A Proposed Strategy to Prepare Students for a Successful DNP Journey

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Introduction

The Doctor of Nursing Program admitted the first student cohort in January 2011. Students returning to academia have been away from formal education 6-7 years on average. With this return comes associated anxiety related to: familiarity with online/distance instructional modalities, learning/utilization of new technology, socialization in a new non-face-to-face venue, writing at a doctoral level, and application of statistical concepts and analysis.

UTC DNP Students Spring 2015 Cohort

Pre-Entry Preparation

Once admitted to the DNP Program, students are sent electronically a packet for them to begin review, containing the following:
Current DNP Student Handbook
Forms for program of study declaration
List of useful texts to begin their DNP library
UTC resource PPT that addresses:
- Advisement process
- Navigation of the MocsNet and UTC Learn websites
- Registration process
- Use of UTC Library
- Financial aid
- Obtaining UTC ID
- Campus map
- Clinical requirements
- ADA Awareness statement
- Helpful links and resources

Socialization

With the advent of distance learning and online programs, comes the change in group participation in higher educational endeavors. Technology has endowed doctoral education students with the ability to attend and complete programs miles away without leaving their home towns. However, this progression comes with the price of less physical contact and in-person interaction among students within a cohort (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2005).

The field of nursing has a strong history of bonded cohorts, not only at the doctoral level of study but throughout the educational journey (Williams, 2010). Doctoral programs are periods of high-stress, high intensity, and great personal/professional sacrifice, so camaraderie with peers is not only a success factor (Grasso, Barry, & Valentine, 2009), it also serves as a contribution to personal preservation (Seiler & Billings, 2004). Sometimes, knowing that someone is going through the same experience can be the saving grace of the doctoral student.

New Technology & Online Learning

The students in the DNP program are introduced (and possibly reacquainted) with the online learning environment and multiple technologies/programs, including but not limited to:

- Blackboard (online learning platform)
- Adobe Connect & Zoom (online synchronous meeting programs)
- SPSS (statistics software)
- Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, PowerPoint)

Exposure to each of these begins at orientation and is threaded throughout the program with assignments building on knowledge/ familiarity gains from previous semesters.

During orientation students are given an overview of the Blackboard learning system and the online synchronous meeting programs (Adobe Connect & Zoom). Students are given the opportunity to explore the programs and are shown basic course structure and log in procedures. SPSS is introduced during the optional two-day 'stats camp' that follows orientation. Microsoft Office is discussed briefly during orientation but instruction is more focused within the individual classes requiring assignments using each of these programs. Explicit instructions and detailed feedback are provided on these assignments with regard to program use to shape student learning and increase program usability.

Stats & Writing

Statistics

The main topic that seems to produce anxiety for students is statistics. The average time since last statistics class for incoming DNP students at UTC is about **seven** years. It is safe to assume that during those past seven years the vast majority of students have had little to no exposure to statistics nor had the opportunity to apply statistical concepts/analyses in their work environment.

To alleviate anxiety and give the students 'jump start' on their first semester of coursework (which includes biostatistics), we offer a two-day 'stats camp' directly following orientation in December. The students are reintroduced to basic statistical concepts and analyses. During this time SPSS is loaded onto their personal laptop computers and a general overview of the software is given along with time for students to practice entering data and manipulating variables.

Student attendance of the optional 'stats camp' has been at or very near 100% across all five cohorts admitted to date. The session is recorded and made available to the students afterward for future reference and review. Student evaluation of the 'stats camp' has been overwhelmingly positive with the majority of students advising it should be mandatory for future students. After 'stats camp,' students feel better prepared entering their first semester and more confident in their statistical knowledge/abilities.

Writing
- Development of Writing Task Force within the School of Nursing
- University Resources
  - Writing Center
  - Remedial Assistance
  - Editing
- Incorporation of writing assignments in every DNP course – clinical or didactic

Conclusion/Discussion/Future

Every educational program, either undergraduate or graduate, should be in a state of dynamic revision with a Rapid Cycle approach to using what is productive and best for the students learning and then revising those aspects that were less than productive. The DNP Program is under review and revision each semester with important weight being given to student input and feedback; what worked, what didn't. The following are some combined suggestions from former and current students and networking with other DNP Programs:

- Plans are being implemented to build a stronger body of UTC Nursing alumni, as DNP Leaders, to serve as a resource for mentoring and precepting current students.
- The CAS System is being piloted as a possibility to expedite the application process for future students and to enlarge our application area/pool
- Implemented this cohort was an "extended option" program of study that allowed for 3 year completion of the program instead of the traditional 2 years.
- Conduct survey of the orientation process immediately after orientation and then after the first semester of study to obtain student feedback.
- Continue to invite current and former DNP students to orientation luncheons for informal discussion and networking with incoming students.

References

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