Journal of Online Graduate Education

Building Intellectual Communities in Online Doctoral Programs

T. Laine Scales, PhD
Baylor University

Veronica L. Timbers, LCSW, MDIV, PhD
University of Utah

Jennifer C. Hollenburger, PhD
Grove City College

Volume 7, Issue 3 (Fall, 2024)

Abstract

In 2008, the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID) presented research on how to help doctoral students thrive and successfully transition into higher education roles. The CID reported that doctoral students often left programs that were using an expert-apprentice model, where students are expected to strictly follow the methods and style of their doctoral chair. Alternatively, students were more successful in programs where a mutual intellectual community was shared among students and faculty. In this article, the authors provide a case study of how mutual intellectual community was established in an online Social Work doctoral program at Baylor University. Using auto-ethnography, the authors draw from their own positionalities in the program as students, faculty, and program director, providing practical examples and critical reflection around successes and barriers in building intellectual community in their online Social Work doctoral program. The main characteristics of intellectual communities include shared purpose, respect for diverse skill sets, flexibility and forgiveness, and generosity of time and ideas. When students and faculty are separated by physical distance in online doctoral programs, these characteristics must be established through intentional programming, mutual commitment to establishing a meaningful community, advocacy (by leadership, faculty, and students), and creative opportunities for engagement. This article provides insights into building an intellectual community and stewarding professional development for online doctoral students. Our narrative and analysis can be instructive to programs seeking to develop online Ph.D. students into early career educators and researchers who can meet the evolving demands of higher education.

Keywords: *online doctoral education, social work education, online education, interactive learning*

Building Intellectual Communities in Online Doctoral Programs

Graduate education has been in a rapid state of change and innovation over the past two decades, and the introduction of online doctoral programs brings additional opportunities and challenges (Cassuto & Weisbuch, 2021). In the early 2000s, doctoral educational scholars turned their attention to sobering research which showed that almost 50 percent of all doctoral students were dropping out of their programs (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Walker et al., 2008). To explore potential solutions to this alarming statistic, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, a group well known for educational innovation, formed the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID) (Walker et al., 2008). In 2002, this initiative began a five-year research and action project exploring 84 U.S. based doctoral programs in 44 institutions (Walker et al., 2008). The goal of the initiative was to rethink doctoral education to meet the needs of the 21st century. The CID developed recommendations based on emerging practices in programs with successful doctoral student outcomes and presented this work in the book-length report, *Formation of Scholars, Re-Thinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century (*Walker et al., 2008). While the CID was not aiming its research report toward online doctoral programs, many of its recommendations remain relevant to this modality of doctoral education. The authors critically share their experiences of how the CID recommendations for building intellectual community have been implemented and refined in Baylor University's online Social Work doctoral program. Suggestions are provided for other online programs that are seeking to adopt this model, and the authors propose specific ideas for future research related to intellectual community and online pedagogy.

Defining Stewardship as the Goal of Doctorate Degree

Online Ph.D. students are aiming for the highest degree in the academy, what Lee Schulman (2008) calls the "monarch of the academic community" (p.11). Completion of the Ph.D., according to Schulman (2008), "…signals that the recipient is now ready, eligible, indeed obligated to make the most dramatic shift in roles: from student to teacher, from apprentice to master, from novice or intern to independent scholar and leader" (p. 11). Using this understanding of the Ph.D. degree, the CID researchers applied the name *steward of the discipline* to describe the ideal type of scholar that should emerge from the Ph.D. experience. The CID says a *steward of the discipline* is one who can:

> …be entrusted with the vigor, quality, and integrity of the field. This person is a scholar first and foremost, in its fullest sense of the term—someone who will creatively generate new knowledge, critically conserve valuable and useful ideas, and responsibly transform those understandings through writing, teaching and application. (Walker et al., 2008, p. 161)

The CID encouraged programs to view the formation of these *stewards* as the chief purpose of doctoral education. Therefore, since Ph.D. and doctoral students are growing into scholars who will continue to transform their field, it is essential for faculty and administrators to provide scaffolding and space to effectively help students move from novice to leader. With the physical distance that is characteristic of online doctoral education, it is especially important to intentionally consider how students are being formed as future faculty when they 1) do not share physical space with their mentors, 2) have exposure to the daily routines of the academy, or 3) experience organic moments of disagreement and visioning with other academics in their field (Feldon et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2019). The CID found that programs with

less student attrition and greater evidence of producing scholars ready for faculty roles had one important common feature- mutual intellectual community between student, faculty, and administrators.

Intellectual Community as the Key Ingredient of Doctoral Success

According to the CID, faculty and administrators provide the most effective mentoring and modeling to students through co-created "robust intellectual communit[ies]" (Walker et al., 2008, p. 215). In fact, the CID researchers were surprised to find that establishing an intellectual community is so central to a doctoral program's success that "nearly every other aspect of the program depends on and contributes to the development of such community" (Walker et al., 2008, p. 215). Consequently, faculty and administrators must be purposeful in building intellectual community, but students also play a role in shaping and deepening the quality of that community (Walker et al., 2008). In other words, these robust intellectual communities do not just happen but are built with intent.

For students and faculty in online Ph.D. programs, the challenge of being connected in community is great indeed, as physical distance from one another may threaten the sense of belonging and togetherness (Bentley et al., 2015; Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011; Caskurlu et al., 2021; Haythornthwaite et al., 2004). Modifying the CID's phrasing, we propose creating "virtual intellectual communities" as a response to these threats. The purpose of this article is to share how the CID's insights on intellectual community were applied in Baylor University's online Social Work Ph.D. program. From varying positionalities, the authors critically reflect on what we have learned, as a student-faculty-administrator team. We discuss our successes and failures in building a virtual intellectual community, and our narrative and analysis can be instructive to

other programs, particularly those attempting to form online Ph.D. students into the next generation of faculty scholars.

Program Design

The Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University hosts an online Ph.D. program, admitting a cohort of seven to nine students every two years. The program was designed using the Community of Inquiry (COI) model, first presented by Garrison et al. in 2000. This model emphasizes the importance of creating transactional space in the online environment and developing a social presence despite physical distance. Social presence is defined by Bentley and colleagues (2015) as "the extent to which persons are perceived to be real and are able to be authentically known and connected to others in mediated communication" (p. 495). The Garland School's program design, cohort model, and twice-a-week synchronous Zoom sessions were based on the COI model creating a foundation for intellectual community building (Myers et al., 2019).

The program includes nine semesters of course work followed by a dissertation phase. Each semester the students take two courses with their cohort. The students must also take two electives, focused on their research area or methodology, alongside their regular course work. These electives are independent studies or courses taken at other institutions. All coursework is designed to include assignments that directly build toward the students' dissertation and incorporate opportunities to practice scholarly collaboration with their cohort peers and faculty across the program. At the conclusion of each course, students have either added material to their dissertation or produced a manuscript draft to build their record of scholarship.

Each cohort begins the program with a one-week in-person orientation. The orientation allows students to meet one another, become more familiar with faculty research topics and work

styles, and experience the culture of the school. The week's schedule also allows time to explore resources for research, learn about policies in the university and program, and most relevant to our topic, foster relationships between students and faculty. Each faculty is given a scheduled time to introduce themselves to the cohort and to answer questions about their research and their own doctoral experiences. Students and faculty share lunches together daily and have a closing dinner on the last evening. In between meetings, students are encouraged to spend time getting to know one another. Students also begin their first two courses during this week, and these initial class meetings are the only in-person classes they have in the program. This one week is the only mandatory in-person requirement in the program.

Following this time, students continue to meet through synchronous Zoom sessions each week. The live sessions are scheduled in the evenings and last two to three hours. Each instructor chooses how to use the live session, but in most cases, instructors begin with a time for both the students and the professor to give personal and professional updates. One of the professors has labeled this *connection time*, and issues a prompt about the week, or perhaps an interactive reflection activity. Being a faith-based institution, another professor occasionally offers an inspirational word or specific encouragement to the students. The remainder of the live session is used for a combination of class discussion, application of the material, guest speakers, and/or a short lecture.

Along with these live sessions, students and their dissertation chairs typically meet on a regular schedule via Zoom beginning no later than the third semester of enrollment. Students are not required to choose a dissertation research chair until the second semester of the program; therefore, regular meetings do not start until students are established in the program. Prior to meeting regularly with their dissertation chair, students are encouraged to schedule time during

the first two semesters to talk with a range of faculty members. Faculty are asked to make themselves available for these meetings so that students can foster relationships with more research faculty. These relationships also help students build out their dissertation committee and consider other opportunities for research collaborations. In addition to these meetings, some early course assignments require the students to ask a faculty member, other than their dissertation chair, to peer-review a draft of a manuscript or IRB submission. This practice builds relationships and familiarity with the peer-review process and continues to develop the scope and depth of the intellectual community.

Once the student establishes a dissertation chair, the frequency of regular meetings varies, based on student and faculty needs. From the intellectual community-building perspective, these meetings keep the faculty members and students connected, strengthen the mentoring relationships, and hold students accountable to their research agenda. From a technical perspective, these meetings provide an opportunity for the student and faculty to become comfortable with the platform and ultimately experience fewer 'technical glitches' when using it for the dissertation proposal and defense, which often take place through Zoom.

Finally, the program's design also allows students to continue working in their fields, which means they are immersed simultaneously in coursework and other professional work. In a very practical sense, the online format helps students financially support themselves and/or their families (Baum &McPherson, 2019), but it also supports a rich intellectual community, as students actively connect theoretical learning directly to the profession's everyday applications in society. This link between research and practical application fosters important understanding of stewardship in a way that is not possible in a traditional full-time, in-person program.

Intellectual Communities: Characteristics and Examples of Online Application

Intellectual community can be hard to define. In fact, we may be most aware of it in its absence, where students and faculty experience a sense of aloneness and isolation. Intellectual communities are built within settings where students, faculty, and administrators collaborate, and the central driver is "engagement with the field and its pressing questions… [to develop] a rolling conversation" among the community members (Walker et al., 2008 p. 219). The CID identified four characteristics that are useful for online doctoral programs to consider: shared purpose, diverse and multigenerational, flexible and forgiving, and respect and generosity.

Shared Purpose

Shared purpose is first and foremost among the characteristics of an intellectual community. The CID defines this as "a community-wide commitment to help students develop into the best scholars possible so that they, in turn, may contribute to the growth and creation of knowledge" (Walker et al., 2008, p. 220). In the Garland School, this takes place through curriculum design and by faculty making intentional connections to student-specific research and skill sets. For instance, some professors designed synchronous class time to practice and reflect on aspects of academy culture and stewardship. Specifically, during the first semester, one of the professors asked students to share papers and practice giving and receiving formal peer reviews in small groups. This activity prepared students with the technical skills required for peer reviews in academic publishing and presentations, while also demonstrating how work within an intellectual community leads to higher quality outcomes. Many of the students used this activity to develop a conceptual paper that became their first published manuscript. Specifically, four of the eight students received acceptance in journals within the field. Rather than building competition and independence, the exercise facilitated collegial interdependence. Using this

intellectual community-building activity, students began to see for themselves the value of collective knowledge and wisdom.

In one of the student early research courses, the professor took time at the end of the semester to allow students to define what stewardship in the profession meant to them in light of their work experience and research area. The students read an excerpt of the CID's work (Walker et al., 2008) to become familiar with the aspirational processes of stewardship and formation. Then, in a live session, students shared with each other what their own stewardship aspirations were as researchers-in-formation. This was done by reading a pre-written letter to their learning community (cohort) expressing how they had grown as researchers throughout the semester and how their professional identity and purpose was developing because of their newly gained skills. The final class meeting, rather than a rush to squeeze in final content for the semester, became an opportunity to slow down and share their reflections. Students considered where they began, celebrated how they had supported one another's learning, and recognized how they were being formed as emerging scholars. It is easy to check the boxes and to work in a frenzy through a doctoral program, but by embedding moments to slow down and consider the meta-cognitions developing through the work, a program cultivates scholarly ethics and a sense of self that would otherwise be lost in productivity. These shared reflections also built a sense of shared purpose and struggle in creating new knowledge for their field. This moment of humanness and vulnerability, by humbling naming their areas of growth, minimized competitiveness and increased group cohesion.

Another example of shared purpose that goes beyond the classroom is the inclusion of students on administrative committees within the Garland School. Though this is a new practice for the school, there have been creative visioning around the inclusion of doctoral student voices

on committees. Recently, the Garland School created a Race Equity Work Team to examine integrity in programming, hiring, retention, and curriculum as it relates to race equity. One doctoral student (and one of the authors of this article), who had experience in teaching and curriculum development, joined the curriculum subcommittee of this group. The committee appointment had reciprocal benefits to the school and the student. Specifically, the student had the chance to practice new skills with curriculum-related administrative processes in higher education and developed wider relationships across faculty and staff. The school benefited from a fresh voice with experience in shaping diversity and equity in social work agencies in the community. Both the student and the faculty on the committee were invested in a shared commitment to improve the curriculum so that the program could teach in ways that enhanced racial equity for students and the profession.

D*iverse and Multigenerational*

The CID suggests that intellectual communities are *diverse and multigenerational*. Students should be seen as junior colleagues and given opportunities to both participate in the research of senior colleagues and be supported in initiating their own independent research, even beyond dissertation work. CID researchers point out that in healthy intellectual communities, faculty appreciate the fresh eyes doctoral students bring to their projects, and students are encouraged to seek out a variety of perspectives on research as they learn (Walker et.al., 2008). In the Garland School, these characteristics lead to creatively using technology to build research and writing teams. We saw this play out in our program when two students collaborated on a grant to access a dataset for research. One of these students had experience with substance abuse treatment and the other had extensive experience with data analysis and statistical testing with large datasets. This project began with the instructor offering students an opportunity to receive

extra credit in a statistics course for developing a manuscript from secondary data. The two students were assisted by the Garland School's grant manager and a faculty mentor, resulting in research that was accepted for presentation at a national conference.

A second example of faculty and students connecting for research purposes was when a senior faculty member was working on a secondary data analysis using a national U.S.-based dataset on substance use. One of his research areas was on substance use and prevention of substance misuse. They were interested in looking at patterns of substance use among people identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and invited one of the doctoral students to collaborate because their research area was on mental health needs among LGBTQ+ people. Through this interdisciplinary project, the student met scholars from other parts of the university and was able to learn virtually from three different researchers with diverse and multigenerational lived experiences, including one senior faculty and two early career scholars across two different fields of study. The origin of this project developed from the professor-student classroom interaction and was outside of the student's research with their dissertation chair. This example underscores the CID's suggestion that doctoral students benefit from learning from multiple mentors, not only the dissertation chair.

Flexible and Forgiving

Vibrant intellectual communities, according to the CID researchers (Walker et al., 2008), are also characterized as being *flexible and forgiving*. Novices will make mistakes, so doctoral students must find a space of safety to take intellectual risks. Students should have opportunities to revise their research and writing projects. Furthermore, faculty can serve as models for failing gracefully when they share stories about their own failures and normalize the process of learning from mistakes (Walker et al., 2008). In one class in the program, a professor has given

permission to another professor to have the students critique a paper from their early career that was rejected for publication. The students do not know who wrote the paper or if it was accepted during their review of the article. Later, they are told more about who wrote the manuscript and why it never went on to publication. This serves as a learning process for the students in how to do journal article reviews and in how to expect a combination of success and failure as scholars who are producing new knowledge.

Throughout the course of study within the Garland School of Social Work, students are encouraged to submit papers for publication. The process of writing, submitting, and revising manuscripts provides many opportunities for faculty feedback prior to formal dissertation writing. One student in our program was encouraged by their seminar professor to submit a teaching note for publication in a social work education journal. This paper initially received a decision of "revise and resubmit." The student, having never written as a primary author, was not sure how to respond to reviewer comments. Consequently, they reached out to partner with another faculty member who has expertise in this content area. The faculty member graciously offered their time and resources to give feedback and guidance. This experience ended with the student having their first article as primary author and added to the faculty members' publications, who was listed as the second author. This partnership was mutually beneficial. The collaboration happened because the student felt safe enough to share the reviewer comments with this professor and admit their inexperience in knowing the next steps for publishing. Additionally, this faculty member could have missed a teaching opportunity (and publication) had they not been focused on the academic and professional growth of the doctoral students in the cohort; however, the emphasis on intellectual community encouraged these types of interactions and reciprocity.

A final example of flexibility can be seen in one student's dissertation chair sharing that they have known colleagues who keep a file of rejection letters next to their file of accepted publications and presentations as a humble reminder of the challenges and rigor of academia. The chair also suggested that the student start a box or file of positive feedback from publications, students, and colleagues for balancing some of the expected disappointments of academic work and publishing. From a similar perspective, a cohort member shared a social media post of a doctoral graduate who made and wore a skirt of journal rejection letters for graduation. These small examples eased the insecurities of the students and encouraged students to share their successes and struggles with one another as they applied for grants, submitted manuscripts, and completed their first conference presentations.

Respect and Generosity

The final pair of characteristics for a healthy intellectual community is *respect and generosity*. The CID describes these characteristics by saying, "[m]embers of a vibrant intellectual community are generous with their time, ideas, and feedback" (Walker et.al., 2008, p. 223). The tone is set by faculty and administrators who model these traits for students. When senior colleagues are confident in their own research projects and take responsibility for stewarding the next generation of scholars, they share ideas and credit. Administrators make sure faculty are acknowledged for mentoring doctoral students and rewarded for their generosity in sharing their time, energy, and skill sets. For example, when a Ph.D. student and a faculty member of the Garland School of Social Work co-author a published manuscript, the school shares the accomplishment through their different social media and communication channels. This small act provides a token of appreciation to both the faculty member and the graduate student. Opportunities for acknowledging and rewarding faculty for stewarding the next

generation may also come in the form of yearly faculty reviews. Additionally, administrators could establish an award for the Doctoral Student Mentor of the Year, which could be based on student nominations.

The CID reminds us that, "Enlisting [students] as partners in this work may not be a move that comes easily to faculty members…[but] students bring staggering imagination and energy to bear" (Walker et. al, 2008, p. 35). In the Garland School of Social Work, faculty who placed value in their role to steward new scholars served students in ways that were not always tangible or visible. For instance, one faculty often edited or consulted on student papers, even when their work did not result in co-authorship. Their generosity in helping students to publish created a sense of care and connection that led to additional collaborations, modeled professional ethics, and fostered long term relationships between that faculty member and the students.

Another example of respect and generosity was in the sharing of professional resources between students and faculty. One professor made a point to know each student's area of research interest and regularly sent emails to students with new research articles overlapping with their research, even after they no longer had these students in class. After observing this model, a few students were able to find ways to be generous with faculty. They introduced faculty members to calls for special editions related to a faculty's research, potential datasets for use in research, participants or programs for sampling, and to practitioners in the field, creating an ongoing exchange of generous collaboration. Virtual intellectual communities are strengthened when everyone is generous with their resources and time, especially since time is in short supply for busy faculty and graduate students.

Mutual Responsibility

We have described and illustrated the CID's four characteristics of intellectual community and applied them to our own virtual experiences at the Garland School of Social Work. In this section, we unpack one of the most important points about building communities: everyone must work together in the building. Students, faculty, and administrators each have a role.

Students

While faculty and administrators are important models of intellectual community, according to Golde et al. (2010) students must also work against isolation in online learning environments, because they "have a role to play in creating the circumstances for their own success" (p. 1). Golde and colleagues (2010) also state, that faculty members should recognize student initiative and "embrace it as a sign that students are becoming junior colleagues" (p.1).

Building a virtual intellectual community starts with a strong connection between student cohort members. Doctoral students at the Garland School of Social Work established community by using a group text messaging and social media app (application) called *Marco Polo*. This app allowed students to leave frequent video messages for one another, which played a vital role in promoting connection and social presence. Students shared their concerns, excitement, and strategies associated with research, coursework, and assignments while simultaneously deepening friendships through vulnerability and virtual proximity. For example, early in the cohort experience, students used the app to introduced one other to their personal environments. They shared videos of their homes and work offices, talked about loved ones, gave book and music recommendations, described their daily rituals, and even shared needs and successes in real time. Students invested in connecting with one another and the app made it easier to weave

these conversations into their everyday lives early in the program without needing their schedules to align for a phone call or Zoom meet up.

While the Marco Polo app strengthened connections between students, other virtual communication methods connected students to the faculty. In their second semester of the program, a cohort of students decided to create a student-led newsletter in order to keep up with one another's research and personal lives. Students showed their desire to connect with faculty when they invited the faculty to contribute to the newsletter as well. A Google form was sent to all students and faculty with prompts about their current reading, favorite movies, personal stories, professional successes, and an option to attach a recent photograph. One of the students assembled the pieces into a newsletter for faculty and students. While program level newsletters may be a common feature of online programs, this student-led effort was different than most because of its purposeful invitation to highlight personal and academic updates. By creating something the students felt was important for establishing community connections between each other and the faculty, the students demonstrated a commitment to the work of creating and maintaining a virtual intellectual community.

Students may also expand the intellectual community by creating connections across cohorts ahead and behind them in doctoral studies. While these interactions between cohorts may happen naturally at a brick-and-mortar campus, in the online environment, it becomes necessary for students and administrators to plan opportunities for connection across student groups. For example, the student authors of this paper met several times on Zoom with students in the cohort ahead of us to get advice on how to prepare for comprehensive exams and also to ask questions about the dissertation process. Program faculty also took the time to introduce these students to alumni and to newer students at in-person professional conferences. After several of these

organic meet-ups and introductions at conferences, the Dean of the School of Social Work took notice and supported these connections by providing financial support for the faculty to take past and present online doctoral students to a meal when they were at some of these national conferences. These across-cohort-connections and student-to-alumni connections led to several co-authored writing projects and established more professional networks for students with early career researchers in the field.

Finally, although the faculty recognized that it was important for students to have their own spaces, students did sometimes organize a conversation or virtual meet-up to which faculty or administrators were invited. These virtual meetings were outside of class time and a place to share wisdom about academia, talk about a particular research strategy, or respond to informal feedback of student needs or questions. This example highlights some of the ways that students can be the catalysts for deepening the bonds and reciprocity of intellectual community. This student initiative is important for shared purpose and responsibility but is especially important for programs in which faculty and administrators are more passive in community-building. It should be noted that students can still create an intellectual community among themselves when necessary; however, research and our experience show it is most successful and effective when promoted and supported by the program faculty.

Faculty

Faculty are the hinges opening the doors to virtual intellectual communities. First and foremost, they can encourage students to join, enhance, and maintain the communities that have been built. Faculty can model collegiality for students by having guest speakers or shared virtual meeting space with other researchers at other universities to demonstrate how faculty interact and speak about or with one another. Faculty might also tell stories about the importance of their

own student connections in graduate school and how those relationships developed over the years in the academy. For instance, we, the student authors of this paper, felt we needed more support with using SPSS and learning adjacent applications like AMOS, for structural equation modeling. We brought this request to the program administrators, and an elective class was made available to us that allowed us connections with another doctoral program. The elective was taught by a senior professor who was on a shared grant with one of our regular professors, further demonstrating collegiality and networking across the field at this highest level of knowledge production.

In discussing other important faculty roles in establishing and maintaining an online community, the faculty author reflected on the importance they find in planning Zoom classes in ways that replicate the serendipitous opportunities for social and intellectual interactions that happen in ground-based classrooms. Many senior professors in the academy who attended face-to-face doctoral programs remember times of spontaneous, but important, conversation with a faculty member at the departmental coffee pot or walking together down the hall. These opportunities for informal conversation are often missing in online programs. Faculty cannot recreate these exact interactions but they can hold time and space for conversation *beyond the classroom*. One faculty does this by scheduling a half-hour one-on-one meeting with each student in their class during the semester. While these planned meetings may not be spontaneous in timing, they can be spontaneous in terms of content by letting the student set the agenda the conversation can be about getting to know each other more, general research questions, discussions about academia, or even how to better balance personal and professional roles as a as a scholar. In fact, the co-authors of this paper found our shared interest in writing about the

formation of doctoral students in online programs through these types of informal conversations with the faculty author.

More casual ways of building the faculty-student relationship are also available. The nature of online education allows for students (and faculty) to live in multiple geographic regions. At the Garland School of Social Work, we viewed geography as a strength rather than a barrier, and many faculty-student meetups were coordinated when students and/or faculty members were traveling to other areas of the United States. For example, one faculty member spends summers in North Carolina where two online students lived, and this proximity allowed for face-to-face time together, outside of the classroom. These types of general travel meet-ups happened between students in the cohort as well. Often pictures of these meet-ups were then shared via a cohort text group or in email to celebrate and share these special opportunities for in-person community.

Most importantly, faculty invite students into their own academic work, scholarship, teaching, and service. By co-creating opportunities for new research or teaching projects, online doctoral students practice their role as future scholars and faculty. Faculty may also invite students to co-teach or substitute teach in an online class to allow for this practice. While some committee work should be for faculty only, there are many opportunities for students to serve alongside faculty in committees. Virtual committee meetings are easiest to include students, but even meetings where faculty are face-to-face can be set up to include a student attending virtually. Committee work becomes a formation experience for these future faculty when it provides a window into a university's shared governance. These types of invitations communicate that virtual intellectual communities value student input and that the faculty and school values the quality and purpose of online education. Finally, faculty who are meeting

regularly with students in classes can serve as liaisons between students and administrators. They can encourage administrators and university groups toward building a culture of inclusion for online students who may be overlooked in the planning of supports or events for in-person students. These faculty can also remind administrators of the need to adapt or create new policies for online doctoral students during procedural discussions.

Administrators

Administrators of doctoral programs include department chairs and graduate program directors, as well as deans of the various academic units and, in some cases, leaders of the university's graduate school. First and foremost, administrators set the stage for the department to value the building of intellectual communities that have a shared purpose. They have the power to reward faculty who exhibit good stewardship as they spend time and energy mentoring doctoral students. Annual reviews and tenure documents should include consideration of these mentoring activities, such as chairing dissertation committees, co-authorship with online students, networking opportunities or meaningful academic connections they provided to online students, and involvement in online professional development activities for doctoral students (e.g., brown bag discussions about academic culture or support of students on the job market).

Administrators can also provide specific resources for online doctoral students. For example, the Baylor Graduate School provides doctoral students with travel stipends to professional conferences. Here students are taking their first steps into professional circles, and as mentioned above, students may have opportunities to meet their online faculty and student colleagues in-person at these events. These opportunities are made possible in part by this allocation of resources.

Another example might be sending the online students marketing items with the University branding, such as notebooks, cups, or other small items that connect the student to the wider university. One student was able to join a book group that was hosted by the Graduate School and open to all graduate students. The Graduate school mailed a copy of the book to the online students who wanted to participate, even though in-person students were required to go to the Graduate office to pick up a copy. When administrators make small but important financial investments in these professional activities, the intellectual community can be made wider and further solidify the sense of community with the program.

Research Recommendations

The authors of this article recognize the need for more formalized research about the strengths and gaps of establishing virtual intellectual communities. Both qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to understand the phenomenon of virtual intellectual community building and the impact of these communities on overall student well-being. The authors recognize that auto-ethnographic work is self-reflective and limited in transferability; however, our hope is that through critical reflection on our experiences in building virtual intellectual community, we have provided shared language and vision for implementation and further study of these experiences. Additionally, we believe longitudinal research is needed to see how these practices shape the trajectory and success of doctoral students who began their scholarly formation in virtual intellectual communities.

Conclusion

The CID found that intellectual community is a key building block for doctoral student flourishing. Ideally, these communities exhibit the qualities outlined by the CID: they have a shared purpose, are diverse and multigenerational, flexible and forgiving, and are respectful and

generous (Walker et al., 2008). Although the CID was not making recommendations specifically for online programs, we have demonstrated that *virtual intellectual communities* are also relevant for the future of academia as we meet the challenges of online environments. In considering each of these four characteristics of intellectual communities in our own doctoral program, we have mentioned many strengths in the sections above, but we also want to address the areas where we still have learning and work to do.

Building an intellectual community means all levels of the program- students, faculty, and administrators- must believe in the benefits of spending the extra time and giving creative attention to the process. Students must resist the urge to passively receive from the program and be ready to be active agents in shaping the community. Faculty and administrators need to provide language, opportunities, and orientation to why virtual community building is important and mutually beneficial. They need to consider how to cast vision for this type of community from recruitment to graduation, and even consider how to continue to cast that vision among alumni who can maintain these virtual intellectual communities as early scholars. All players must also recognize that each online cohort might have different needs or struggles, adapting to those needs is part of the flexibility of these intellectual communities. For instance, students who were online during COVID may have needed different types of support and space than doctoral students who began after COVID. Student in U.S. doctoral programs now might need more discussions on academic freedom and new state laws that are impacting curriculum, than virtual intellectual communities provided to cohort 5-8 years ago. As the academic landscape changes and students and program needs change, there needs to be a willingness of faculty and programs to re-think and re-create how they support virtual intellectual community. The authors of this article hope that the ideas and examples here show how virtual intellectual communities can be

anticipated and developed with room for the organic needs of each specific program context and cohort to uniquely shape it. The process of building something together prepares doctoral students to participate in and nurture the intellectual communities they will later inhabit (or create) once they enter faculty life as new but well-prepared scholars.

References

Baum S. & McPherson, M. (2019). The human factor: The promise & limits of online education. *Daedalus, 148*(4), 235–254. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01769

Bentley, K. J., Secret, M. C., & Cummings, C. R. (2015). The centrality of social presence in online teaching and learning in social work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *51*(3), 494–504. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2015.1043199

Caskurlu, S., Richardson, J. C., Maeda, Y., & Kozan, K. (2021). The qualitative evidence behind the factors impacting online learning experiences as informed by the community of inquiry framework: A thematic synthesis. *Computers & Education*, *165*(2021), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104111

Cassuto, L. and Weisbuch, R. (2021) *The new PhD; How to build a better graduate education.* Baltimore: MD; Johns Hopkins University Press.

Feldon, D.F., Wofford, A.M., Blaney, J.M. (2023). Ph.D. pathways to the professoriate: Affordances and constraints of institutional structures, individual agency, and social systems. In Perna, L.W. (Ed) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94844-3_4-1

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education, 2*(2–3), 87–105. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6

Glazer, H. R., & Wanstreet, C. E. (2011). Connection to the academic community: Perceptions of students in online education. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *12*(1), 55-62. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A284222181/AONE?u=anon~3885a50e&sid=googleScholar&xid=35550ba1

Golde, Chris M. (2000). Should I stay or should I go? Student descriptions of the doctoral attrition process. *Review of Higher Education* 23(2),199–227. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2000.0004

Golde, C. M., Scales, T.L., Gardner, S. (2010). Building intellectual community: Graduate deans as catalysts. *The Communicator.* Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools.

Haythornthwaite, C., Kazmer, M. M., Robins, J., & Shoemaker, S. (2004). Community development among distance learners: Temporal and technological dimensions. In C. Haythornthwaite and M. Kazmer's (Eds.) L*earning, culture & community in online education* (p.35-58). Peter Lang Publishing.

Lee, H., Chang, H. & Bryan, L. (2020). Doctoral students' learning success in online-based leadership programs: Intersection with technological and relational factors. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 21*(1), 61–81. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i5.4462

Lovitts, B.E. (2001). *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Myers, D., Singletary, J., Rogers, R., Ellor, J., & Barham, S. (2019). A synchronous online social work PhD program: Educational design and student/faculty response. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 39*(4–5), 323–343. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2019.1659908

Schulman, L. (2008). Forward. In G. E. Walker, C.M. Golde, L. Jones, A.B. Conklin & P. Hutchings, *The formation of scholars: Rethinking doctoral education for the twenty-first century*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Walker, G. E., Golde, C. M., Jones, L., Conklin A.B, & Hutchings, P. (2008). *The formation of scholars: Rethinking doctoral education for the twenty-first century*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Williams, E. A., Duray, R., & Reddy, V. (2006). Teamwork orientation, group cohesiveness, and student learning: a study of the use of teams in online distance education. *Journal of Management Education*, *30*(4), 592-616. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562905276740

