

LAUNCHING NEW DOCTORAL STUDENTS: EMBRACING THE HERO'S JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

This case explores the value of a two-hour experiential activity that elicits the perceptions, and examines the anxiety and comfort levels, of students entering a doctoral program, with a view toward students' successful completion of the program. The Hero's Journey, an archetypal myth articulated most popularly by Joseph Campbell, was used as the substrate for the experiential activity. A pre-test question asked: "How excited are you to be getting started? On a Likert Scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not excited at all and 10 being quite excited, most people were in the range of 5 to 10. This suggests that they were looking forward to getting started. A second question asked: "How anxious are you, as you get started? Using the same scale, most people were in the 1 to 5 range. This suggests there was a palpable amount of anxiety. Students were then shown a short video explaining the essence of the Hero's Journey. A series of questions guided participants through the early phases of the Hero's Journey and encouraged them to reflect upon what called them to doctoral study and what they felt must be shifted in their lives to make room for such an undertaking. This process helped normalize the notion that challenges might yet occur, and that they could be dealt with effectively. A post-test revealed that the level of excitement about beginning the journey had moved up from 5/10, on a Likert Scale, to 7/10.

Keywords: Hero's Journey, doctoral student, learning community, cohort, doctoral

INTRODUCTION

This case explores the value of a two-hour experiential activity that elicits the perceptions, and examines the anxiety and comfort levels of students entering a doctoral program, with a view toward students' successful completion of the program. The Hero's Journey, an archetypal myth articulated most popularly by Joseph Campbell, was used as the substrate for the experiential activity. What follows is an overview of the context of the intervention, discussion of the criticality of student retention, an explication of the experiential activity that served as an intervention, the resulting themes identified through an analysis of the data from pre- and post-test surveys, and the authors' conclusions.

COLORADO TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY'S DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

Established in 1995, the doctoral program at Colorado Technical University (CTU) currently has over 500 students. There are two doctoral programs; the Doctor of Management program and the Doctor of Computer Science program. Both are scholar-practitioner programs where the emphasis is on developing scholars who typically practice in corporate, military, and community organizations. CTU's students are mid-life leaders, managers, and consultants working with constituents who are dealing with emerging and persisting opportunities for improvement and change. Students select from over 14 concentrations within the two doctoral programs and dedicate themselves and their research to advancing both knowledge and practice in their chosen concentration.

CTU employs a cohort model, in the interest of supporting student success. Utilization of cohorts, where incoming students are grouped together with other students beginning their doctoral studies at the same time, enables the students to move through the program together in a supportive setting. The cohort model is a fairly recent method employed in doctoral education; the students are expected to support one another throughout the doctoral journey (Santicola, 2013). To achieve this end, students must come to know one another, understand the roles and responsibilities of a learning community, and be anchored in their desire to achieve a doctoral degree.

Retention of Doctoral Students

From the university standpoint, retention is a critical issue. With a retention and completion rate of over 85% in both of the programs, the researchers desired to illuminate the university's understanding of the variables that contribute to this successful outcome. There are many moving parts in a doctoral program. Students must navigate coursework, research, academic writing, relationships with the university and professors, relationships with fellow doctoral students, etc. There are also variables that are not influenced by the university or a particular program, such as the student's personal circumstances: home life, work life, social life, health, financials, etc.

Given all of that, a salient question is, "What are the variables that weigh in on doctoral student persistence?" Given the nascence of this question, we decided to focus on learning more about the impact of one of the earliest deliberate interventions the student experiences within the program: the orientation symposium. More specifically, we elected to examine an intervention that is conducted during the orientation symposium.

THE ORIENTATION AND THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

The journey towards completion of a doctorate is a bumpy one for many students. Historically, up to 50% of students discontinue their doctoral studies before completion (McAlpine & Norton, 2006, p. 3). Not unique to Colorado Technical University (CTU), successful completion of doctoral study requires persistence, where persistence is “the continuance of a student’s progress toward the completion of a doctoral degree” (Bair, 1999, p. 8).

The orientation experience at Colorado Technical University is intended to aid in the student’s ability to persist, as well as to be successful, in the doctoral program. From anecdotal information, the researchers were fairly certain that the orientation symposium does have a positive impact on doctoral program persistence. However, this specific segment of the orientation program had not been empirically studied.

The levels of both enthusiasm and anxiety present at the beginning of the journey are thought to impact the student’s overall perceptions of both the program and the student’s ability to complete it, and to subsequently affect the student’s retention in the doctoral program. To more deeply explore the phenomenon of doctoral student retention, and the effects of a specific subset of the orientation, this study explores that subset of the new doctoral student’s orientation symposium experience.

A show of hands

The first day of the 2.5 day orientation symposium is focused on welcoming new doctoral students and providing important information about the program, as well as tools and resources available to students that are designed to support their success. The first hour of the day is led by the Program Chair and consists of a welcome speech and introduction to key members of the faculty. Following that, the students are led through and activity that focuses on the challenges of taking any journey

in life. In this instance, the vehicle used to introduce some of the challenges faced on the journey through a doctoral program is titled “Embracing the Hero’s Journey.”

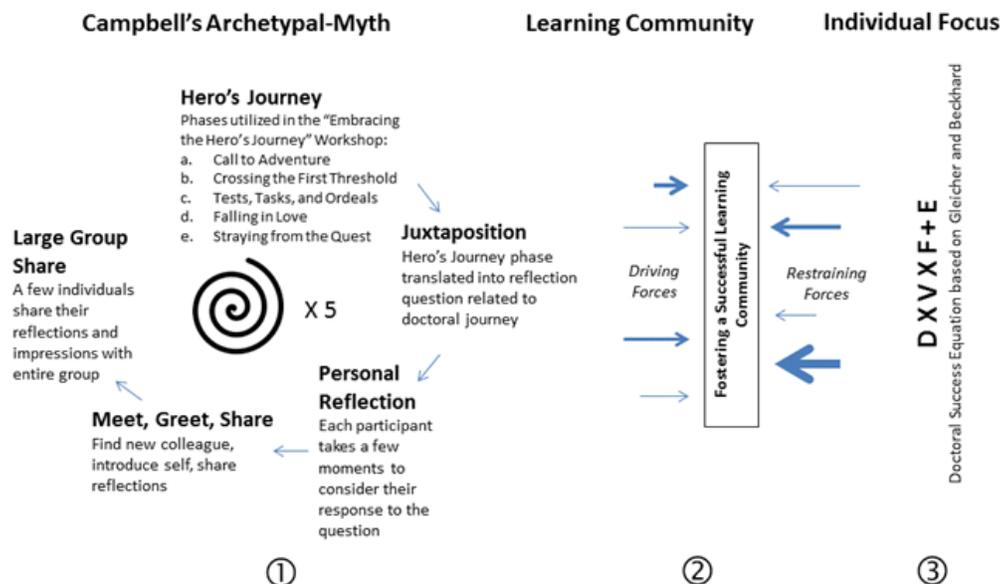
“Embracing the Hero’s Journey” is a key segment of the first day of the orientation symposium, with the following learning outcomes presented to students at the beginning of the session, and reviewed at the session’s conclusion:

- Establish familiarity with fellow doctoral learners to support a successful doctoral journey
- Know the value of developing and participating in a doctoral cohort and learning community
- Identify individual strengths and opportunities for growth as a doctoral student
- Develop an awareness of strengths and growth opportunities, in order to be most successful in the doctoral program

After a short break, the “Embracing the Hero’s Journey” workshop unfolds across the remainder of the morning. Before the workshop commenced, students were advised that they would not need their computers or other materials, and that they would be asked to move around during the interactive workshop. For the first foray into exploring the impact of the workshop, a very informal pre-test was administered. Students were asked to indicate, by a show of hands their “level of excitement related to embarking on the doctoral journey.” On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not excited at all and 10 being quite excited, most people were in the range of 5 to 10. This suggested that the attendees were looking forward to beginning the doctoral program.

A second question was asked: “How anxious are you, as you get started?” On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being quite anxious and 10 being not anxious at all, most people were in the 1 to 5 range. This suggests that there was a palpable amount of anxiety, not knowing just what to expect. The following quote from a participant illustrates this dichotomy: “I want to do this –

FIGURE 1.
COMPONENTS OF THE WORKSHOP



but I don't; I am excited – but worried; I am ready – but not!!”

The informal survey of participants attending the orientation session sparked the desire to better understand the impact of the two hour Embracing the Hero's Journey workshop. To initiate the workshop students were shown a short video that explained the essence of the Hero's Journey.

Positioning the Research for Participants

The researchers developed a pen and paper instrument to collect data at the next orientation session, which occurred three months after the “show of hands” inquiry. The instrument repeated the questions posed during the informal show of hands, and included the ability for respondents to make narrative comments regarding what they were “feeling” and “thinking” both before and after the workshop.

The stated purpose of the research was to examine the efficacy of CTU's Wednesday morning orientation for new Doctoral Students and to aid in CTU's continuous quality improvement of the new start orientation experience. To these ends the participants were informed that they would be asked to complete a short pre-test prior to the start of the interactive workshop and would be asked to complete a short post-test at the completion of the workshop.

STRUCTURE OF THE WORKSHOP

The “Embracing the Hero's Journey” workshop had three major components. The first workshop component used five phases of the Hero's Journey to guide both personal reflection and to facilitate meeting other students in the cohort. The second workshop component introduced the students to the learning community construct, and pointed out its importance to doctoral study success and what it takes to create and sustain a suc-

cessful learning community. Kurt Lewin's force field analysis (Lewin, 1951) was employed to demonstrate this, by calling upon the recollections of the students' past communal experiences, and what it takes for a group to successfully achieve both personal and group goals. The third workshop component brought the focus back to the individual student and the considerations that can impact his or her success in the doctoral program (See Figure 1.)

The Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey is an archetypal myth that explains the nature of the world and of life. It has been used to explain how one must overcome one's faults and weaknesses in order to reemerge as a mature, productive member of one's society. This segment of the workshop was facilitated by introducing the students to Joseph Campbell's archetypal myth of The Hero's Journey (2008). Brown and Moffet (1999) wrote, “Metaphor has the power to kindle the imagination and touch the heart.” The use of Joseph Campbell's articulation of The Hero's Journey allowed CTU faculty to help doctoral learners draw a connection between the initial stages of the hero's journey and the doctoral journey.

The facilitator kicks off this segment by sharing a brief explanation of the initiatory phase of the Hero's Journey under review during the segment, translating the central issue of each of the initiatory phases into a question related to the doctoral journey (See Table 1.), asking learners to reflect upon the question, then inviting learners to share their reflections with a fellow cohort member, and then to participate in a large group sharing of responses.

As the students answered a series of other questions, they were encouraged to reflect upon what called them to doctoral study and what they felt must be shifted in their lives to make

**TABLE 1.
PHASES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY
AND CORRELATING REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS**

Phase of the Hero's Journey	Seminal Question(s) students are asked to address as they a) reflect, and b) introduce themselves to fellow cohort members and share their reflections
Call to Adventure	Tell a story about the moment or moments where you heard, “the call to adventure” to undertake your doctorate? What happened? When?
Crossing the First Threshold	What must shift, end, and/or be rearranged as you cross the threshold and begin this journey?
Tests, Tasks and Ordeals	What tests, tasks and ordeals have you experienced so far? (or what do you see in the very near future?) What did you do to manage and succeed? (What do you plan to do to manage and succeed?)
Falling in Love	What is your research “love”? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “I know how to...” and I want to research this 2. “I really wish the world were different related to” and I want to research this 3. “I want to make a difference in this area” and need to research it 4. “I love, love, love this topic” and I want to research this 5. “I have experienced ...” and I want to research this 6. “I saw/see ... in the world “ and I want to research this 7. “I have a really strong interest in ...” and I want to research this 8. “The existing research in ... area really appeals to me” and I want to research this
Straying from the Quest	What is one of your “growth edges”* ? *growth edge – the boundary that delineates what you know and are comfortable with and what you do not know and are not comfortable with but must conquer in order to be successful

room for such an undertaking. By sharing those thoughts with other new students, a community of learners began to form and individual students found themselves in the midst of others who had similar feelings about the call to doctoral study, as well as what some of the challenges might be in order for any of them to be successful.

Further discussions regarding the tests, tasks and ordeals they had already begun to deal with, or had overcome, afforded yet another opportunity to see themselves in the experiences that were shared. This process helped to solidify the notion that challenges might yet occur, and that they could be dealt with effectively.

Students are asked to enter the doctoral program with some idea of their research topic. Having an opportunity to discuss the individual interests provided a process for beginning to form communities of like interests and possible communities of practice for mutual learning and support throughout the program.

Force Field Analysis

During the Force Field Analysis portion of the workshop, the participants are asked to take a look at what helps a community succeed and what can detract from community success, based upon their past experiences as community members in other settings. France and Wahl (1997) wrote, “**Force field analysis** is used to analyze any issue that impacts the group or affects the group's drive to achieve specific goals... The strategy is to help the group diagnose those **forces** that stop effective group functioning.”

Lewin's (1951) model for force field analysis has been used in various ways to help individuals and groups address the challenges associated with managing change. It provides a structure to identify and compare the strength of the various factors, or forces, that either support (*driving forces*) or hinder (*restraining forces*) a given change. Change is more likely to be successful if the combined force of all of the driving forces is greater than the combined force of all of the restraining forces. However, if the forces in both directions are equal or if the restraining forces are greater, successful change is less likely to occur and the status quo will remain in place.

Findings

The instrument utilized for this exploratory study to begin to capture student's perceptions of the Hero's Journey workshop was intentionally kept as simple as possible, to minimize its impact on the student's experience. Considered by the researchers to be a first step in examining the outcomes, the findings will help to illuminate the mechanisms embedded in the workshop through the articulation of the participants' pre- and post- perceptions.

Responses to the question “Describe your level of *excitement* related to embarking on your doctoral journey as you begin this session?” are shown in Table 2.

The pre-test results revealed that students were genuinely excited and prepared to begin the doctoral journey. The 24 responses at the top of the scale seem to represent a high degree of engagement, despite some of wonderment about what they were getting into. 77% of the responses were in the 8 - 10 range, at the top of the scale. An additional 17% were in the 6 - 7 range. Only three responses were less than 5, representing 6% at the low end of the scale.

The post-test results showed there are 40 (87%) responses in the high range, and none in the low range. The difference in the total number of post-test responses reflects the failure of some students to complete the post-test. Despite that, there is clear movement upward in the level of excitement reported by the students in this orientation session.

It is reasonable to assume that students entering upon doctoral study harbor some degree of anxiety as they begin such an endeavor. Students participating in this brief study are no different. Table 3. shows the results of the responses to the pre- and post-test questions related to anxiety.

Responses to the question “Describe your level of anxiety related to embarking on your doctoral journey as you begin this session?” revealed that students were somewhat anxious as they began the doctoral journey. The 16 responses at the top of the scale (8 – 10), indicated that 31% of the students had a high degree of anxiety as we began the orientation session. There were 20 responses in the mid-range (5 – 7), representing 38% who were moderately anxious. The remaining responses, 16 in the low range (1 – 4) reflected 31% of the students with a low

**TABLE 2
PRE-AND POST-TEST RESPONSES TO STUDENT'S LEVEL OF EXCITEMENT.**

Perceptions re: Excitement level	Responses Pre- Session	Responses Post-Session
1 Not Excited	0	0
2	1	0
3	0	0
4	1	0
5	1	2
6	3	0
7	6	4
8	8	10
9	8	8
10 Very Excited	24	22
<i>Total responses</i>	52	46

sense of anxiety as we began. While this is a perfect bell-shaped curve, it does not necessarily indicate that this distribution is to be expected in all entering cohorts of doctoral study.

The post-test responses revealed that the number of students in the high range decreased from 16 to 8; students in the mid-range decreased from 20 to 16; and students in the low range increased from 16 to 23. The increase in the number of students showing low anxiety may reflect that the interaction and discussion with their colleagues played a part in reducing the level of anxiety among the participants.

PRE-TEST THEMES

There were two questions posed for students to respond to by writing first, what they were feeling, and second what they were thinking as they got started with the orientation session. There were several themes that emerged from the responses. Among the themes in response to the question “**What are you feeling?**” were themes of **excitement and nervousness**, being a bit *overwhelmed*, concerns about *research topics and process*, feelings that this was just the start of a long *journey*, and feelings of being *challenged* in a significant way.

Excited and Nervous

At the start of the session, almost a third of the respondents explicitly stated that they were both excited and nervous. Responses to the question “What are you feeling?” were many and varied. A predominant feeling was one of excitement as reflected in these comments: “Excited to be opening a new chapter and moving forward in my life;” “Excited – anxious to meet new people – but worried about my dissertation ideas – ready to learn;” “I am feeling excited and anxious. I love academia and always want to continue learning and gaining more knowledge;” “Excitement of future career opportunities and contacts/networks - a little apprehensive – hopeful.” “I’m feeling a little bit nervous about starting, but I am glad that I decided to pursue a doctoral degree.” “I’m feeling a little worried and agitated. I’ve transferred from another university and attended four (4) colloquium sessions for them. Hopefully this isn’t a waste of time with a lot of general information about motivation, time management, study habits, etc.

Overwhelmed

A number of the respondents reported that they felt overwhelmed. Characteristic responses included: “Overwhelmed, honestly. It seems like July came too quickly.” “I simply feel overwhelmed.” “Adjusting to CTU specific online tools and resources is a bit overwhelming.” “I am anxious and slightly overwhelmed at starting this new journey.” “Excited, apprehensive, a bit overwhelmed.”

Research/Research Topic Concerns

For some students, the realization they were about to begin a doctoral program caused them to feel a bit apprehensive about the level of research that would be required. Among the comments from students were these: “I’m feeling a sense of anticipation about the journey, but a bit concerned regarding nailing down a topic for my dissertation.” “OMG. I am really not an expert in my field of study. I hope that I can become one by the end of the three year journey.” “I am feeling excited about the DCS with some concern about my ability to generate a good dissertation.” “How do I figure out what to do in my dissertation?” “Worried about dissertation – narrow down the question without getting into too much of a complicated topic that can’t be done in three years.” “Worried about my dissertation ideas.”

The Journey

Another theme was the feeling of just beginning a long journey. Students wrote: “My journey is just beginning – I am getting all the information I can about the process but more importantly I want to actively meet fellow students.” “The long-term relationships formed during this journey begin today. This meeting with faculty and fellow classmates provides the greatest reward.” “I am feeling a little anxious to really learn and begin my journey.” “I feel that I will have a long journey in completing my three years in completing my DCS.” “I am feeling enthusiastic about my journey.”

Challenges

Feelings of being challenged were expressed in these ways: “The first feeling that comes to mind is the feeling of enormous challenges. By that I mean intellectual, organizational, and financial challenges which I will have to meet.” “External profes-

TABLE 3
PRE-AND POST-TEST RESPONSES TO STUDENT’S LEVEL OF ANXIETY

Perceptions re: Anxiety Level	Responses Pre- Session	Responses Post- Session
1 Not Anxious	3	4
2	7	4
3	3	9
4	3	6
5	2	6
6	3	3
7	15	7
8	7	3
9	2	2
10 Very Anxious	7	3
<i>Total responses</i>	52	47

sional and personal conflicts, both positive and negative, will make this a challenging three years. “I am married and have two little girls, so time for learning and knowledge are sometimes hard to find. The challenge of balancing home life with doctoral study will have to be handled well.”

Among the themes in response to the second question, “What are you thinking about?” were these: among all of the responses, the predominant thought was excitement reflected in a variety of ways. For example, “I am already thinking of my dissertation question and how to advance it to a scholarly level.” “OMG, I can’t believe I’m doing this; glad to be here;” and, “My thoughts are good ones. I see other professionals and I am even more inspired to complete this program.” Other themes included: cautious optimism, thoughts about the research requirements in doctoral study, the impact of achieving the doctoral degree on one’s life, thoughts about the other people in the room, and curiosity about the Hero’s Journey session.

Cautious Optimism

Another theme in the written responses was cautious optimism described as nervousness. Among the comments were these, “How am I going to fit anything else in my already busy schedule? I know I can do it, just put my mind, body, and soul into it;” “I am thinking that this will be very time consuming, enlightening, and rewarding. Also, that I will be collecting more knowledge nuggets than I can chew on at one time; I will save them and use them all;” and, “Even though this is difficult, I will do this!”

Research/Dissertation

Some of the thoughts included the following: “Is the topic choice I am thinking about one that others will see as valid?” “Sounds like I need to get going on selecting my topic/question for the dissertation.” “I am thinking about what is involved in doing a doctorate and how it differs from a masters and the master’s thesis. It seems the doctorate is much more research focused where you work on your own.” “What am I going to do? I can’t solve the problem of my original idea. This is going to be difficult.” “I am already thinking of my dissertation question and how to advance it to a scholarly level.”

Impact of Doctoral Degree

Some thoughts here were: “Thinking about the value of the degree, Ph.D. vs. DCS...” “I am thinking about the day of graduation.” “The difference the program will have in my life.” “How am I going to be able to share my learning with others? What challenges am I going to face as I go through the program? How rewarding is the doctorate when I finish?” “How am I going to fit anything else in my already busy schedule? I know I can do it, just put my mind, body, and soul into it.”

People in the Room

For some students, their thoughts were on the other people there in the room. “Who can I meet here who is in my concentration that I will possibly be in class with?” “How great it is to be among such distinguished and humble faculty and how their dedication to my doctoral journey will contribute to my success.” “I am thinking about how to engage in conversation with others. I am not good at striking up conversation.” “Am I going to like the people I meet? How can my peers help me on my journey? How many people are pursuing a DM?”

Curiosity

The last theme was one of curiosity about the Hero’s Journey session. What is this about? Students’ responses included:

“I think the topics outlined in the agenda appear to be relevant, given where I am in the journey.” “Will the knowledge I gain help me complete my program?” “Making sure I take in as much advice as I can, in order to be successful.” “Just keeping an open mind, looking for a basic understanding of what is needed, step by step.” “I am just trying to digest the information.”

Post-test Themes

At the end of the two-hour session of the Hero’s Journey, the same two questions were posed for students to respond to by writing first, what they were *feeling*, and second what they were *thinking* as they now have had an opportunity to consider some of the chalet ‘heroes’ face. Again, there were several themes that emerged from their responses. Among the themes in response to the post-test question “**What are you feeling?**” were themes related to **confidence and less stress**, there were additional responses about the **research process**, and feelings about **commitment and motivation**.

Confidence and Less Stress

The students indicated by their responses some of the following: “I am more at ease, feeling less stress, much more comfortable, and I feel more relaxed.” “I feel a lot more confident.” “Better – not so worried and less concerned about not being 100% ready.” “I am losing the fear of starting this journey.” “I am more excited, less anxious.”

Dissertation

Students’ feelings about the dissertation research process were expressed in these responses: “A little more confused actually; however, not due to the presentation, but because I realize my topic needs to be quickly broken down.” “I feel a bit of uncertainty regarding a research topic.” “Positive... motivated...nervous... I don’t have a dissertation topic.” “I am hopeful that I will be able to start my dissertation process successfully. I know the topic that I will write about.” “It is okay that I don’t know what I want to write about, at this time. I will figure it out.”

Commitment and Motivation

A third theme related to feelings was commitment and motivation, and students said: “I feel that I am in the right place.” “I am motivated... determined... excited for the next three years.” “I will excel and I will succeed.” “I am still excited and I am more motivated.” “I feel wonderful, encouraged, motivated, excited, and ready to learn, grow, and move forward.”

The second post-test question asked what students were **thinking**, at the end of the Hero’s Journey session. The themes that emerged from those responses were related to **developing research strategies**, the **journey of doctoral study** (three years), being in a **cohort** for the first time (for many of them), and **life changes** that may be necessary.

Developing Research Strategies

Looking at the first theme, students said: “I am thinking that it is important to remain focused and ensure that my passion for the subject matter is one that can be translated by my research effort into real application.” “I am thinking how important it is to understand my research topic and to have a laser focus, not too broad.” “I am thinking about the methodology I will use for my research. How to more appropriately hone down my topic.” “I am reviewing my thinking about my current topic, again.” “I think I need to decide what is and is not important in my proposed study.”

The Journey

Students were also thinking about the journey they are beginning. They said: "I know I can do this, just take one step at a time." "I have to put my process into a plan and figure out how to begin this journey." "I'm thinking that I shouldn't be taking this too many steps at a time."

Cohort

For many students, this is the first time they are entering into a cohort learning community. This is a notion that is foreign to them. Yet, they began to think: "We are all in this together. This is going to be a great journey." "I am excited to begin and will complete the journey with the support of cohort 52." "Wow, it's nice to have a peer support network – this is a resource to succeed." "I feel that talking to different cohorts helps make me feel better about what I want to do." (The symposium is attended by returning students, as well). "I am comfortable meeting and greeting others. Everyone is seeking the same goal. We are one big support system." "I am thinking that connections w/new people will lead to greater successes and insights."

Changes Needed

After hearing the feelings and thinking of each other, many students continued to reflect on the kind of life changes that are necessary for doctoral success. Students said: "I'm thinking that I have a lot of "catch up" work to do as a transfer student." "Will I truly make time to succeed? Are my priorities aligned?" "I am thinking that time management is going to be important." "I am thinking that I will have to put in a lot of effort to finish my degree. I need to let some things go, in order for me to be successful." "I am going to get busy real fast. I need to make some personal changes. It's time to focus."

LIMITATIONS AND BIAS

The research associated with this paper does not include a control for a placebo effect. Some students may simply have been influenced by being present in the setting that introduces them to, and opens their thinking about, doctoral study. The changes in perception reported may have occurred during the orientation symposium, without this activity. While retention and completion of doctoral study is a desirable outcome for all who begin the journey, there is no control data to present that demonstrates that participants in The Hero's Journey complete their doctoral degree at a higher rate than participants who did not have the benefit of this activity.

It is possible that the participants in this study simply responded by "feeding" the researchers what they thought the researchers wanted to hear. Given the research design that was used, that is a very real potential bias. A possible way to avoid such bias might have been to more clearly separate out the roles of the researchers as "instructors" and as "evaluators."

CONCLUSIONS

As discussed earlier, successful progress toward completing doctoral study requires persistence. Studies over the last four decades show that 40% to 60% of doctoral candidates at some stage in the process fail to demonstrate doctoral persistence; that is, they fail to achieve their goal of earning a terminal degree (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008). This phenomenon of doctoral persistence and its converse, attrition,

is most puzzling given that "Paradoxically, the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system—doctoral students—are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals" (Golde, 2000, p. 199).

The Hero's Journey session at the orientation symposium is intended to address just this problem. Programs such as the CTU Doctor of Management and the Doctor of Computer Science are of the type (distance programs) that is associated with lower levels of persistence. However, programs utilizing cohort models are associated with higher levels of persistence (Lovitts, 2001; Norris & Barnett, 1994). The Hero's Journey is an effort to facilitate the successful entry of a new cohort into the CTU doctoral learning community. According to West, Gokalp, Edlyn, Fischer, & Gupton, (2011), cohorts may be organized according to when students begin a program or according to research focus. CTU has chosen to organize each cohort at entry. Subsequent "mini-cohorts" develop around specific concentrations in each of the doctoral programs. Irrespective of which model is used, cohorts provide interactions with peers that foster connectivity, increase social integration, and help to develop a sense of belonging, and community (Lovitts, 2001; Norris & Barnett, 1994).

The findings generated from this study only scratch the surface of what has been found in prior research studies on doctoral persistence. No attempt was made to examine any previous research. The purpose of this study was to discuss have a cohort of new doctoral students examine the implications of starting the doctoral journey and to identify for themselves what impediments there might be for their successful completion of the journey. The potential impediments identified were a) dissertation challenges, and, b) Identification of personal and professional motivations for pursuing the degree.

Dissertation challenges

For many, completing the dissertation will very likely be the most challenging aspect of earning the degree. Among the challenges they face, one may be the difficulty associated with identifying a motivating and researchable topic. Often students start out with a much too broad topic, or they choose one that is too narrow (as they attempt to hone in on "solving a problem"). Answering the questions in the Hero's Journey session provided many of them with the first opportunity to recognize what they must do to lean into an appropriate topic with a clear focus. They also now have a clear picture of the importance of balancing family and work related responsibilities, while carving out time to work on the dissertation. This part of the challenge may be associated with feelings of guilt and loneliness, leaving candidates susceptible to breakdown and burnout. The discussion with other "new starts" and the formation of the cohort learning group may help to alleviate this concern.

Identification of personal and professional motivations for pursuing the degree

Whatever the professional incentives such as the promise of a raise, the hope for a promotion, and the recognition derived from a new title may be, these are compelling reasons to begin the degree, but on their own are not likely to be sufficient to sustain pursuit toward the degree. It is personal (intrinsic) motivations (e.g., feeling "called" to earn the degree, the love of learning, seeing the process as a personal challenge, gaining new skills and knowledge that translate into serving others) that will carry an individual through to a successful defense and to earning a doctoral degree. Participation in a cohort learning

community is helpful, but for each of these new doctoral students, it is important for them to be able to identify their own reasons to persist when challenges come. They must have clear and compelling reasons to continue (e.g., time and money already invested, determination to accomplish a goal, wanting to prove to themselves or someone else that they could do it).

SUMMARY

This paper delineated the context of the intervention, discussed the criticality of student retention, outlined the experiential activity that served as an intervention, presented the resulting themes identified through an analysis of the data from pre- and post-test surveys, and shared the authors' conclusions. In summary, the two-hour experiential activity that elicited the perceptions, and examined the anxiety and comfort levels of students entering a doctoral program appears to have value in terms of reducing the anxiety of students entering the doctoral program. Future research would serve to uncover any longitudinal effects as evidence, in part, by students' successful completion of the program.

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