

# Dealing with Social Isolation to Minimize Doctoral Attrition – A Four Stage Framework

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to create a framework for dealing with social isolation in doctoral programs. Previous studies have focused on the issue of attrition among doctoral students and the factors that cause the same students to drop-out prior to completing their degrees. Among the factors that affect students' decisions to leave doctoral programs is the feeling of social isolation. However, such previous studies have focused on identifying the causes rather than establishing a framework for dealing with isolation feeling in doctoral programs. This paper intends to fill in the gap and to establish a framework for dealing with isolation feelings in order to minimize doctoral attrition.

**Keywords:** Framework for Doctoral Isolation, Isolation and Doctoral Attrition, Social Isolation in doctoral programs, Doctoral Attrition, Model for Doctoral Attrition.

## Introduction

This paper builds on a previous study conducted by the same authors in order to complete and build a framework for dealing with feeling of social isolation at doctoral programs. In the previous study, Ali and Kohun (2006) established that social isolation is a major contributing factor to the decision of doctoral students to leave their programs prior to obtaining their degrees. The same study divided the completion phases of doctorate degree into four stages and identified common characteristics that potentially lead to increasing social isolation among the students. The study also identified certain characteristics that helped in dealing with isolation during doctoral studies. This paper takes our previous efforts a step further by establishing a framework for dealing with the feeling of social isolation in doctoral programs. The framework is intended to be used by faculty members and administrators in doctoral programs when contemplating re-designing or updating of their doctoral programs.

Doctoral attrition has been the subject of numerous studies (Hawlery, 2003; Lewis, Ginsberg,

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Davies, & Smith, 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson 2000). Most of these studies point to the difficulty and the problems associated with doctoral attrition. Such studies also indicate the severity of the consequences of doctoral attrition on the students and on the universities that offer these programs. These studies, however, received little attention from the doctoral programs themselves and as a result, the attrition

problem remains unnoticed or marginalized (Lovitts, 2001). This paper emphasizes further the problem of attrition among doctoral students. It identifies four stages of doctoral completion and explains specific characteristics of each stage that may contribute to increasing social isolation among the doctoral students. It then suggests counter measures to social isolation for each stage. In this work, all such identified characteristics and counter measures are then combined into a framework that may help identify causes of social isolation and their remedies.

## Framework for This Study

The purpose of this study is to develop a framework that will be used in dealing with isolation feelings at doctoral programs. The intended framework divides the completion phases of doctoral studies into four stages. Each stage has different characteristics and affects the students differently; thus, each stage is discussed separately. Two questions guide the discussion in this paper for each stage of completion: First, what characteristics in doctoral studies contribute to increasing social isolation among doctoral students? Second, what measures can be taken by doctoral programs in order to deal with and/or minimize the effect of social isolation among students? This paper intends to complete the following steps in order accomplish the task of developing the intended framework:

- 1- It begins by explaining about each of the topics of doctoral attrition and feeling of social isolation in general. It explains the causes of doctoral attrition and the factors that contribute to social isolation.
- 2- The topic of social isolation is discussed within four stages of the doctoral program. These four stages are not selected arbitrarily; instead this paper follows a previously established model that explains adjustment of graduate students to academic life (Beeler, 1991). Beeler's model describes the adjustment phases of students to graduate studies through four stages. Thus, this paper explains this framework and how it could be applied to the doctorate program.
- 3- Similar to the Beeler's model, this paper divides the completion phases of doctoral degrees into four stages. It relates the specific factors in each stage to increasing the feelings of social isolation among doctoral students that may eventually lead them to withdraw or drop-out from the program.
- 4- Following that, the discussion shifts to methods of dealing with isolation feelings. It focuses on the opinions of experts in this field and it focuses also on the experience of universities that have had higher graduation rates among their doctoral programs.

Table 1 below shows the initial layout of the framework that this study intends to build. The key ingredient of building the framework is to find keywords that relate to the stages required of doctoral studies. Thus, as the discussion proceeds in each of the stages of doctoral programs, attention is going to be focused on finding keywords that relate to social isolation so as to build the framework around them.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggested three methods of finding keywords related to a particular subject: a) keyword count; b) keyword in context, and c) direct statement from experts. Thereby, this paper is going to these methods in order to find keywords that are related to the subject of social isolation and doctoral attrition.

Table 1 – Framework for Dealing with Social Isolation in Doctoral Programs – Initial Stage

Doctoral Completion Stage	Causes of Social Isolation	Remedies to Social Isolation
Stage 1		
Stage 2		
Stage 3		
Stage 4		

## About Doctoral Attrition

Doctoral attrition (or drop-out) is generally referred to when explaining or discussing students who drop-out of doctoral programs prior to completing their doctorate degree. Various studies estimated that about 50% of the students who enter doctoral studies end up dropping out before attaining their degrees (Hockey, 1994; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Powers 2004). Hawlery (2003) estimated the number of students who graduate annually with a doctorate degree to around 40,000 within U.S. universities. So putting both numbers together, it can be determined that the number of students who drop-out from doctoral programs is about 40,000 per year in different fields of doctoral studies.

Despite the large number of doctoral attrition, the problem of student drop-out has received little attention from administration in their respective programs. Lovitts (2001) explained that doctoral attrition is not one of academe's best kept secrets and it is not even a guarded secret. Lovitts further noted that "The situation is worse than that. For large segments of the country's faculty members and administrators, the problem does not exist because the problem – and the student who leaves – is largely invisible" (p. 1).

Traditional viewpoints of some doctoral faculty members lay the blame on the students' background and their lack of commitment to withstand the rigor of doctoral study as the main cause of attrition. But a closer examination of the background of the students dropping out may change this view. Hawlery (2003) noted that dropping out of doctoral programs could happen to the "brightest" students and further explained that:

- It is not lack of commitment on part of the students that cause doctoral attrition.
- Most students enter the doctoral program with dream of finishing it and obtaining a Ph.D. degree.
- They become disappointed when they do not cope well with the new environment.

Lovitts (2001) explained that it is not the background of the students that contributes mainly to doctoral attrition, instead characteristics in the design of the programs that is the major contributor to students' drop-out. Lovitts noted that:

It is not the background characteristics students bring with them to the university that affect their persistence outcomes; it is what happens to them after they arrive.

Graduate student attrition is a function of the distribution of structures and opportunities for integration and cognitive map development.

The causes of attrition are deeply embedded in the organizational culture of graduate school and the structure and process of graduate education. (p. 2)

Additional reasons have been cited in literature to contribute to the high rate of doctoral student drop-out. Some of the reasons that are noted to contribute to doctoral attrition are related to the student's life. Other factors are related to the nature of the doctoral programs and their differences from previous studies that were successfully undertaken by the same students (Hawlery, 2003; Lovitts, 2001). But the reasons mentioned above ignore an important factor that deals with the emotional aspect that is normally neglected when talking about doctoral attrition. This emotional aspect is either totally overlooked or it is not fully addressed in the design of most, if not all, doctoral programs. Instead, it is left to the individual students to contend with emotional issues on their own (Bess, 1978). Among the emotional issues that are often neglected in doctoral programs is the feeling of social isolation that is experienced by the students during their journey to obtain their doctoral degree (Lewis et al., 2004).

### **About Social Isolation**

Social isolation has been described as “lack of meaningful relationship” (Hortulanus, Machielse, & Meeuwesen, 2006) and is often referenced when describing the life of the elderly, the depressed, the sick, and those disconnected from society. Social isolation is also seen as contributing factor to depression and is considered a subject of personal matter (House, 2001). A closer examination of the literature shows that social isolation affects a wider range of population and influences the life of many individuals in different ways including in the work environment, school, and others. Hortulanus et al. (2006) explained about some of the negative effect of social isolation by noting that:

Social isolation has negative effects for the functioning and well-being of individuals, and for solidarity and social cohesion within society. Personal quality of life is very much affected by being part of a social network. By rationalizing relationships, in the public domain, the intimate nature of social relationships in the other domains has become increasingly important. (p. 25)

There are different explanations about the cause of social isolation and their development, but at the outset, one can attest to societal influence and the changes of lifestyle. Some consider social isolation as a phenomenon of modern times where the introduction of technology and the changes of societal structure minimize the importance of social contacts. Others termed this phenomenon as “The Connection Gap” and explained that the changes in the structure of society are prime factors that increased the risk of becoming socially isolated (Pappano, 2001).

A common description that is mentioned regarding social isolation is a “lack of meaningful social contacts” (Hortulanus et al., 2006). The emphasis here is on the word “meaningful” and its context varies depending on the situation in which the individual lives. At work, meaningful may mean relationship with peers, superiors, and others the individual may come in contact with. At colleges and universities, meaningful social contact may take place among students and also with faculty members.

Social isolation is felt more strongly in cases of a new or unfamiliar environment such as moving to new neighborhood, starting a different job, and/or studying for a new degree. It also is felt strongly when dealing with situations that require a coping mechanism in cases of stress, failure/disappointment, or the loss of family member. In these cases, social contacts/social interaction become of paramount importance when dealing with the new situation or coping with the difficult problem (Hortulanus et al., 2006).

Doctoral programs are known for having both characteristics that contribute to social isolation: first, they are new and different from prior studies conducted by students; second, they are long and known to be associated with a lot of stress (Bess, 1978; Burnett, 1999). This creates a recipe for socially isolating individuals from the new environment they engage in. Lovitts (2001) ex-

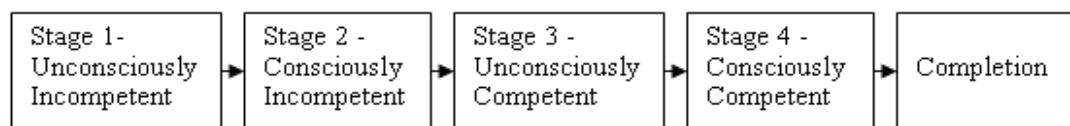
plained that while doctoral programs are known to provide a framework for studying, they ignore the other part life associated with doctoral study: the social life.

In a study about social isolation, Hortulanus et al. (2006) identified four categories of people in the way they handle social contacts and social isolation: socially competent, socially inhibited, lonely, and socially isolated. Their study noted that the first group of people have less trouble establishing social contacts, thus, they adjust easier to new life situations. The lonely and socially isolated have fewer contacts and their adjustment to the new norms and values of different cultures may be delayed further. This paper references the two categories of “socially competent” and “socially isolated” when describing the adjustment into the various stages of life of doctoral studies. This paper also groups the other two categories of “socially inhibited” and “lonely” within the first two categories of “socially competent” and “socially isolated”.

## Beeler’s Model

Adjustment of graduate students to academic life is usually a process that takes conscious and unconscious transformation. Beeler (1991) described the adjustment process of full-time students during their first year of graduate studies into four stages: Unconsciously incompetent, consciously incompetent, unconsciously competent, and consciously competent.

The first stage of full-time graduate students starts upon entering the program. Many students have only a limited idea about what is involved in the program either academically or socially; essentially they do not know what they do not know. During this stage, many may question their decision to pursue the graduate degree and doubts may linger about their performance. The second stage of adjustment takes place after the students gain knowledge about the academic requirements and what is ahead of them. The students at this stage become aware of their deficits in the requirements of the program, thus, their lack of knowledge becomes apparent. During the third stage the students focus on the idea that they gain some competence in their field of study but are largely unaware of their competence; thus, they feel competent unconsciously. The fourth and last stage is the result of accumulation of enough knowledge and the students become aware that they ‘know what they know’. This conscious awareness of competence is cultivated by completing the degree requirements that they attempted. Figure 1 depicts a representation of the framework described by Beeler.



**Figure 1 – Beeler’s Framework**

The adjustment process takes place for academic life as well as the social life in graduate studies. The social adjustment entails recognizing the norms and values of the new culture that the graduate program brings in. The social adjustment aids and complements the academic adjustment of the students. By the same token; lack of social adjustment may contribute to deficit in the successful transformation to a newer level of academic adjustment. Social isolation in particular works as a counter step to prevent the transformation to a different stage of completion. Looking back at the stages of Beeler’s framework, social isolation works mostly in impeding the transformation between the second and third stages. Socially isolated students may not have the framework to compare his/her progress during the doctoral study; thus, they remain at the same stage of being consciously incompetent and may drop-out as a result. Figure 2 depicts the effect of social isolation on the transformation stages described in Beeler’s framework



**Figure 2 – The effect of Social Isolation on Doctoral Completion**

Beeler’s framework, although referencing only to the first year of transformation into graduate studies, can be applied in the same way to all stages of doctoral programs. The framework directly describes adjustment to a new life. However, doctoral programs involve different stages and each stage has many new situations that make Beeler’s model applicable to them all. In other words, Beeler’s model can be applied to the entire doctoral program in general, but it can also be applied to each stage of the doctorate completion that essentially presents distinct new factors to be taken into consideration.

## **Social Isolation in Doctoral Programs – Causes**

This section explains the factors that appear to cause an increase in the feeling of the social isolation among doctoral students. It also explains the effect that such feeling of isolation has on the student’s decision to drop-out prior to attaining the doctoral degree. This section divides the completion of doctoral degrees into four distinct stages. After completing the discussion of each stage, keywords that describe the causes of social isolation in that particular stage are selected. These keywords are included in the framework that is presented at a later stage in this paper.

### ***Stage 1 – Preadmission to Enrollment***

The first stage begins early in the process when the students start inquiring or reviewing pamphlets regarding the doctoral program. The stage also continues through the early days of enrollment into the program. It may also include campus visits or orientations that the doctoral programs have for the students individually or collectively. Most literature described the pre-admission process as vague or unclear at best. The literature also describes the early days of enrollment into the doctoral programs as lacking the sufficient steps required to integrate students successfully into the social environment of the new culture of doctoral studies (Hawley, 2003; Lewis et al., 2004; Lovitts, 2001)

The admission documents are meant to attract students to the new program. Most of these documents place emphasis on courses, job perspectives, academic requirements, and similar attributes. Very little is explained about the complexity of the doctoral studies and the needed social adjustment. Campus visits, if any, usually have limited scope.

Once the students start the program, most often they are faced with feeling of isolation from the beginning. Lewis et al. (2004) studied the experience of African American doctoral students during their first year of study and explained about the finding in the following points:

- Some students experienced strong feeling of isolation and were left to negotiate the system upon arrival.
- Some students indicated that they came very close to leaving the university from the beginning.
- Acclimating to a culture very different from anything the students proved to be a daunting task. Isolation feeling was most prevalent among the doctoral students.

While the statements above describe the feelings of minority students at doctoral programs, the finding of Lewis et al. (2001) study can be generalized to include wider range of students. In other words, most doctoral programs do not have systematic procedures to integrate the students into the social life of the doctoral programs. Instead, these efforts are left to the students themselves or to the faculty members individually. Hawlery (2003) explained about this:

You would think, given the importance of doctoral student to the scholarly life of the university, there would be more institutional support for their entry into this community of scholars. Actually, beyond an occasional doctoral orientation class, there is little formal or systematic effort to socialize doctoral students. (p. 6)

Administrative policies and procedures need to be re-learned—especially for students who left academia for a long period. Learning these policies is left mostly to the individual students. The students who have larger social networks have less difficulty in learning about policies and procedures. To other students, this may represent a difficult time and may lead them to be confused, withdrawn, and as result may lead them to drop-out of the doctoral program.

*Keywords: Vague description; Lack of social integration; Insufficient administrative support*

## **Stage II – First Year of Program**

The second stage represents the first year of a doctoral student's experience. During this stage, the students usually take courses related to their program and field of study. This stage takes place after the students complete the administrative procedures for enrollment in the doctoral program and after attending the initial orientation.

Doctorate studies are substantially different from other studies that the students undertake, such as masters or undergraduate degrees. This difference can be represented from at least two different perspectives: a) the academic standpoint; and b) the social and psychological demands placed on the students.

From the academic standpoint, doctoral programs are usually geared toward research, while other programs focus less on research and more on learning the practical aspect of the field. A doctoral program is different in scope and in purpose for which it prepares students. Hawlery (2003) explained the academic standpoint difference by noting that:

In most disciplines, the Ph.D. is considered a research degree and means that its primary purpose is to not prepare practitioners, clinicians and teachers, but to produce scholars. If you want to be considered scholar, you must do research. This calls for a major transition in how you think and what you do. (p. 21)

From the social and psychological demands, studying in a doctoral program subjects students to new forms of socialization and psychological demands that are specific to the culture of doctoral programs itself. It involves new identities and deals with fellow students, the faculty members, and the institution in which they study. Lovitts (2001) explain about this new form of socialization of doctoral students by noting that:

When they enter graduate school, new students are subjected to socialization processes that are intense and influential. The department presents them with a new culture and new identities. Graduate students often have to replace many of their old values with something approaching a departmental model. The level of awareness of this socialization process is varied. (p. 41)

Despite these vast differences, little has been done by the doctoral programs to “Socialize people properly about the differences between doctoral study and previous experiences in education”

(Hawlery, 2003, p. 9). During the early days of entry into their doctoral studies, the students are faced with the long journey ahead of them. At the same time, doctoral students have to deal with this vastly different environment in which they are immersed. The socially isolated students have fewer frameworks to learn from in order to cope. These socially isolated students cannot get it from the institution, and they cannot get it from those around them. Thus, this situation creates a prolonged period of uncertainty for the students at the beginning of their studies.

The period of uncertainty that this situation produces makes it difficult to deal with the new environment and creates what termed as “intolerable anxiety”. Intolerable anxiety is a kind of anxiety that pushes some students to develop “anxiety avoidance” mechanism and may cause them to drop-out of the program (Hofstede, 1991, p. 110).

**Keywords:** *Difference with other academic programs, New social adjustment, Uncertainty avoidance.*

### **Stage III – Second Year through Candidacy**

The third stage begins after completing the first year and extends through the period when the students obtain candidacy (i.e. pass the comprehensive exam). At the end of this stage, the notorious ABD (All But Dissertation) or doctoral candidacy status is gained. During this phase, students may complete the following:

- 1- Take additional courses required by their program.
- 2- Complete the qualifier or comprehensive exam.
- 3- Proposal phase that includes selecting a research topic and defending the proposal.
- 4- Select a research advisor and doctoral dissertation committee.

Students at this stage have already completed a number of doctoral courses. Thereby, taking additional courses is not expected to produce many additional problems regarding their persistence in the program. However, the comprehensive exam and the research proposal have different points of contention that may challenge the student’s ability to cope with the program.

The qualifier or comprehensive exam tests the knowledge of the students in all the subjects they have experienced previously in their doctoral program. This is an experience that many students did not have before during their academic experience. The exam represents a point where students are allowed to continue in the program upon passing it or are encouraged to drop-out when failing. To this extent, no program fully prepares the student to take this comprehensive exam and a lot of this process is learned through the ‘grapevine’. To the socially isolated, acquiring this kind of knowledge through the grapevine is not available to them, and the student may resort to dropping out before or after taking the comprehensive exam.

The proposal stage includes selecting a topic that will be the focus of the student’s research in the doctoral dissertation. The student is faced with many topics that have to be narrowed down in order to reach a topic that is manageable. Hawlery (2003) explained the difficulty at this stage by stating that:

You are surrounded by ideas, many of which would make an interesting topic. Ideas leap from the printed page, they fall like pearls from the lips of speakers, and a few are even exciting enough to awaken you in the middle of the night. In retrospect, it all seems so simple ... Yet the process of carving a topic from among what seems to be an infinite number of possibilities is anything but simple. Usually it is the result of months of vigorous intellectual effort and considerable emotional investment. (p. 35)



The uniqueness of the topic of the proposal makes each student experience different from the others. This kind of work forces each student to work alone without the support that they received during prior studies and during their earlier stages of their doctoral program. It potentially leads to confusion and additional psychological pressure which they have to deal with alone (Bess, 1978). To the socially isolated individual, there is no social venue to vent out this kind of psychological pressure, and this may lead to a conscious decision to leave the program.

At the end of this stage, the students select an advisor and a dissertation committee. Academic departments do not prepare the students fully on how to make this selection (Grover & Malhorta, 2004). This stage also marks the beginning of working alone with their advisor on the doctoral dissertation. Thus, inconsistent feedback from the advisor may lead to a rocky start and eventually to mistrust and/or frustration later.

*Keywords: Lack of preparedness for comprehensive exam; Lack of guide to select research topic; Lack of guide to select a faculty member advisor.*

### **Stage IV – The Dissertation Stage**

The fourth stage is the last stage of the doctoral program in which successful completion results in attainment of the doctoral degree. The steps required to complete this phase of the program vary considerably among doctoral programs. But the processes by which they (students) complete it are complicated, long, and daunting. Lovitts (2001) explained about this by stating that:

These are complex processes with which most students have little familiarity or prior experience. Students who reach this stage know (or discover) that they must conduct research that distinguishes them from their peers. Most feel inadequately prepared to do this type of research and find themselves unprepared for the writing in the style required for a dissertation. (p. 72)

This last stage is marked especially by the individual student working with his/her advisor and committee. All feedback, communication, and progress reports, if any, often channel through the advisor. Thus, maintaining a good relationship with the advisor is crucial.

In a study about the interaction between a doctoral student and advisors, Grover and Malhorta (2003) noted that “that the key to having a successful dissertation is to establish good relationship with his/her advisor” (p.16). They continue by adding “To do that – managing the interaction with the advisor is crucial. While problems with the research might be frustrating, problems with the advisor might be crucial” (p. 16). They further noted that doctoral programs place emphasis on matching the academic background of the advisor with the research interests of the student. However, very little is done by doctoral program administrators to match personality types with advisors, which appears to be the cause of majority of problems including the feel of isolation.

This dissertation stage becomes more unstructured as times passes by and as the time pressure increases (Hockey, 1994). Doctoral studies, in general, are characterized by lack of structure, but more so at the dissertation stage (Davis, 2000). The crucial part of this last stage for students is to receive constant feedback about the work they submit. Unavailability of faculty member and inconsistent feedback may breed resentment and feelings of being lost—resulting in distrust.

As time passes by and the process of receiving late or contradicting messages from the advisor repeats itself, further strain is placed on the student-advisor relationship which, in turn, creates more doubt with the student about his/her work. The students at this time have limited options to remedy the situation, and all of the options are unpleasant. Asking to change the advisor at this last stage may mean starting all over with a new advisor, and getting to know the work style of the new advisor further delays the process. On the other hand, to continue with the same advisor

may lead to more clashes, more misunderstanding, and as result may deepen the feeling of mistrust.

Solomon and Flores (2001) wrote about establishing trust in business and politics as well as relationships and noted that one of the primary tasks of managers/politicians is to work to establish trust with their constituents and employees. Solomon and Flores indicated that mistrust can work like a two edged sword: It hurts both the politicians/managers as well as constituents/employees. So, if constituents mistrust their representatives, they will not go to them for help. The same thing can be said about advisor/student relationship. If a student does not trust his/her advisor, he/she will not consult the advisor freely. If some students have more social contact, they may be able to solicit answers and, as a result, improve their work without going to the mistrusted advisor. However, this avenue is not available to the socially isolated. The socially isolated students do not have the same contacts and the strained advisor-student direct relationship further deepens this isolation that may result in dropping out.

**Keywords:** *Unstructured dissertation phase; Mistrust; Working alone.*

## **About Social Support/Social Inclusion**

Establishing social relationships among individuals in any society helps the same individuals as well as the society in different ways. Hortulanus et al. (2006) explained about some of these benefits by noting that:

Social relationships are important resources that contributes to the capacity of individuals to lead a relatively independent life and thus to personal well-being. Social relationships also form an elementary aspect of society and provide in different ways for cohesion and bonding within society. (p.19)

A by-product of an increasing social relationship is the availability of social support. In moments of stress or in the moments when the individual goes through difficult situations, social support works as a coping mechanism to the individual in different ways. Thoits (1986) explained about ways that social support may assist the person by suggesting that:

Social support might work like coping by assisting the person to change the situation, to change the meaning of the situation, to change his/her emotional reaction to the situation, or to change all three. Each of these can in turn foster positive effect and thus reduce the disturbing psychological impacts of stress. (p.3)

So, establishing social support aids in minimizing social isolation and the problems associated with it. But some may question whether dealing with the issue of social isolation or social support is the responsibility of the society or whether it is a private matter. Hortulanus et al. (2006) noted that the severity of the consequences that social isolation brings may make it the responsibility of the society to handle the issue of social isolation. They noted that “The impact on personal well-being and threat to societal can be reason enough to view social isolation not exclusively as a private matter, but also as a social issue” (Hortulanus et al., p. 7).

Similarity, in doctoral studies, encouraging social contact and providing social support goes a long way in minimizing the effect that social isolation has on students. But the question may be raised as to whether providing such a frame for social contact and social support is the responsibility of the doctoral program administrators or it should be left to the individual students to contend with. Lovitts (2001) explained that by stating that:

When task-related and social interactions are cooperative and supportive, students are likely become integrated and persist. Their participation in their pro-

grams and their daily interactions in their departmental community become well scripted and taken for granted. However, when interactions are competitive and divisive is characterized by benign neglect, students are likely to become factioned and atomized. (p. 43)

Bess (1978) not only encouraged providing a mechanism for social interactions among students in graduate studies, but also between the students and faculty members. According to Beck, social interaction in graduate studies helps ease the tension in the program in many ways and also helps in providing understanding among the students and faculty member. Increasing the chances for social contacts in doctoral programs helps in creating personal networks among these students. Thoits (1986) explained that personal networks provide a framework for “like-minded people” to exchange experiences when dealing with new situations. Personal networks helps further by focusing similar efforts to solve the problem.

## **Social Isolation in Doctoral Programs – Remedies**

This section suggests steps that may be taken to provide remedies to ward off the feeling of isolation among doctoral students. It bases the suggestions on the experience of other universities who were successful in graduating higher percentages of doctoral students. It divides the steps of completing the doctoral degree into the same four phases that were discussed in the previous section. At the end of the discussion of each of the phases, keywords will be listed that are pertinent to providing remedies for social isolation at the stage being discussed. The keywords will be incorporated into the proposed framework that is presented at the end of this paper.

### ***Stage I – Preadmission to Enrollment***

The basic problems that cause social isolation at this stage, which were discussed earlier, included vague information about program requirements, lack of administrative support when students arrive, and lack of policy for social integration. The strategy for providing a remedy for these problems includes clarifying the requirements, providing administrative support, and including a social integration policy.

Department brochures or pamphlets are mostly limited in describing all that happens in the program—especially with respect to social transformation. Lovitts (2001) suggested orientation that may come in the form of campus visits in which formal or structured and meetings take place. During these visits new students meet the doctoral program staff, faculty members, and other students currently enrolled in the program. Lovitts stated that:

Orientations serve a number of functions. Although their primary purpose is (or should be) to help students develop and understanding of their programs, they also begin the process of integrating students into the academic and social systems of the department. (p. 59)

Hawley (2003) minimized the benefits of the short term orientation session in that it “jams” students together to lecture them about the program. However, structured and well planned orientation sessions give the doctoral student opportunities to meet the faculty members and other students as well as ask questions that will clarify many issues that will not be clear otherwise. One particular university went a step further and required the students to attend an “orientation semester”. During the orientation semester, the doctoral students were introduced to the faculty members while procedures and expectations were clarified (Fields, 1998). The introduction of the orientation semester was credited for resolving a lot of confusions and minimizing doctoral attrition.

Administrative support may include procedures or steps that aim to minimize the confusion that many students may feel as they begin their doctoral study. One particular program provides an

administrative liaison person who takes care of most of the administrative procedure, such as: course registration, purchasing books, hotel and travel reservation, if any, etc. This policy is credited with minimizing the confusion and, as result, minimizing the social isolation that may be felt by some students at the beginning of their doctoral study (Kohun & Ali, 2005).

Integration into the social community of doctoral programs can be accomplished partially through attending orientation before starting the program. Further formal steps may include events at the beginning of each term, such as a welcoming party (often called an ice breaking party), the formal introduction of the students to the faculty members, and other social events (Lovitts, 2001). These events may formally be included within the program to ease the integration of students into the new social life of the doctoral program.

*Keywords: Orientations; Administrative Liaison; Formal social and introduction events*

### **Stage II – First Year of Program**

As explained in the section about causes of social isolation, the students during the first year are often confused about the program with respect to the psychological and social demands placed on them. As the students look ahead at the long journey, they have a feeling of uncertainty combined with significant anxiety.

One of the approaches of doctoral study that deals with the issue of doctoral isolation is the cohort approach. Bentley, Zhao, and Reed (2004) attended a program of study for a doctorate degree using this cohort approach and after completing their degree, they explained the cohort approach within the context of the organizational frames model developed by Bolman and Deal (1997). Bentley et al. (2004) were very pleased about their experience as a cohort and credited it for simplifying the transformation into the social life of the doctoral program. Bentley et al noted that:

Generally, a new cohort seminar series begins two to three times annually and consists of coursework and the cohort classes engage individuals to participate in a group setting. However, cohort participants grow beyond a group; they become a team... Member's evolution from a group to team is evident when certain attitudes become obvious. It is readily available apparent to all involved that cohort member's shared experiences lead to transition from group to team as members gain a strong sense of common identification, a strong sense of common goals, and begin to envision personal growth through high task interdependence while members gravitate toward using their own personal expertise by taking a socialized roles within the team that contribute to common goals – in short, they solidify into an interdependent team of mutually supporting friends and colleagues. (p. 40)

The description above appears to be an evidence of the value that the cohort approach provides to students in minimizing the anxiety that accompanies the journey to attain a doctorate degree. Cohort approach also appears to help in building the sense of a team in which each student can relate to each other, which appears to be the main antidote to feeling of social isolation. Bentley et al. (2004) explained in particular about the effect of the cohort approach with respect to the political frame in the following points:

- The professor is the class authority and the one with power to assign the final grade.
- The typical power-to-powerless framework does not continue for long in the cohort.
- Within the early stages of the doctoral programs, students realize that each share a power equal to others and develop collegiality among students.

- Professors contribute to empowering the students to make them feel belong to the group.
- The cohort through sharing their own experience enhances the group's understanding of the program and range of educational leadership topics.

Another approach that contributed significantly to minimizing the uncertainty during this stage was to hold debriefing sessions between students of the cohort so as to discuss various topics that were studied that day. The debriefing sessions are not structured or moderated by a faculty member; instead they are left to the students to manage themselves (Ali & Kohun, 2006). These debriefing sessions help to further orient the students to the program and break the anxiety that is a common characteristic of this second phase of doctoral study.

*Keywords: Integration; Cohort approach, Ice Breaking.*

### **Stage III – Second Year through Candidacy**

This is the third stage and may involve the following activities: take additional courses required by their program, complete the comprehensive exam, prepare a research topic, as well as write and defend the proposal. The students at this stage have already taken different courses so taking additional courses is not expected to produce many points of difficulty. However, the other three activities of this stage (comprehensive exam, research topic, and proposal) are new to the doctoral student and may produce points of difficulty—especially to the socially isolated.

One of the practices in the business environment is about forming a “focus group.” Likewise for a doctoral program, a “study group” is helpful to discuss the topics regarding the comprehensive exam. The purpose of the focus group would be to prepare the students to take the comprehensive exam. Review of previous exams may be conducted and practice exam reviews may also be included. The intensity of the exam may not be able to be duplicated, but doing reviews and studying together may help to address organizational and anxiety issues. To the socially competent, inquiring and asking questions about prior experiences in the comprehensive exam may not be difficult. So these students may gain advantage as a result. To the socially isolated individual, this kind of inquiry or socialization is a difficult task. Thus, combining the students in focus groups may help bridge this gap.

One particular university that was successful in reducing attrition among their doctoral students has scheduled ‘debriefing’ sessions among their students so students meet and discuss issues related to their courses (Ali & Kohun, 2006). Among the topics that are subject to discussion is the comprehensive exam. Requiring the students to meet without the supervision of a faculty member may prove to further break the barriers among students and also to prepare them for the difficult of the comprehensive exam and/or dissertation.

Regarding the issue about preparing a research topic, the difficulty is that the topic begins by being too broad and narrowing and focusing the topic becomes a daunting task to complete. In a study of the supervision of doctoral programs using a collaborative cohort approach, the participants noted that that some of the psychological barriers that the students faced during their doctoral program contributed to their decision to leave the program (Burnett, 1999). This cohort approach may help in preparing the students to focus the research topic, as well as to write and defend their doctoral dissertation proposal

A study conducted by Kruppa and Meda (2005) explained group dynamics in the formation of a Ph.D. cohort. It concluded that organizational socialization adds elements of inclusion to its participants. This kind of inclusion was important to the success of the group that it studied. The feeling of inclusion becomes paramount at this stage. Establishing trust can be maintained through keeping promises. Solomon and Flores (2001) described this process by stating that:

Trust forms the foundations, or the dynamic precondition, for any free enterprise system. What constitutes that freedom is not only the right to make promises (to buy, to produce, to sell, to hire, and pay, to give one's labor or one's expertise), but, just as important, the responsibility for keeping promises, following through on one's offers, making good on one's commitment. (p. 10)

At the stage when the students begin selecting a research topic, direct communication begins between students and their advisors. As noted before, the selection of advisor usually does not follow a pattern of matching personality, so the chances of personality clashes remain high. It will be the responsibility of the advisor to set the stage for a good relationship to maintain trust. This kind of trusting relationship begins by keeping promises on dates to meet with prompt responses for feedback.

*Keywords:* Collaborative model; Topic presentation/feedback, Structure advisor selection.

### **Stage IV – The Dissertation Stage**

This last phase completes the doctoral degree and ends with a defense of the dissertation. Successful completion of the dissertation and the defense leads to acquiring the doctoral degree while lack of progress makes it difficult to attain the degree. The factors that were explained earlier in this paper are three: lack of structure in selecting an advisor, lack of structure in completing the dissertation, and the mistrust that may arise between the student and the advisor.

Grover and Malhotra (2003) developed a model for interaction between advisor and the students. Their model divides the interaction style of advisors into four 'archetypes' that range from domineering/egocentric to more inclusive/participative" (p 16). Based on the personality type of the advisor, they suggested a coping mechanism for interaction styles as well as critical success factors for different styles and incidences. Grover and Malhotra's model goes a long way in identifying the personality types, interaction incidences, and it gives doctoral students suggestions for interaction styles between the student and the advisor.

Regarding the structure for writing the dissertation, Davis (2000) provided a systematic approach for completing the doctoral dissertation. The work emphasized presuppositions for systematic approach to complete the doctoral dissertation. Davis placed the main responsibility on the student but also advocated providing a structure for completing the dissertation. Fortunately, the dissertation is identified into distinct steps like problem statement, literature review, methodology, and others. Providing progress reports or any similar milestones on each step goes a long way in providing structure for completing the dissertation.

One other way that may help in providing structure for writing the dissertation and helps in providing feedback for the work of the student is through the 'constructivist approach'. The constructivist approach encourages publishing the student's work in a common Website so each can gauge his/her progress toward completing the dissertation (Lazerson, 2003). Using this constructivist approach, students may provide feedback to each other's dissertation drafts, helping to identify and remedy problems as soon as possible. This policy encourages communication, breaks the social isolation barriers, and helps in completing the degree.

The lack of trust issue was initially developed as a result of the absence of direct communication between the student and the advisor. This may be as a result of misunderstanding through following communication patterns that are not direct. In reality, communication is enhanced when people talk directly (or face-to-face) to each other: Berger and Luckman (1966) described the benefits of face-to-face and contrast it with other form of communication by suggesting that:

In the face-to-face situation the other is fully real. This reality is part of the overall reality of everyday life, and as such massive and compelling. To be sure, another

way may be real to me without having encountered him face to face – by reputation, say or by having corresponded with him. Nevertheless, he becomes real to me in the fullest sense of the work only when I meet him fact to fact. p. 29)

It follows that relations with others in the face-to-face situation are highly flexible. Put negatively, it is comparatively difficult to impose rigid patterns upon face-to-face interaction. Whatever patterns are introduced will be continuously modified through the exceedingly variegated and subtle interchange of subjective meanings that goes on. (p. 30)

**Keywords:** *Providing structure for the dissertation stages; Collaborative Model; Face-to-face communication.*

## The Framework for Dealing with Social Isolation

This section creates the framework developed as a result of the discussions above. The framework lists the four stages that were indicated at the beginning this paper and adds the keywords that were selected throughout this paper as causes or remedies at each of the four stages.

Table 2 – The Framework for dealing with social isolation at doctoral programs

Stage	Causes of Social Isolation	Remedies to Social Isolation
Stage I: Preadmission to enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vague description</li> <li>• Lack of social integration</li> <li>• Insufficient administrative support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientations</li> <li>• Administrative Liaison</li> <li>• Formal social and introduction events</li> </ul>
Stage II: First year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difference with other academic programs</li> <li>• New social adjustment</li> <li>• Uncertainty avoidance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integration</li> <li>• Cohort approach</li> <li>• Ice-Breaking</li> </ul>
Stage III: Second year through candidacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of preparedness for the comprehensive</li> <li>• Lack of guide to select research topic</li> <li>• Lack of guide to select an advisor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative model</li> <li>• Topic Presentation/feedback</li> <li>• Structure Advisor Selection</li> </ul>
Stage IV: Dissertation stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstructured dissertation phase</li> <li>• Mistrust</li> <li>• Working alone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structure for the dissertation stages</li> <li>• Collaborative Model</li> <li>• Face-to-face communication</li> </ul>

The proposed framework is intended to be used by existing doctoral program administrators as a prescriptive guide to identify potential problem areas that foster social isolation in those programs. The framework that is presented above lists attributes for methodological and programmatic adjustments that potentially can affect historically high rates of attrition in doctoral programs. Identifying these attributes can help to mitigate feelings of isolation. Furthermore, addressing the causes of social isolation can help to direct efforts on maintaining and providing academic quality in doctoral programs.

Within the design of the framework above, a number of limitations are observed that may hinder the application of the framework in its fullest context at some programs. The following are two observed limitations. First, not all doctoral programs follow the four stages listed in this paper. Some doctoral programs do not require students to take courses and, instead, doctoral students start directly with the research and the dissertation stage. Thus, some factors listed in the first few stages may not apply to these types of doctoral programs. Second, a greater emphasis on the social aspect by a doctoral program may give the sense that the program compromises quality. It is not the intention of this work to indicate that; on the contrary, a balanced emphasis on the social and academic life ensures a better integration of students into the doctoral program and appears to pave the road to a better quality of education. Despite these two limitations, it appears that the proposed framework for dealing with isolation feeling at doctoral programs proposed here can be helpful in several ways. Moreover, this work should bring the problem of social isolation to the attention of administrators of doctoral programs and it sheds more light on how to cope with such problem.

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