean taking actions that keep the broad objective of learning and cultivating research and teaching skills, while simultaneously focusing on program requirements. Some of the most successful students I've had took the time to build an evolving reference set, did not avoid challenging courses, read copiously, exposed their work in conferences, and sought opportunities to work with colleagues and faculty. Yes, doing these requires motivation and competence, but it also accelerates their maturation process as researchers. In doing so they command respect in the eyes of their colleagues and mentors. In reactive mode, a student might successfully meet the requirements of the program and (in the case of a well designed and structured program) be a pretty good candidate in the job market. However, students that proactively (but judiciously) leverage their time in the program tend to be more successful in their careers.

### **Doctoral Students Do Not Carefully Evaluate Opportunity Costs**

In general, I've observed that students who are noted for their competence and motivation tend to get more demands on their time from their colleagues and faculty. However, with every opportunity comes

corresponding costs. For these students, *prioritization* is key. Saying "yes" to every opportunity (whether it be a research project, review, consulting assignment, technology seminar) could be counterproductive. Spreading themselves too thin could distract students from moving forward programmatically. Some may find themselves in the bowels of a project that is not pertinent to their area of interest. And yet they continue to do it.

To the extent that students have control over their opportunity set, every opportunity should be evaluated strategically. Pertinent questions could be: Does this (new) project contribute to my doctoral education? Is it an appropriate use of my time in lieu of other uses (e.g., finishing my series of incomplete grades)? Am I getting into something that could keep expanding like a black hole? I'm not suggesting that risks should not be taken, but that they should be measured. There are tactful ways of managing the political pressures of opportunities. If not done, it won't take long to delay your candidacy in the market by one recruiting cycle and real dollar opportunity costs.

### **Doctoral Students Fall into a Lull Period**

I've seen this one many times. Particularly, after successfully going through the stress and the psychological hurdle of comprehensive exams, students feel relieved and take a month off. That month becomes two months. Then three months. And then it is a slow process getting back into the dissertation mode. I've observed that the duration between post-comps and the dissertation proposal is often the most poorly managed time. Yes, by all means take that well-deserved break. Go to the beach. But be cognizant of the program. I've seen advisors lose interest in non-responsive students, which at minimum results in loss of continuity and tremendous start-up costs in every interaction (i.e., what were you working on), but ultimately could prove academically fatal. Students who have planned their program well by creating synergy and thinking of topics while studying for comps can and should quickly home in on their topic and work on developing it with their advisor. There is no substitute for continuous interaction, even if it is for minor updates.

### **Doctoral Students Do Not Manage Their Advisor**

Many students don't consider the duality of their relationship with their advisor. Despite their best attempts at choosing an advisor who is available, supportive, knowledgeable, and responsive, in reality there will be different profiles of advisors along these and other dimensions. For instance, some advisors have good intentions and do care about the student, but are so busy that they cannot be as responsive or available as the student might want. In that case, the student should be proactive in managing their advisor. For instance, students should not go into a meeting with an open-ended question that they have not thought through. This will result in a discussion that might soak up a precious hour or two, but that will not be an effective use of time. Instead, if they go in prepared with the issues, their possible solutions, and solicit their advisor's *advice* (that's what advisors are supposed to do) in resolving the issue, the limited interaction time can be more efficiently managed. Similarly, seek guidance on major issues, while taking a position on the minor ones. If an advisor is "hands-on" and wants to meet regularly and keep the student on track with substantive advice and encouragement, then the student is truly blessed and should leverage their advisor. If an advisor is pushing a student in a direction that seems like too much work for the return, then the students should present the arguments against that advice cogently. Most advisors will appreciate the thought and preparation students put into meetings, and will be open-minded about alternative approaches.

Students should never hide from their advisor. Hiding is a pathological behavior that students indulge in, particularly if they cannot deliver on a project. However, hiding is delusional in that the problem (whatever it might be) gets compounded. If there is something amiss, communication with the advisor is a prerequisite to getting it resolved. Ultimately, a symbiotic relationship between student and advisor is the most productive one.

### **Doctoral Students Do Not Seek Help**

If a student is in a program with a lot of colleagues and faculty with expertise, they have tremendous resources at their dis-

posal. They should use them. I occasionally see doctoral students invest inordinate amounts of time in topics or methods for which expertise is available. However, they try to resolve it through their own means rather than ask for guidance. While there is no substitute for perseverance, remember, in many cases guidance can save hours of fruitless work. For instance, if there is a methodological concern that is consuming lots of time, students should seek help. Maybe a faculty member in another department well-versed in the technique can help, or even a colleague who might know of a book or other source of information. Even an e-mail to someone whose article uses the same technique can compress the frustration cycle. In a related vein, doctoral students should not be afraid of criticism. In fact, they should actively seek it. Sharing and critiquing each other's ideas is the essence of research development. If students surround themselves with good people who are excited about their work, their enthusiasm will rub off. Research can actually be fun.

### **Doctoral Students Do Not Build an Asset Base**

In their career as researchers, doctoral students will have the opportunity to work with a number of research groups. However, never will they have devoted more time to learn as they do in their doctoral program. While life-long learning is a noble goal, we often don't have the time or inclination to learn as much as we'd like to in our jobs. Therefore, doctoral students should use the time in their program to build their personal value as a co-author. Relevant questions for a student are: If I work on a joint project, what do I bring to the table? Can I cultivate those skills while in the program? For instance, I have often seen doctoral students solicited for their expertise in a certain area or methodology or even writing skills. Cultivating these assets while in the doctoral program creates value for joint endeavors down the road. Therefore, 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. Students who do not build an asset base tend to be "followers" and can-

not sustain the joint research relationships that are so critical for success.

### **Doctoral Students Are Too Ambitious**

"The best dissertation is a done dissertation" is an oft-heard saying. While partially facetious, there is an element of practicality in the statement that needs to be noted. I have observed competent and motivated students invest a tremendous amount of time in proposing projects that are extremely ambitious. In some cases, they draw from various theoretical lenses, include a plethora of variables, and require an ambitious methodology. Often, I see my role as an advisor as simply to narrow down their topics into a project that is not only interesting and relevant, but also *defensible and feasible*.

The dissertation process is also a learning process, and not necessarily the most significant project the student will ever do. Also, feasibility (i.e., completion of a project within a reasonable time frame) is as important a criterion as any other. I often advise students to evaluate their ambitious changes in terms of costs and benefits: What is the cost in time and effort to make these changes? Would some people disagree with the importance or need for the change? How do the benefits translate into probability of publication in a major journal? This kind of analysis often suggests that reasonable imperfection is acceptable.

### **Doctoral Students Are Not Politically Astute**

Unlike most masters programs, the doctoral program involves a higher level of dependence on faculty. An unfortunate reality is that some faculty tend to be parochial and egocentric. Therefore, it is important for students to be politically astute when managing their program. I have heard of cases in which faculty confrontation during oral examinations or defenses denigrated to a no-win situation for the student caught in the middle. In general, students should be friendly, receptive, and responsive to faculty; professional in their demeanor; avoid taking unilateral actions that can create potential conflicts (without faculty protection); and carefully choose

their committees based on their (members') contribution and interests, as well as any unfortunate political realities.

### **Doctoral Students Leave Too Early**

This one is fairly pervasive. While we generally discourage our students from leaving before their final defense, the pressures of getting a head start in their career often takes precedence. I have generally observed that a dissertation with one month of pending work on-site, sometimes takes months or even years off-site. In a new job, a year goes in settling down, prepping courses, and establishing new relationships. The dissertation tends to get squeezed out. In the long run, that one-month investment can save the student many times over in tension, anxiety, as well as risk in losing continuity of the dissertation process and interest (or even physical presence) of the committee.

In sum, I believe that while doctoral education is challenging, motivation and competence can work synergistically. However, students can extract the most value from their program by carefully considering program management issues as the third crucial factor. 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. Moreover, I believe that this success will translate to their professional career. ■

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