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Integrating distance students into a graduate student organization

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The Apparel, Merchandising, and Design program (AMD) in the Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management at Iowa State University began admitting students to its distance PhD program in the summer of 2014. This hybrid program brings students to campus during the summer semester to take one to three classes. Afterward, they enroll in distance classes or the distance sections of hybrid classes. Optionally, students may choose to return to campus during subsequent summers.

From the start of the distance PhD program, the Apparel, Merchandising, and Design Graduate Student Association (AMDGSA) was committed to integrating distance students into its programming. The AMDGSA's overarching purpose is defined by its constitution as fostering community among its members as well as creating connections between members and professionals (both in academia and industry) through professional development programming and social events (AMDGSA, 2014).

The AMDGSA's goals for its members are aligned with research findings on the socialization of new members into organizations, which emphasizes the importance of ongoing informal ties in developing one's social identity or "sense of personal belonging within a collectivity" (Podolny & Baron, 1997, p. 674). Green (1991) noted that the first year in a doctoral program is a particularly critical time when students start to acclimate to the norms associated with being a professional in academia. While professors and advisors clearly play an important role in this professional socialization, peer-to-peer relationships also help to shape the process. Throughout the graduate school experience, peers can give targeted advice about courses and program requirements from their own experience, as well as strategic and wide-ranging advice, such as job search tactics and suggestions for work-life balance; in addition, they are uniquely positioned to give social or emotional support (Podolny & Baron, 1997). Although successful distance learners tend to be especially motivated and self-reliant (Irizarry, 2002), a strong sense of community is important for all PhD students, distance and on-campus alike (Rovai & Jordan, 2004).

In considering how to best incorporate distance PhD students into the AMD graduate student community, the AMDGSA executive committee realized that some of their current practices work well for asynchronous or off-campus access. The group regularly archived notes taken during its professional development events on a Blackboard webpage available to all members. In January 2015, the organization began to broadcast its events live using videoconferencing software. Any interested graduate student in the AMD program could connect to the event via computer and take part virtually. The software also recorded the events, and these recordings were made available on the group Blackboard page.

AMDGSA also moved to expand its programming to include the summer semester, specifically during the time when distance students would be on campus for classes. In June 2014, it hosted two social events that were attended by most of the incoming distance students.

As of 2015, there were 23 dues-paying members in AMDGSA, and 30% (n=7) were distance students. Recognizing that distance PhD students would make up an increasingly large proportion of the AMD student body in the near future, the executive committee set out to gain a more nuanced understanding of the needs of their distance PhD colleagues. To this end, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with current distance student members. Questions focused on their perceptions of the benefits associated with being a member of AMDGSA and how it could better serve their needs as distance PhD students.

Interviewees noted that the initial summer events were quite effective. They made students feel welcomed, decreased their initial stress about entering a demanding program, and helped to forge connections and a support system. The opportunity to speak face to face with fellow students about a host of topics also helped to solidify performance expectations and allowed the new students see how more experienced colleagues were navigating the doctoral process, including the selection of advisors and course options. The resources on the group's Blackboard page were also cited as beneficial. While not accessed by all distance members, those who did use them commented on the wealth of information there. Notes from a faculty presentation about salary negotiations and a video recording on optimizing the grad school experience were specifically mentioned. Finally, continuing communication from the executive committee was appreciated. While acknowledging that their competing priorities often precluded them from reading emails advertising events in their entirety, members typically scanned them to keep abreast of group events. Efforts by individual officers to contact specific members about events they might find particularly useful were especially valued.

In response to this information, the group's leadership has expanded its summer semester calendar beyond social events to include a professional development program. It will continue to document its events online as well as broadcast them to members. Above all, AMDGSA will strive to remain responsive to all of its members, both distance and on campus. Although this is an exploratory study of one organization's efforts, the suggestions for engagement could be considered by other graduate student groups that seek to integrate distance or hybrid students into their activities.

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