The College of Education Doctoral Student Association at the University of Hawai‘i: Providing Peer Support and Community to Doctoral Students

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A single description cannot accurately depict the “typical” PhD student at the College of Education at the University of Hawai‘i. Our students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and circumstances. One student is the wife of a US Marine, pursuing her degree while her husband is stationed at Mokapu. She is planning to complete her coursework, comprehensives, and dissertation on a strict two-year timeline. Another student is a recent MEd graduate from the College of Education who has already completed a majority of her core requirements and is ready to move almost directly to the dissertation phase of her work. Another is an international student who has come to the United States for the first time and is facing the challenges of adapting to a new culture, learning a new language, and understanding a different education system while striving to making progress in the program. Yet another is a lifetime resident of Hawai‘i with full-time professional responsibilities and three children. She attends one course a semester, and, on that basis, is making steady headway toward the degree. This lack of uniformity creates a set of distinct challenges to the PhD program at the College of Education, while, at the same time, offering the benefits and strengths of diversity.

Each student inevitably encounters numerous challenges and obstacles in the course of pursuing and completing their degree, and the range of these challenges is increased in proportion to the diversity of our student body. In their journey from novice to scholar, they must develop the knowledge and abilities to conduct original research. They must learn to critically examine and evaluate their work, and the work of other scholars, and learn the relationship between their work and the field of research. All this occurs within the context of meeting a wide variety of personal, financial, and professional requirements. The enormous challenge presented by this endeavor is evident in the figures: only 50 percent of all students entering doctoral programs nationwide will reach their goal of obtaining a doctorate (Anderson, 1998; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). However, the provision of support, and the sense of community that attends it, is often inadequate or simply unavailable. Doctoral candidates frequently complain about the loneliness of dissertation research and writing. They feel alone in a sea of academic requirements, striving to develop their own research, and struggling to meet individual professional goals. The College of Education Doctoral Student Association (COEDSA) was established to address some of these problems by creating a sense of community and providing peer support for doctoral students.

COEDSA is a student-based organization that continues a tradition of students helping students as they navigate the doctoral process. The association provides core support services in socializing doctoral students to academic life and in easing them through their critical transformation from students to scholars. For example, COEDSA brings new students together with specialization coordinators and veteran PhD students in a New Doctoral Student Orientation. Every August for the past ten years COEDSA has invited new doctoral students to meet together with experienced students and faculty. This meeting introduces them to essential support systems from the very onset of the program. For the past three years, COEDSA has also conducted workshops to help students refine their research skills. For example, there have been workshops on using EndNote, a bibliographical software program; researching electronic databases; and other essential resources that support their inquiries and enable them to use technological effectively. COEDSA also organizes an annual reception that brings students and faculty together to discuss various issues relating to their doctoral studies and to their future professional work. COEDSA is responsible for a full range of ongoing services: providing peer support and networking opportunities; conducting informational workshops covering topics of interest and relevancy to the doctoral experience; creating opportunities for faculty-student exchanges; and communicating information on a variety of services and resources available for doctoral students.
COEDSA is a relatively young organization. Its origins may be traced to the early 1990s. At this time, aware of the absence of appropriate support services available for doctoral students, a few people began to meet informally under the guidance of Dr. Linda K. Johnsrud, a professor in the educational administration department. The students formed a support group and met periodically to discuss their experiences, their research, and the highs and lows of being a doctoral student. These informal meetings continued until 1996, when, under the leadership of Vicki J. Rosser, a doctoral candidate in the educational administration department, who is currently an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis department at the University of Missouri at Columbia, work was begun to expand the informal student group into an organization that would more formally address the academic needs of the College of Education doctoral students.

The result of this work was a document called the Five Guiding Principles, which articulated the goals and mission of the organization. These principles establish five key aims critical to the development and socialization of doctoral students in the college:

1. strengthen the professional development and research skills of doctoral students;
2. enhance the quality of doctoral training beyond coursework;
3. provide effective guidance through the stages in the doctoral process;
4. create a social and professional network with faculty and peers; and
5. foster collaborative research and dialogue through interdepartmental cooperation.

At the same time, the planning group also addressed the issue of governance by creating a new COEDSA Executive Council that would be composed of students representing each of the five areas of specialization in the College’s doctoral program. They also agreed to hold monthly meetings to plan events and address issues of mutual interest and concern to doctoral students. Today the executive council includes one representative from each of the specializations to sponsor special events and facilitate the regular dissemination of COEDSA information.

Once the organizational and operational framework had been created, COEDSA began a series of support projects. They established an electronic email listserv for the doctoral students. They obtained a room within the College of Education for doctoral students to study, work, and socialize. They developed an annual orientation for new doctoral students entering the College of Education. They arranged monthly workshops on assorted topics of interest. And most notably, they played a decisive role in changing the College of Education’s doctor of education degree (EdD) to a doctor of philosophy degree (PhD). The success of these projects gave COEDSA greater visibility, credibility, and recognition within the College of Education. As a result, COEDSA has representatives serving on a number of College-wide committees and boards including the College Advisory Council and the Editorial Board of Educational Perspectives.

The success of COEDSA in providing assistance to doctoral students is based on its peer-support approach—doctoral students in many instances are the best people to help other doctoral students. COEDSA has been fortunate in obtaining the assistance of many volunteers over the years, representing all five PhD specialization areas. Each has taken an active role in the operations of the council and the work of the organization as a whole. They include

Curriculum and Instruction
Anne Ashford, Ranee Cervania, Chenling Chou, Kimmetta Hairston, Hazel Hasegawa, Jamie Simpson

Educational Administration
Lynn Inoshita, Joseph Sanchez, Vicki Rosser, Lynn Tabata, Ginny Tanji

Educational Foundations
Wallace Napier, Gabriel Molieri, Warren Nishimoto, Nancy Rice

Policy Studies
John Anderson, Michael Massey, Valere McFarland

Exceptionalities
Thomas Duke, Marcia Howard, Rachelle Reed, Serena Shimabukuro,

COEDSA has also greatly benefited in the support of the faculty. Dr. Andrea Bartlett, Dr. Mary Anne Prater, Dr. Mary Jo Noonan, Dr. Linda Johnsrud, and more recently, Dr. Donna Grace, have served as faculty advisors to the organization. Numerous other faculty members have generously donated their time and expertise as panelists and workshop facilitators. The dean’s office has also made important contributions by providing travel funds so that students can attend
conferences to present their research. It has also helped with scholarships, and has provided refreshments and resources for a variety of COEDSA functions, including the annual New Doctoral Student Orientation.

COEDSA continues to support doctoral students in the college. Over the next few years, COEDSA hopes to play a stronger role in the establishment of peer study groups to discuss reading, research, and writing. COEDSA also hopes to begin operating with an annual budget. Thus far, the organization has survived with small donations and on the good will of volunteer students and faculty. An annual budget will help to increase COEDSA's ability to distribute information while ensuring the sustainability of the activities.

To learn more about COEDSA's informational workshops, download workshop handouts, and locate doctoral student resources, please visit the organization's website at http://www.hawaii.edu/coedsa. COEDSA is always open to new volunteers to serve on the Executive Committee. If you are interested, please contact us at jamiesim@hawaii.edu.

References

Lynn Tabata is a doctoral student in education specializing in educational administration. She served as chairperson of COEDSA from 1999 to 2001. Her research interests include technology issues in higher education. She is currently writing her dissertation which examines faculty attitude on adoption of technology innovation in higher education and its influence on participation in distance education instruction and higher education policy.

Jamie Simpson is pursuing a PhD in curriculum and instruction at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa with an emphasis on arts education and research interests in teacher preparation. As a graduate assistant with the Institute for Teacher Education, she instructs and supervises preservice teachers. She also serves students and teachers through Honolulu Theatre for Youth. Jamie is the current chairperson of COEDSA.