



Strength and Support From a Doctoral Cohort

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My Backstory

I first felt a desire to earn a doctorate as an undergraduate student at BYU in the late '80s. I fell in love with education when I began college, and couldn't get enough of it.

After I graduated with a bachelor degree in 1991, I moved with my husband and three young children to Saint Anthony, Idaho, a small town in Southeast Idaho, where my husband began teaching high school. The area is a wonderful place to live and raise a family; however, my dreams of furthering my education were put on hold, as it was almost a hundred miles to the nearest institution offering postgraduate degrees.

I dove into my role as a full-time mother (adding five more children to our family) and helped supplement my family's income by running a couple of businesses from my home. Then in 2009, as I contemplated sending my youngest child to kindergarten, I realized my days would be free to do something other than coloring with crayons and reading Dr. Seuss. My former dreams of advanced education were rekindled. We still lived almost a hundred

miles from an institution offering advanced degrees. What changed in two decades was that I now had an option of earning a master's degree online.

Two years later, I was a year into an online Master of Nutrition program when I read an article in July 2011 about a doctoral program offered at Rexburg, which would begin that September. I immediately phoned the director, and he outlined the details of the program. The program was a collaboration between the University of Idaho (U of I) and BYU-Idaho and offered graduates a professional practices educational doctorate. Participants would go through the program with a cohort, meet once per week for class and graduate within a three-year time frame. I hadn't finished my master's degree, so technically, I didn't qualify for the program. But after talking with my husband, I knew it was something I desperately wanted to do. I called the director again and pleaded to be allowed to join the cohort, promising that I would finish my master's degree within the year. I obtained permission from the U of I administration and within a month I applied to the program, took the GRE, and was admitted.

The Overall Experience

The program began in September 2011 with a meeting at the U of I campus at Idaho Falls. For the next two years I met once a week on Thursday evenings from 7 to 10 pm with the cohort. At that point we finished our coursework, and as per the program plan, divided ourselves into small research groups of three to four to focus on our research and dissertations for the final year of the program.

The program director, Bryan Maughan, was hired by the U of I and had an office at BYU-Idaho. He met with us each Thursday of the semester for the first two years, and taught several of the classes. Bryan had done extensive research in the area of mentoring, and the theme was featured prominently throughout the program. The idea of finding mentors and being a mentor for others was fitting for an educational doctorate, and applicable to all professional practices. Bryan also taught us classes on leadership and philosophy.

Some coursework was not included in the Thursday evening classes and was completed online instead. We either Skyped or visited face-to-face with the professors at least once a semester. Throughout the program, U of I administrators attended class at Rexburg about once a semester.



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Coursework included several classes on qualitative and quantitative research and writing. In addition, we studied the history of higher education, philosophy, leadership, program planning, and contemporary issues in higher education.

Everyone who completed the coursework and continued on to the dissertation phase graduated in May 2014. There were a few final hoops which some needed to jump through, but as far as I am aware even those were completed by the end of the summer.

My Experience

I was not a typical member of the U of I doctoral cohort; a researcher would have referred to me as an “outlier.” For one thing I was not an employee of BYU-Idaho. (Of the 25 who began the program, only seven of us were not employed by BYU-Idaho.) In fact, although I had run a few small businesses out of my home for the last two decades, I had not been “employed” at all for over twenty years and did not have a professional career in any sense.

This difference was significant, because the U of I doctorate program was a professional practices doctorate, which is designed to have very practical application.

Professional practice doctoral students conduct research in their field, and then make changes based on their findings. It thus becomes a very practical, rather than a theoretical degree.

The concept of conducting research in a professional practice was a challenge for me, because while others in the cohort had established careers and were building on that foundation and planning research in their field, I was starting from scratch. Having spent the past twenty-two years as a full-time mother, I was unsure what to study and where I wanted my education to take me. Initially I considered continuing with nutrition, which was what I was studying for a master’s degree. However, by the end of my first semester in the U of I program I changed my focus to researching “teaching in online learning.” I saw an opportunity to make a difference in the growing field of online education and felt guided in that direction.

Connections

As with many experiences in life, it was the people I worked with and the connections I made which made it a positive experience. I consider these relationships a major reason for the program’s success and for the fact that twenty-two of us walked at graduation. We worked together in five main capacities.

First, we gathered every Thursday evening as a cohort. These gatherings made all the difference, as we truly became friends and were committed to each other’s success.

Second, one of the articles in our dissertation was the culmination of a small group research project and was written as a group. As a small group we were committed to not letting each other down and kept our group assignments on track, even when individual work may have fallen behind.

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Third, our program director not only met with us on Thursdays but was also available throughout the week. He was key to our success, and this program could not have happened without his commitment and dedication.

Fourth, our small groups were each assigned to a major professor who worked with us throughout the dissertation process. My group's major professor was incredible. She made two trips from Moscow to work with us individually and as a group, was available whenever we needed assistance, and was an excellent editor and teacher. She worked tirelessly to help us be ready for our defense on time, and to have top-quality dissertations.

Fifth, connectedness came from U of I faculty and administration. They went to great efforts to get to know us individually and support us throughout the program. They made visits once or twice a semester and connected at other times through Skype. They were committed to the success of the program and to our success as students.

Challenges

Because this was a new program, the program director told us right from the start that we were “building an airplane in the air,” and we needed flexibility and staying power. Many details of the program were still unclear and needed to be worked out. To prepare us for the turbulence and chaos we were about to encounter by adding a doctoral program to already busy lives, the first book we were assigned to read was entitled, “Learning as a way of being: Strategies for survival in a world of permanent whitewater” (Vail, 1996). This was followed by a team-building exercise in the form of a raft trip down the Hoback River. The experience set the stage for the rest of the program, as the members of the cohort became acquainted and began to trust each other and work together.

The theme of resilience and change appeared constantly throughout the program. The concept of thriving and growing in a sea of constant change is characteristic of any

macrosystem, which includes any organization and any professional practice. Vail (1996) describes a macrosystem in which “all the various participants...[are] trying to get their parts of it running smoothly, constantly looking ahead to a time when things will settle down (“and we’ll be able to get some work done around here”), but none are succeeding except temporarily. Why? Because it is the nature of macrosystems to upset all attempts to get subparts to run smoothly” (p. 7). A go-with-the-flow approach, which was necessary as a member of this cohort, continued to be helpful in navigating the whitewater I faced on a daily basis.

In Retrospect

I am so grateful for this experience and that BYU-Idaho and U of I collaborated to bring this program to Rexburg. The program had a positive impact on my relationship with my family and I am grateful for their strong support. My husband, children, parents, and siblings rallied behind me proofreading papers, encouraging me, and expressing their confidence in my success. While I achieved my original goal of earning my doctorate, I gained so much more as well. Among other things, I gained confidence in my abilities, increased what Steven R. Covey (1989) describes as my “circle of influence,” and set an example for my children that education is important and that with hard work and patience they also can accomplish their dreams.

Perhaps one of the most important results is that throughout the program I came to know more fully what it means to trust in the Holy Ghost to guide me. One evening early in the first year, as I was driving to our Thursday night class, the words of 1 Nephi 4:6 came to my mind, “...I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do.” It struck me that this is exactly what it means to be led by the Spirit—to be willing to venture into the unknown and walk by faith.

While there were many unknowns when I began the program, I felt guided, and even compelled, as I proceeded. With each step into the unknown, I was directed in what to study and how to do it. The second semester of the program included the study of leadership models, and some of the readings were about Servant Leadership. I had never been exposed to this model before, but as I read about it I saw true doctrine embedded in its



principles, and I felt guided to focus my research on Servant Leadership applied to teaching in online learning. I attended a Servant Leadership Conference in Michigan and connected with people who were able to assist in my research. The focus prepared me well, as three months after graduation I began a full-time job for BYU-Idaho in Curriculum Development. I know that I qualified for this job because of the direction I received in completing a doctorate in the field which I studied. I am grateful for the guidance I received along the way—and for the experience of being led by the Spirit in my studies.

When I was in the last year of my undergraduate program at BYU, I remember turning to my husband and saying, “I think differently now than I did before.” Having completed a master’s and a doctorate degree, I would repeat my earlier sentiment, but now I would make it bold, underline, all caps, and add exclamation points. I would do it again and I would recommend it to anyone who has a desire to earn an educational doctorate. ❀

References

- Covey, S.R. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Vail, P.B. (1996). *Learning as a way of being: Strategies for survival in a world of permanent white water*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.