

The Ph. D. as Lifelong Learning

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If there were an award for taking the longest amount of time to complete a graduate degree, while getting the most experience out of it, I think I could be a major contender for that award. I started the doctoral program in higher education in the fall of 2005. When I applied, I really didn't know what I would be getting myself in to – in fact, I actually didn't think I'd even be accepted! When I was accepted, I chose the Ph. D. over the Ed. D. because I wanted to do more research, but on what, I was not so sure. Many individuals could not believe I would take on this degree as a hobby, but in all honesty, that is the way I originally looked at it, and it has been one the best decisions for professional development that I could have made. I have been enrolled in my doctoral program below part-time to complete all of my coursework. Yes, it takes longer, but I do not know that I would have had the professional development experiences that I can now say I have had, if it were not for the doctoral program.

Coursework. For almost the entire time I took classes, each course matched with a specific aspect of my job. As I started graduate work, I began a new, higher-level position. The coursework for the doctoral program definitely informed my daily work right away. During my second semester in the program, I selected to take the required business and finance course, where I was able to learn all about zero-based budgeting, and use my office as my “project” for the course. Another example of my coursework in practice came in our higher education law course. Through this course, I learned solutions to real life issues that came up on my campus, such as what to do when you work for a private institution where the sorority houses are privately owned and are not ADA-accessible and you have a student in a wheelchair participating in sorority recruitment. (Answer – it's up to the sororities to retro-fit their houses. You should plan for recruitment to be in the campus buildings, not the sorority houses, though.) I think coursework, in tandem with employment, really made me think critically and directly apply my learning. It is safe to say that I do not think I did so as a full-time master's student.

Graduate Certificate Programs. Some masters and doctoral programs offer graduate certificates in specializations within the field of higher education. I have been able to complete two certificate programs by strategic use of elective requirements. Graduate certificates provide additional education and training that can enhance one's skills and practice. Many certificates may be completed absent of or in addition to an advanced degree, and are often a nice complement to assisting one in learning more about an area that is not as well-known to the recipient. For example, I completed an international higher education certificate and I have not worked in international student services. This is an area that was literally foreign to me (pun intended) and I found that the skills and knowledge I gained as a result of completing it make me a well-rounded professional, better prepared to work with a wider array of students.

Teaching. If you chose the full-time route, then teaching may come as an automatic part of the role of being a doctoral student. For me, teaching was something I sought out on my own. At Mount Union, I was able to teach a one-credit first year seminar course because I possessed the requisite master's degree and a year's experience working on campus, but I had to pursue that myself. Teaching provides you a way to better understand the role of a faculty member, to have appreciation for what goes in to teaching a course on a daily or weekly basis, and to experience what the relationship between a faculty member and an undergraduate (or graduate) student is like. Let's face it; our relationships with the students are different.

However, because of the combination of the coursework and full-time job, I was asked to serve as the instructor in my graduate program for a special topics course in coordination of fraternity and sorority life. I could believe I had the chance to teach others about what it is I do every day. In fact, I was able to not only use this instruction experience to build my own three-credit class, but I was also able to use it as a teaching internship and finish a graduate certificate in college teaching while I was at it.

Curriculum. Not only did I teach courses, but due to the information gained in our curriculum course, I also designed course curriculum. Along with another student affairs colleague, I designed the introductory courses for a minor in leadership studies, which had its first graduates in May 2014. We are currently in our third year of the minor and this year, and this year elected to switch up instruction. I now teach a totally different class, and that course brings the total number of courses I have taught to four; three of which I built and designed the content, sequence, and syllabus. This enables me to work closely with members of the faculty who serve as my supervisors because the minor in leadership studies is housed in an academic department. Developing curriculum provides an additional opportunity to learn more about the daily life of a faculty member – grading, instruction issues, policies and procedures related to in class assignments, academic honesty, and more. It has been quite enlightening.

Assessment. My doctoral program offers an assessment course that is an optional elective, and if you have one in your program, I suggest you take it. In this course, I designed an outcomes-based assessment plan for our office, while receiving step-by-step instruction and feedback at the same time. Admittedly, I have taken to assessment. I find it fascinating and enjoy it; I recognize that many do not. As a result, I designed student learning and programmatic outcomes for my office, as well as a comprehensive program review process for the entire division of student affairs at both my previous university and at my current place of employment. I find myself better able to create “homegrown” evaluative instruments that provide feedback on more than just student satisfaction. I am able to utilize one-on-one meetings as opportunities for information gathering. I sit on a university-wide assessment committee, which enables me to advocate for assessment in student affairs and provide evidence for why and how cocurricular endeavors are actually assisting students in being successful. I know these examples of assessments would not have occurred if I had not first taken the course in assessment in higher education.

Study Abroad. One specialization in my graduate program you can pursue is international higher education. As previously mentioned, I found this was an area of the profession about which I knew little. I had never studied abroad and never taken more than the required language or culture courses. If you asked me fifteen years ago to go to Spain and live there for six weeks, without knowing anyone and only able to speak the language as well as one semester of college Spanish, I would have laughed at you. However, as it turns out, I did just that. Two summers ago, I applied and was selected for a Faculty International Development Award (FIDA), provided through the Universities Study Abroad Consortium (USAC). Many schools have a partnership with USAC, and I encourage every one of you with any interest in international student services, study abroad, or international admissions to look in to the opportunity to engage in what I would call “studying study abroad”. I was able to travel and live, not with other Americans, but as an almost true Spaniard. Yet, I confess, I am not fluent in Spanish. I learned firsthand what entry, culture, and reentry shock are. I do not know that I would have ever studied abroad or even known this was an option if it were not for the international higher education certificate. In spring of 2014, I chaperoned an international trip to

Germany with 20 undergraduates and a faculty member. We traveled for ten days to five cities throughout the Bavaria region of the country. It was a fantastic learning experience for the students and for me. It was also at an economically reduced amount!

Dissertation. I did not come into my doctoral program with a topic for a dissertation. In fact, it took several semesters to develop a research question that was adding to the scholarship in the field and was able to be accomplished while working full-time. When your professors tell you to write what you know, believe me, you should follow that advice. I selected a topic near to my experience – sorority life. I am still struggling through the proposal stage, but I know that writing a dissertation while having a full-time job is not prohibitive; rather it is a delicate dance in time management. In fact, the research skills one picks up because of creating his or her own independent, original research can tremendously inform one’s practice.

Admittedly, I am still plugging away, nine years later, on completing my doctoral degree in higher education administration. In fact, I am still battling my way through the proposal stage. Yes, even today, I still kind of value my doctoral work as a “hobby”. I know that much of what I shared in this article could also be applied to a given master’s degree program in higher education. However, I truly believe the experiences I have had happen for me, and to me, would not have happened without pursuing my doctoral degree. I needed the coursework to get my foot in the door, and as a result, I have literally explored the world.

Resources

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