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# Online Doctoral Students at a Faith-Based University: Concerns of Online Education

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## **Online Doctoral Students at a Faith-Based University: Concerns of Online Education**

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### **Abstract**

Online doctoral education enrollment continues to rise, and the number of academic institutions who offer the degrees are increasing proportionately. Various types of institutions are involved in this growth, including those that are faith-based. Due to the competitive nature of all online doctoral degrees, including faith-based and secular programs, it is imperative to understand the needs and concerns of the students who enroll in such programs. Students enrolled in a faith-based university online doctoral program were surveyed regarding their concerns about online doctoral education. The results revealed three main themes of concerns/non-concerns, and these results could be beneficial to faith-based institutions who offer online doctoral education or plan to do so in the future.

*Keywords:* Online doctoral education, faith-based education

### **Introduction**

Online doctoral degrees are in higher demand than ever (Fuller et al., 2014), and the number of students expected to earn online doctoral degrees is expected to grow (Evans & Green, 2013). As online education becomes more respected and accepted, the working professional is able to access an advanced degree while benefiting from the flexibility online education provides (Offerman, 2011). Over half of online doctoral program students are enrolled part-time and are often professional practitioners who have served many years in their field (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). While many of these professional practitioner online doctoral students seek efficiency and customization of research interests (Green & McCauley, 2007), Berry (2017) found that cohort, class groups, small peer groups, and study groups help online doctoral students feel an increased sense of community. Therefore, it may be posited that the interests of students seeking an online doctoral degree are varied.

Jove (2015) found that in online doctoral programs, practical projects assist in leadership development, including “scholarship, stewardship, social interpersonal skills, and self-concept.” Numerous online doctoral students note criteria on which they base their satisfaction regarding the online learning experience. According to one study, this included work-academic balance, support, and sense of belonging (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Gender also plays a role in the online doctoral environment. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2017) reported that women have more confidence in completing an online doctoral degree if there is the support of an influential advisor, such as an employer, and supportive reference groups. Therefore, attributes sought in an online doctoral program are diverse and possibly complex in nature.

Several studies have noted the most prevalent concerns of doctoral students when enrolled in an online doctoral program. Some students have anxiety over not feeling a sense of community or feeling isolated (Yuan & Kim, 2014;

Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Others have concerns over the dissertation process; student to instructor relationship/interaction, including feedback, research pressures, employment/finding a job/salary, quality of training; and student experiences such as individual development, support, and flexible delivery (Jones, 2013). Some doctoral students experience concern with technological/computer-related problems, while others state that instructor behavior influences overall dissatisfaction with online doctoral learning (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012).

Even though these studies have been conducted within numerous areas of online doctoral education, few have focused on the specifics of online doctoral education in a faith-based university or institution. Thus, the purpose of this study is to supplement the literature in this area and to provide information to those faith-based institutions who currently offer, or will offer, online doctoral degrees in the future.

## **Literature Review**

### **Faith-Based Online Education**

Approximately 1000 institutions in the United States identify with having a religious affiliation (Council of Christian College and Universities, 2017 and StateUniversity.com, 2017). Faith-based organizations and institutions are developing more online educational programs as the online student population increases (Rogers & Howell, 2005). Additionally, many students seeking a faith-based education are considering online programs and courses to advance their education (Carnevale, 2006). Some faith-based organizations concluded that they should not offer online programs until the online environment was proven effective and the materials were proven to be quality. However, these obstacles have been resolved by advances in online learning (Rogers & Howell, 2004.) Rovai & Baker (2004) found that students at a faith-based university felt a deeper sense of community among distance and traditional platforms than students at a comparable secular university.

Further, one of the main tenets on faith-based education is the care for the whole student, which includes not just academic development but moral and spiritual developments as well (Rovai et al., 2008). One unique aspect of faith-based education in the higher education environment is that educators see themselves not only as role models for their students, but also as faith-mentors (Woodson, 2010). This also occurs in the online learning environment. In other words, the whole person is considered within online platforms, and the structure of the classes are developed as such. According to Olson (2011), faculty, cultural diversity, and student relationships are a few of the important variables that have a significant impact on student spiritual development. Spiritual impact may be made at many education levels.

Although some Christian higher education institutions have questioned the effectiveness of online learning, citing that it cannot possibly address the whole person or allow for spiritual growth, others have argued that distance education programs can provide spiritual formation through online learning communities “regardless of physical proximity” (Lowe & Lowe, 2010). Faith-based institutions offer online chapel services, virtual prayer rooms, a virtual table and other communities in which to address the whole person and spiritual growth in the online environment (Maddix & Estep, 2010). These offerings could be viewed as attractive options to the students’ seeking an online education in the faith-based content.

### **Faith-Based Doctoral Programs**

Faith-based doctoral programs have received some attention in the literature. For example, a faith-based doctoral degree “can be used as a driver of leadership while also incorporating rigorous research standards for the dissertation” (Forman, 2016). However, faith-based dissertations are often completed with the student’s having no religious affiliation when making the choice of dissertation topic (Lunde, 2017). Additionally, being a faith-based institution requires unique teaching methods and poses unique questions. For example, one of these questions is, how does a faith-based instructor “affirm a student’s faith and encourage a coalescence of their personal beliefs and professional practice” (Anderson, 2014)? Another unique question for faith-based online teaching is “How can a biblical studies course encourage adults to use their imaginations in ways that are both playful and productive for learning?” (Delamarter et al., 2011). Even questions such as how to facilitate deep spiritual formation in the online environment and how to maximize that effort have been posited in faith-based online learning research (Flynn, 2013).

Based on the literature, it can be said that doctoral online education is a mainstay in the education learning environment and that faith-based institutions are realizing and developing online programs at many levels, including

the doctoral level. It has also been noted that with online education several unique challenges not related to traditional learning environments can occur. More specifically, online doctoral education brings additional concerns and challenges, such as the dissertation process and instructor relationships (i.e. proposal defense via video chat with professors one has never met in the physical environment). Furthermore, faith-based online doctoral education programs bring some of the same challenges and include the challenging and/or rewarding variable of spiritual growth and educating the whole person.

## Methods

The purpose of this study was to address student concerns of faith-based online doctoral education. It was the intent to discover the most prevalent student concerns regarding this specific type of education and to discover if these concerns varied from non-faith-based online doctoral program concerns found in the literature. The primary objective of the survey was to assess student concerns within an online doctoral program and to determine if adjustments needed to be made to the program as a result of the responses.

The research was conducted at a small, private, faith-based university in the United States. The survey was sent in Fall 2016 via email to all new students entering the doctoral program, which was a total of 60 students. A total of 28 students (majority female) returned useable surveys via email (51% return rate). To ensure anonymity, the departmental graduate advisor sent and received all the emails and gave the researchers the results with no student names attached to the survey.

The fourteen-item survey instrument was constructed of items reflecting information regarding student online concerns found in two sources. The first source of relevant information was found in the professional literature related to student concerns with online learning. The second source of pertinent information was gathered via student inquiries received by the researchers while teaching online courses. Fourteen statements (as shown in Table 1) were included to which students responded to a 5-point Likert scale of numerical value, indicating a range of *very concerned* (1) to *not concerned* (5). An opportunity for open response or comments was also included.

## Results

The survey asked students about the following concerns: communication between student and professor, technology knowledge regarding use of the course management system, rigor of courses, Internet access, professor engagement, isolation, advising, assignment quality, course design, professor quality, workload, personal time requirements, preparation for dissertation and completion of degree in a timely manner.

Participants were not concerned with items 4 (Internet access), 10 (professor quality), 2 (technology knowledge regarding the use of the course management system), and 8 (assignment quality). They were slightly concerned with items 7 (advising), 1 (communication between student and professor), 6 (isolation), 9 (course design), 5 (professor engagement), 3 (online rigor of courses), and 14 (completion of the degree in a timely manner). However, when asked to rate work load, (item 11), personal time requirements (item 12) and preparation for dissertation (item 13), students were more concerned (see Table 1).

The anecdotal comments provided by candidates supported the findings on the Likert scale questions. Item 13 addressed concerns regarding the dissertation preparation. For example, one participant responded, "My main concern is preparing for the dissertation. This is my only drawback to an online program over a face-to-face program." Another candidate reported, "I have had no communication concerning the preparation for dissertation. I am unsure if that occurs now or later; however, I would like to start thinking about it and wrapping my mind around the requirements in plenty enough time." While the respondents addressed item 12 by expressing concern over the time requirements necessary to complete the online program, one student put the issue into perspective. The participant stated, "I have found that the professors I have had thus far are very accessible and helpful. I appreciate the timely and effective feedback given after assignments are submitted. I am slightly concerned about the dissertation preparation, work load, and time requirements, but I feel comfortable with the support given. I know that everyone is willing to help." Item 1 was found in a response that stated, "My biggest concern is communication. I am afraid of missing important information since I'm not on campus. Having another form of email to check is also a concern."

**Table 1****Student Concerns**

Item Number	Item	Median	Mean
4	Internet access	5	4.93
10	Professor quality	5	4.43
2	Technology knowledge regarding use of the course management system	5	4.43
8	Assignment quality	5	4.29
7	Advising	4.5	4.25
6	Isolation	4	4.14
1	Communication between student and professor	4	4.25
9	Course design	4	4.07
5	Professor engagement	4	4.04
3	Online rigor of courses	4	3.64
14	Completion of degree in timely manner	4	3.46
11	Workload	3.5	3.21
12	Personal time requirements	2.5	3.04
13	Preparation for dissertation	2.5	2.75

**Conclusions**

Some unique themes surfaced with this analysis. Although the doctoral program is 100% online, technology (Internet access and technology usage) was found to be an area of minimal concern. This result is in contrast to previous studies in which technology was a major concern for online doctoral students (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012). Students in this sample may already be confident in this area. Most of the participants are working professionals who use technology daily. Unlike the research in non-faith-based programs that indicate a concern of isolation, this sample revealed little concern over isolation (Yuan & Kim, 2014; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Also, students were not concerned with quality issues (professors and assignments). Further research could be conducted to investigate if these items were of no concern due to university reputation, trust in the program, positive word-of-mouth or additional reasons.

The result of this study support the research that online doctoral students are concerned with the dissertation. This may be due to the unfamiliarity of the process and perceptions regarding the major undertaking of a dissertation.

When observing items that fell in the middle of student concerns (items 1, 3, 5, 6, 9 and 14), one may find that they each relate to working independently, which inherently results in a domino effect or causal relationship among those middle items. For example, it could be argued that bad or ineffective advising could lead to a feeling of isolation or that the students felt they were “on their own” while making their way through the program. If they felt isolated, this could lead to a worry or anxiety about the program components such as the courses (rigor or design) and professors (communication or engagement). Thus, those worries could compound into a concern about completing the degree in a timely manner.

When noting the items for which students indicated the most concern, the commonality was time issues. These include preparation for the dissertation, personal time requirements, and workload. Those students drawn to online programs are also ones who tend to be working full time or have other obligations (Radford, 2011). Therefore, enrolling in an online doctoral program, which implies flexibility, may be concerned about time issues that normally surround going to a physical classroom or having class at a specific time or location.

**Recommendations**

Based on the results and further analysis, three recommendations are offered for generalization to institutions with similar needs. First, the same students could be surveyed again with the same survey at the mid-point of the

program. This would allow researchers and administrators to observe any changes in the mindset of the student after having spent some time in the program. Students could also be surveyed at the end of the program for the same reason. Second, it could be recommended that adjustments be made to the program based on the findings. For example, more information may be added to a student guide regarding the dissertation process and time expectations. Third, administrators could use the findings to market the program to achieve marketing objectives. Strategies could be used to attract students based on their concerns and how the program can address and help them achieve their goals despite these obstacles and concerns.

While this study addressed only one faith-based university, the results could benefit many faith-based institutions with online doctoral programs. Being able to determine student primary concerns prior to their entrance to an online doctoral program at a faith-based university may allow for several competitive advantages in regard to competing against other faith-based and secular online doctoral programs. First, more successful and efficient marketing campaigns could be developed. Whether using traditional tactics such as print or television or using digital means like social media or email, programs could tailor messages to explain the realistic but manageable workloads that may be initial concerns the student may have about dissertation preparation and time requirements. A second benefit seen by the faith-based program could be the more effective initial engagement with potential students. If caring for the “whole person” is a focus of the faith-based education process, as indicated by the literature, then faculty, advisors, staff and administration could collaborate to ensure the potential students feel this engagement on a level not seen at secular institutions. Finally, the faith-based online program could benefit by realizing increased retention and graduation rates via proactively nullifying areas of high concern to alleviate apprehension of pursuing the faith-based online doctoral degree.

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