



Tools for the Road: Successfully Navigating the Doctoral Journey

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On a Thursday evening in June of 2012, golden rays shot across Rexburg's western horizon as I drove lazily home. They bathed the streets of rural Idaho in soft, photo-perfect glows. I was reveling in the beauty and sounds of Rexburg's most beautiful season—an instinctual reaction not completely natural considering my life conditions: working full time as a single mother of three while simultaneously grinding away at a rigorous doctoral program through the University of Idaho. I had just gotten out of class, and in ten more minutes I would be getting kids in bed and settling in for a couple more hours of homework—but for now, those commitments made the soft, small-town hums and avenues all the sweeter.

Now, nearly three years later, with my doctorate degree framed neatly on my office wall, I've wondered how I could experience such peace during one of the most

intense and frazzling times of my life. Although there were extraordinary demands on my time, the collection of tools I'd been given sustained me from my initial doctoral application through a successful dissertation defense. These resources made my pursuit of a terminal degree in education both successful and joyful.

Vision

When Lehi left Jerusalem to journey halfway across the world, he was equipped with vision—aspirational and inspirational ideas and images of where the Lord would have him go and what he would have him do with his life. Similarly, businesses make vision statements to guide their actions and to define what they want to accomplish in the future. The vision I had for doctoral work directly correlated with my success.

From the time I was 12 years old, I dreamed of getting a doctorate. Every time I was asked to set goals for my future, it was part of the list. Raised by two teachers, education was always part of the vision I had for my life. It was my father, a recently retired professor from BYU-Idaho, who first encouraged me to apply for the University of Idaho doctoral program. He even attended the initial informational meeting in my absence. I was waiting out a layover in Texas, on my way to Puebla, Mexico to visit BYU-Idaho's first Mexican-resident students. The students themselves were miraculous, having fought their way through societal and financial barriers to grasp the opportunity of higher education—and the trip sparked questions about my own educational barriers and dreams. Similar to what BYU-Idaho was doing for the Mexican Saints, the University of Idaho was offering me a realistic way to overcome financial, geographical, and time barriers to achieve my doctoral vision.

Not only did the idea of a doctoral program fit with the long-term vision I had for my life, the program and degree itself harmonized with my career path. The University of Idaho doctoral degree focused on applied research over theoretical analysis. Defined as a Professional Practices Doctorate in Education, PPD, or EdD, the university advertised the program as being “designed for advanced preparation of university practitioners, academic leaders and professional staff in educational settings.” As I came to better understand the University of Idaho program, I

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saw the value of unifying research with the practices of my own current profession. I began studying how online communities might improve and strengthen our efforts to bring BYU-Idaho and the Spirit of Ricks to instructors and students around the globe. The program directly fit my needs as an administrator within the Online Learning arm of BYU-Idaho, as well as attuned me to the needs of stakeholders, encouraged me to enact positive change, and improved my professional practice.

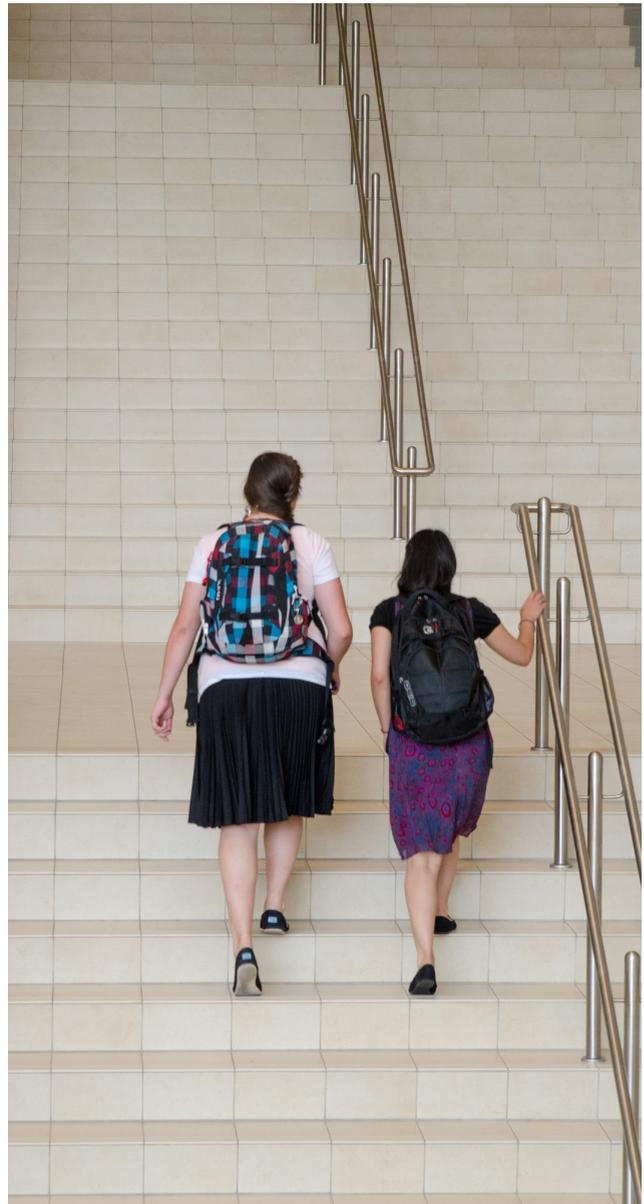
Sociability

The University of Idaho's EdD program focused on a limited enrollment, cohort model. In August 2011, around 25 students were accepted to the program. From Fall 2011 to Spring 2014, we met every Thursday evening with the same, small cohort of students. We took all our classes together, asked questions together, shared successes, failures and frustrations, and progressed throughout the program together.

I still recall the spirit present in the classroom the first Thursday evening we met. Both excitement and anticipation were palpable, but overall, I felt joy at gathering with fellow learners, and being part of an environment that invited banter, as well as rich discussion about theory, research, and texts.

As we entered our third year in the program, we formed smaller groups of 3-4 students, researching and writing one of the articles for our dissertation together. The unity and support of these individuals kept me working when I felt my strength waning. I couldn't let my group members down when they had "saved" me on so many other occasions.

Having colleagues who understood the difficulties I was facing bolstered me. Our unity was so important that our program director shuffled us to Jackson Hole to raft the whitewater of Lunch Counter and the Snake River together. We found the experience an appropriate metaphor for the



doctoral whitewater experience we were encountering as a group. I could not have finished the program in the time frame allotted without the weekly interactions I had with my cohort colleagues.

Flexibility

Nearly all my cohort colleagues were working full-time with families at home, juggling the many demands of professional, personal, and educational pursuits. The University of Idaho was aware of these challenges and designed a flexible learning structure with both online and face-to-face components. From live meetings to picnics by the river, conference calls with professors in Boise or Moscow to intense weekends where our major professor ate, slept, argued, and interpreted data with us, we were given both the time we needed together to succeed, as well as the professional and personal distance required to keep our lives together.

Not only were courses and professors flexible in their teaching, the program was designed for a three year time frame, including dissertation writing. We began searching for research topics from the first course we took, so that by the time we got to our third year, the purpose of our research pursuits were more clearly defined. Although we would take courses throughout the regular school year and summer, course work lessened significantly by the last two semesters, when we focused on writing our dissertation.

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Campus Support

From the beginning of the program, BYU-Idaho opened their classrooms, office space, and technical equipment to the University of Idaho students. Whether I was entering

or exiting the classroom, I stepped through the peaceful beauty of BYU-Idaho grounds. In the library and I-Center, I found quiet places to think and study as a student, and the fact that the degree could be completed without traveling outside Eastern Idaho allowed me the ability to apply in the first place.

In addition, BYU-I invested time and interest in our doctoral program. By means of one course assignment, I began developing a handbook for online leadership, focused around principles of servant leadership. The work I completed during my graduate studies went hand in hand with my daily professional work goals. All our doctoral efforts culminated in a graduation luncheon attended by Academic Vice President, Fenton Broadhead. The Advancement Vice President, Henry Eyring, attended and spoke at our graduation in downtown Idaho Falls. Although the program was administered by the University of Idaho, the support of BYU-Idaho was constant.

Family Support

In many ways, my doctoral cohort became part of my family during our intense program of study. I still fondly recall them rushing me home from a cohort gathering so I didn't miss a "date." They celebrated with me when I got engaged and married during the program. However, my nuclear family probably saw my most intense periods of worry and fear. As I got engaged, my fiancé and I spoke about the plausibility of completing the doctorate while jumping into a new, blended family situation. I expressed my strong desires to complete the program. My new partner fully supported me from that moment until graduation. He set up a separate workspace for me in our home, and reminded me of spiritual impressions I'd been given when I was ready to jump ship.

Before remarrying, my parents regularly babysat while I attended Thursday classes or when I had looming deadlines to meet. Even after I had a "built-in" babysitter, I still occasionally borrowed my mother's desk just for a quiet place to analyze data and think. Though family often requires sacrifice of our own time and energy, families also provide a structure that gives back tenfold, and in my case, provided the framework by which I could accomplish my doctoral dreams.

My doctoral experience not only heightened my own state of being and confidence, it affected and improved my day-to-day work experience in my department.

The Lord

What greater tool could any student have than access to divine revelation and the support of the Spirit? One of earliest questions I asked the Lord as I pondered whether I should apply for the doctorate program was how I could physically, mentally, and emotionally approach such an endeavor while working full time and trying to simultaneously nurture my three growing children. As I prayed for guidance, direction came through Elder Uchtdorf's April 2010 address to the Young Women of the Church. He spoke about the adversity we face during our own life fairy tales—and the “happily ever after” that awaits following our persistence and faith in the face of trials. It's through life's challenges, Elder Uchtdorf explained, that we “learn wisdom, become stronger, and experience joy.”

After searching, pondering, and praying to the Lord, a witness came that should I choose to pursue

the doctorate, the Lord would walk the path with me, help me along the way, and that I would “mount up with wings as eagles; [...] run, and not be weary; and [...] walk, and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31). There were no promises of an easy journey; however, I knew the Lord would strengthen me and provide the tools to make the journey possible.

Now, at the end of my journey, I don't have a pay raise or a new job. I still work in my same position in Online Learning. Still, my doctoral experience not only heightened my own state of being and confidence, it affected and improved my day-to-day work experience in my department. I came to know other members of campus and their understanding, excitement, and biases toward the online initiative. I've represented BYU-Idaho and shared my personal research findings at international conferences, including the Sloan Consortium for Online Learning and the AACE

World Conference on E-Learning (Association for Advancement of Computing in Education). In a three-year time frame, I plumbed the depth of my field, immersed myself in theoretical and professional practice research, completed and successfully defended a dissertation, and gained life experiences that will bless and benefit my colleagues and family for years to come. ❀

Works Cited

Uchtdorf, Dieter F. (2010, May). “Your Happily Ever After.” *Ensign*, 40(5), 124-127.

