



The Colloquia Philosophy:

Scaffolding for a Transformative Learning Experience

Golde and Walker (2005) state that the purpose of doctoral education is “to educate and prepare those to whom we can entrust the vigor, quality, and integrity of the field.” (p. 5). Graduates of doctoral programs become “stewards of the disciplines” in which they practice (Thombs, et al., 2004, p. 13). Viewed from the perspective of the recognized tasks of any university (Shapiro, 2005), Capella’s doctoral program seeks to advance and transmit knowledge while preserving the essence of graduate education through extending access to our adult learner populations. Capella is uniquely positioned to “exert leadership to help society shape new cultural commitments and expand others” (Shapiro, p. 11) through the delivery of high quality academic and residential learning experiences. The goal of doctoral education at Capella University, therefore, is to provide experiences that broaden understanding and that are inextricably linked with the integration, teaching and application of knowledge and intellectual accomplishments (Boyer, 1990).

The purpose of this paper is to articulate the values, beliefs, and philosophical tenets of the doctoral colloquia experience. This colloquia philosophy serves as one aspect of the University’s internal guidance system in support of the curriculum provided to doctoral learners at residencies. These guiding principles retain their value as learners progress through academic coursework and meet three times face-to-face during their doctoral academic careers at Capella University.

Philosophical underpinnings of curriculum development reflect the values that guide and support the delivery of the educational experience within doctoral programs (AAHB, 2005) as well as at the doctoral colloquia. Specifically a set of core values provides clarity of purpose of the colloquium element of the doctoral program at Capella University. Articulating the core values for the colloquia curriculum fosters understanding by learners, faculty, and Capella support departments and other stakeholders regarding the importance of this unique and intense face-to-face experience.

Core Value: Face-to-Face Interaction

A core value embodied in the colloquium experience is the importance that Capella University places on the person-to-person or face-to-face (FTF) encounter during which learners from all doctoral programs convene three times during a doctoral program of academic study and research. This valuing of human interaction is focused on facilitating the educational experience in the FTF context and additionally recognizes the importance of establishing person-to-person interaction between adult learners and faculty across specializations and diverse fields of practice. In traditional doctoral programs, the value of person-to-person interaction is embedded within the doctoral education process since delivery of course teaching, seminars, and study groups are in-person, real time experiences (Winston & Fields, 2003). Graduate seminars provide opportunity for team teaching and intense interaction between learners and faculty characterized by the give and take of vigorous intellectual discussion (Damrosch, 2000).

It is through the person-to-person interactions that take place at colloquia that doctoral learners advance understanding of doctoral education while acquiring and affirming the academic skill sets needed for degree completion. The University's commitment to ensuring that all doctoral learners achieve the benefits of personal interaction with faculty, staff, and supporting Capella University departments reflects this core, abiding value.

Core Value: The Learning Community

Capella University ascribes to the essential nature of interpersonal communication and interaction that takes place in a real time, face-to-face environment. This learning exchange is designed to optimize learning, application of learning, acquisition and application of specific academic skill sets, and is characterized as intellectually stimulating and invigorating. Within higher education, the role of the real time, face-to-face encounter between students and faculty is recognized as a form of mentoring that is associated with success in doctoral program completion (Dedrick & Watson, 2002; Rose, 2005). At the same time, the requirements inherent in doctoral study completed by adult learners, while simultaneously involved in professional career endeavors, involve a significant level of commitment that can be characterized by stress, the need for stamina and endurance, and emotional highs and lows of blending academic and personal/professional life needs (Glaze, 2002; Pearson, Evans & Macauley, 2004).

Connection to and with other learners in like circumstances facilitates the development of a personal learning community that is characterized by shared experience and insight. At colloquia, faculty engage in mentoring activities that stimulate learning, challenge learners to expand thinking, and engage them in a host of intellectual activities associated with becoming doctoral. The cohort experience for the Track 1 learner provides specific support for professional development similar to the graduate cohort group described by Mullen (2003). In this close-knit initial experience, adult learners begin the process of identifying with the doctoral education process, developing a sense of belonging and identity, and experiencing success-oriented support from peers, faculty and staff. As each successive colloquia is completed, learners participate in and contribute to the richness, diversity, and stimulation of the colloquia learning community.

The learning community initiated in Track 1 is expanded, refined, and focused through each of the developmental stages that characterize the doctoral experience at Capella University. This core value becomes the context for all other core values and is, in turn, influenced by each of the values inherent in the colloquia curriculum and supporting Capella University resources and services. Central to the success in learner, faculty and staff use of the learning community is the provision of professional events management that establishes an environment in which the colloquia core values can be expressed.

Core Value: Honoring the Developmental Process of Becoming a Scholar Practitioner

Adult learners begin the doctoral program with graduate school experience at the master's level of academic achievement. The doctoral program, however, is distinctly different from the master's graduate school experience due to the academic rigor of coursework and completion of two capstone academic activities: the comprehensive examination and the dissertation. Learners acquire an array of academic skills as they progress through coursework in preparation for the comprehensive examination,

followed by the dissertation. The time span for accomplishing these three components of the doctoral program can range from three to five years, on average, with this time span reflecting the completion of a series of developmental stages.

As with other developmental sequences described in the literature, the doctoral learner's successful mastering of one developmental stage establishes the foundation upon which each succeeding stage rests. According to Tinto (as cited in Rose, 2005), doctoral learner motivation changes appreciably as he/she progresses through three distinct stages of development. The first stage consists of transition and adjustment during which academic coursework is the main focus of attention. During this stage, the learner forms affiliations with other learners, faculty and support resources. In the second stage, or mid-life stage (Stein & Glazer, 2003), the learner acquires the academic skill sets necessary to complete coursework and pass the comprehensive examination. During the third stage, concentration is directed toward design and completion of dissertation research. The colloquia learning experience serves as a bridge for this developmental process through an organized curriculum that recognizes the developmental aspect of the doctoral education experience.

Intrinsic to the developmental process for learners attending each colloquium is recognition that the needs of each cohort of learners evolves in conjunction with academic course completion, acquisition and use of academic skill sets with increasing sophistication, and increased confidence in the ability to succeed. This developmental process is designed to result in the transformation of the learner from practitioner scholar to scholar practitioner. The structure and design of the colloquia curriculum and related learning experiences recognizes and values the importance of a paced delivery of content that is aligned with this developmental process.

Core Value: Enculturation as a Scholar Practitioner

Learners entering the doctoral program at Capella University have earned master's degrees, placing them within the framework of the practitioner-scholar professional identity. Enrollment in the doctoral program begins an academic and practice enculturation process that culminates in the practitioner scholar achieving the status of scholar practitioner. Within the framework of the scholar practitioner model, the goal of the doctoral program "is to educate and prepare those to whom we can entrust the vigor, quality, and integrity of the field" (Golde, p. 5). The graduate, therefore, becomes a "steward of the discipline" (p. 5) who seeks to make lasting contributions to the world of practice through applications of scholarship in diverse fields of practice (Golde, 2005; Tennant, 2004).

Capella University combines the requirements for rigorous academic inquiry that includes knowledge generation, conservation, and transformation while emphasizing the application of knowledge to professional fields of practice (Golde, 2005). Through knowledge generation, the doctoral learner engages in the demonstration of scholarship in coursework, the comprehensive examination and in dissertation research. Conservation of knowledge includes recognition of the depth of knowledge that comprises a field of practice and being committed to preserving knowledge that continues to contribute to the growth and vitality of the discipline. Scholarship is extended to the world of practice through the efforts of the doctoral graduate to transform information in ways that facilitate understanding, use, and appreciation "to a variety of audiences in oral and written forms" (p. 11). Participation in the doctoral colloquia provides lived experience for each of these central tenets of the scholar practitioner model.

As the principal venue for person-to-person interaction at three key touch points in the doctoral program, the colloquia bring diverse learners and faculty together to explore aspects of the scholar-practitioner model, provide opportunity to “live” aspects of the scholar practitioner role, and to interact with role model scholar practitioner faculty. For example, colloquia provide intense, highly relevant and personally meaningful enculturation experiences for the doctoral learner through the daily opportunities to engage with peers, faculty, and support staff while attending content sessions, informal discussion groups, and through encounters in discipline specific seminars.

The enculturation process is cumulative. It includes coursework experiences and various forms of communication and interaction between learner, faculty, and support staff. It is at colloquia, however, that the enculturation process is made real, reinforced, strengthened and illustrated as a diverse and unique community of scholars explores becoming doctoral. This process continues after the colloquia requirement has been met and extends well after commencement as the doctoral graduate becomes a steward of the discipline.

Core Value: Contemporary Curriculum and Learning Experiences

The colloquia experience is nurtured, facilitated, and made tangible through the curriculum and associated learning resources that are integral elements of the colloquia learning environment. Academic coursework experiences that precede and follow the colloquium experiences complement and extend the learning at residencies. Capella University places high priority on ensuring that the curriculum delivered at colloquia reflects contemporary content, discipline specific knowledge and practice information, and is based on sound principles of curriculum design. In addition, as a leading distance education university, the importance of incorporating an understanding of contemporary knowledge-based society (Allen, Smyth, & Wahlstrom, 2002; Tennant, 2004) is recognized as an essential element of the colloquia experience. To that end, the colloquia curriculum incorporates an ongoing review and revision process that involves key stakeholders in designing and delivering curriculum and learning support resources that are sensitive to the multicultural and diversity needs of the adult learner populations enrolled in the doctoral program.

The colloquia curriculum is one element of the doctoral program offered at Capella University and is aligned with the academic curricula offered by the Schools. Content incorporated into the colloquia curriculum reflects the defined needs of the school-based doctoral programs. As an extension of the defined outcomes of the doctoral program residing in each school, the colloquia experience is an essential element of learner success and persistence. The residential colloquium is a distinguishing element of the Capella education model, and for this reason, the integration of colloquia curriculum competencies and learning objectives are reflections of similar elements defined by the schools as critical to the success of adult doctoral learners.

The colloquia curriculum values the seminar model of graduate education as well as the flexibility of multiple delivery methods of teaching and instruction. Through group discussion seminars, learners engage with faculty on contemporary topics associated with the learner’s discipline as well as across disciplines. The seminar model, often referred to as the research seminar (Malfroy & Yates, 2003), holds continuing promise to enrich the colloquia learning experience as curriculum revision and remodeling takes place. Integration of computer technology teaching/learning options provides expanded opportunity to engage learners in the education process at colloquia, to demonstrate

learning through use of technology supported assessment, and to strengthen faculty-learner teaching interaction.

Summary Comment

This colloquia philosophy incorporates core values that reflect Capella University's commitment to furthering the doctoral learning process during the face-to-face residential experience. The philosophy is a foundation for a conceptual framework for this vital element of the doctoral education process. Learning objectives derived from the conceptual framework defined for the colloquia experience inform the design of the curriculum as well as related learning support services. Capella's model of residential learning is inextricably linked to the academic curricula of the schools. From another perspective, the colloquia residential experience provides cohesion and connection to the rigorous process of acquiring a doctorate. As such, the colloquia establishes a critically important component of the quality brand of doctoral education at Capella University.

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