Online Doctoral Program and Doctoral Advising: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Online doctoral enrollments have grown, but the individualized mentorship doctoral education requires does not scale as easily as coursework. This exploratory study examined advising loads, compensation, institutional recognition, and perceived challenges in online doctoral programs in educational technology. Faculty typically supervised 9–10 doctoral students and often reported pressure to take on more. While 94% of faculty reported that students appreciated their advising work, only 45% perceived similar appreciation from administrators. Most programs continued to use traditional dissertation requirements, and compensation varied widely, ranging from course releases or credit-hour assignments to no formal compensation. Only half of the respondents reported that doctoral advising counted toward teaching load. Faculty identified role ambiguity, asynchronous communication, limited administrative support, and uneven advising loads as primary challenges. Many indicated that reduced advising loads and stronger administrative support would improve the quality of doctoral mentorship. With faculty already supervising substantial numbers of students and most facing pressure to take on more, current models may not scale without changes to workload policies and institutional support.

Introduction

Online course and program enrollments have grown steadily over the past two decades, driven by technological advances, increased Internet access, and diverse student needs (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Once considered supplementary, online learning has evolved into a mainstream option, providing flexibility and convenience (Seaman et al., 2018). Institutions now deliver complete degree programs online, including bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019).

Despite offering online doctoral programs for over a decade (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010), institutions like ours have faced persistent skepticism about whether the intensive mentorship doctoral education requires can be delivered online (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011). COVID-19 dramatically shifted this landscape, forcing rapid transitions to remote and online learning (Lederman, 2020). While only one-third of students had taken online courses pre-pandemic (Allen & Seaman, 2017), the crisis forced nearly all educators and students into digital learning environments (Johnson et al., 2020). Even longtime skeptics came to acknowledge online learning's potential during this period (Hodges et al., 2020).

Online doctoral programs now serve working professionals, international students, and geographically dispersed learners seeking flexible pathways to advanced degrees (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018). Broader acceptance within academia and the field has increased the growth of online doctoral programs. However, doctoral education does not scale as easily as master's programs because it depends on individualized mentorship.

Doctoral mentoring is time-intensive and is often not fully reflected in faculty workload policies (Curtin et al., 2016). Advising doctoral candidates and serving on dissertation committees is demanding work (Walker et al., 2008). This work often extends well beyond standard hours, competing with research and teaching demands (Barnes & Austin, 2009). Yet institutions often fail to recognize or compensate this work, which can contribute to faculty burnout and reduce the quality of mentorship (Gardner, 2009). Workload policies and institutional supports may need to change if doctoral mentoring is to remain viable (Gibbs et al., 2014).

Method

We surveyed faculty at 44 institutions offering online doctoral degrees in educational technology and related fields. The survey collected basic program demographics, including degree types, course delivery formats, and enrollment of active and incoming students. It also asked about advising loads, compensation, and mentorship practices.

Results

Program size and enrollment patterns

Programs varied in both annual admissions and active enrollment. Annual admissions varied widely across the sample, ranging from fewer than 10 students to more than 51 per year, with nine programs, the largest group, admitting between 10 and 20 students annually. Active enrollment showed similar variation, with 11 programs maintaining more than 100 students.

Programs used different approaches to assigning advisors. Approximately 30% of programs assigned advisors based on research alignment between faculty expertise and student interests, while 22% allowed faculty members to select the students with whom they wished to work with personally. Only 11% of programs used workload considerations as the primary factor for assignment, and 37% employed other methods, including various hybrid approaches that combined multiple factors. Most programs (73% of respondents) assigned advisors at the start of the program; only 3% delayed until the dissertation phase.

Advising loads and workload distribution

Faculty advising loads varied considerably across programs and institutions. After removing outliers, the mean advising load was 9.48 doctoral students. Thirteen respondents reported unequal distribution of advising responsibilities among colleagues, suggesting workload inequities within departments. Most respondents (80%) reported their current load as typical, with 8% reporting it as more than usual and 12% as less than usual.

Compensation and recognition structures

Institutions classified doctoral advising in workload structures in different ways. About 50% of institutions counted doctoral advising as part of faculty members' teaching load. In comparison, 12% to 17% classified it as service work. Another 14% indicated that advising was simply expected without specific workload categorization, and 24% reported various other arrangements that did not fit standard categories.

Compensation for doctoral advising varied widely across institutions. Some programs offered course releases after faculty reached supervision milestones. Others assigned credit hours for dissertation chairing, typically one credit per dissertation. Some offered fixed stipends for chairs and committee members, or compensation for summer dissertation hours. Many offered nothing.

Faculty perceptions and institutional support

Faculty saw a gap between how students and administrators recognized their advising work. While 94% of faculty felt their advising work was appreciated by their students, only 45% perceived similar appreciation from their administration, and 39% explicitly disagreed that administrators valued their advising work. Compounding this gap, 61% of faculty reported institutional pressure to take on more advisees despite existing challenges. At the same time, 57% said reducing their advising loads would

improve mentorship quality, and 72% pointed to administrative support as a way to strengthen their advising.

Key challenges identified

Faculty most often cited time as their biggest challenge. They described struggling to balance advising with research and teaching. Faculty also pointed to limited administrative support and to the communication gaps that come with asynchronous online learning. Faculty also reported that students often entered programs underprepared and with unrealistic timelines for completion. Maintaining engagement in asynchronous environments was a consistent challenge.

The findings suggest that online doctoral education may not scale as easily as online master's programs. Individualized mentorship is hard to reconcile with pressure to grow enrollments. Without changes to how advising is supported, current models may not be sustainable.

Discussion and Implications

This study points to a tension between enrollment growth and the time required for doctoral advising. The variability in compensation structures suggests that workload policies have not kept pace with the demands of online doctoral advising. Students and administrators differed substantially in how they recognized advising.

These results point to a need for policy reform that reflects the time-consuming nature of online doctoral advising. Faculty who held regularly scheduled meetings with their advisees reported fewer advising challenges. Routine meeting schedules may be one practical way to reduce some of the difficulties faculty members described. Doing this requires more than administrative approval. It requires changes to workload formulas and programs resources.

If institutions increase online doctoral enrollment without increasing advising support, faculty may face heavier advising loads with limited compensation or recognition. Over time, this can decrease the quality of mentorship students receive. Programs may need to revisit how advising is counted in workload policies, particularly given the wide variation in current practices across institutions.

Online doctoral programs need a more honest accounting of the time advising demands. Because doctoral education depends on individualized mentorship, enrollment growth is not sustainable without structural changes to how advising is supported. Future research should examine how different workload models shape faculty capacity, student progress, and advising quality.

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