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# Readiness to Succeed Preparing the Scholar-Practitioner

Daniel W. Salter

Tony A. Ajsenberg

Tobias Ball

Joshua W. Bass

Michelle Brown

*See next page for additional authors*

## Authors

Daniel W. Salter, Tony A. Ajsenberg, Tobias Ball, Joshua W. Bass, Michelle Brown, Shawn Picht, Denise Pranke, Adam Schnider, and Kerry Sullivan

# WALDEN UNIVERSITY

# Readiness to Succeed
## Preparing the Scholar-Practitioner

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# Readiness Working Group

- **Daniel Salter**, PhD, Chair, Center for Research Quality
- **Tony Ajsenberg**, Center for Research Quality
- **Tobias Ball**, Writing Center
- **Josh Bass**, EdD, Student Success Advising
- **Michelle Brown**, EdD, Center for Research Quality
- **Shawn Picht**, Academic Skills Center
- **Denise Pranke**, Career Services
- **Adam Schneider**, Enrollment Management
- **Kerry Sullivan**, University Library

# Contents

# Introduction

This report expands on a previous working group's effort to clarify the alignment of existing scholarship around doctoral education with how students move through the process at Walden University (Salter et al., 2013). Following up on the recommendations in that report, the current working group was charged with understanding students' readiness or preparedness to move through these stages/phases across the entire student timeline from prospect to graduate. Additionally, the group attempted to map the services currently in place to support that journey while identifying opportunities to improve it.

## The Working Group

Walden University is a big operation with many "moving parts." To keep the conversation focused and manageable, a strategic choice was made to have experienced representatives from key student-facing support service areas across the timeline, from Enrollment to Career Services. The group also invited guests to their meetings to clarify particular services and to provide added background. Immediately clear was the fact that the group's members see aspects of the student experience, which faculty and administrators may not observe, and are often on the frontline in situations where a student is not ready for one reason or another.

## Stewards of the Discipline/Practice

A discussion of readiness begs the question: ready to do what? So, rather than beginning at enrollment, this report starts at the end of the doctoral journey to clarify where all these phases and challenges ultimately lead.

A decade ago, the Carnegie Foundation on Teaching and Learning (Walker, Golde, Jones, Conklin-Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2009) advanced what they saw as the overriding goal or outcome of doctoral education. They asserted that doctoral graduates should be viewed metaphorically as "stewards" (p. 12) of their discipline or area of practice. Further, they offered three key aspects of stewardship at the end of the doctoral journey:

- generation of new knowledge,
- conservation of key values and practices, and
- transformation of knowledge for the benefit of others.

As was observed in this working group's discussions of readiness, these three aspects of stewardship interact and inform one another. For example, a steward cannot successfully generate new knowledge if he or she does not have a fundamental understanding of the value of existing evidence and an ability to communicate new information in ways that others can understand. In particular, the doctoral capstone can be seen as a demonstration of graduates' ability to be stewards because it involves all three aspects of stewardship (Walker et al., 2009), with their academic coursework and research training as antecedent experiences that prepare them for it. So, with this endpoint in mind, the working group examined how Walden University prepares doctoral graduates to assume the responsibility of stewardship.

# Readiness

Although a simple notion in some ways, as used in this working group, *readiness* was seen as a multifaceted construct representing the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and dispositions needed to resolve the challenges facing students at each phase of their program: a more elaborate version of the notion of college readiness (Conley, 2007). For example, are students ready to conduct their capstone when they reach the doctoral candidacy stage? Importantly, readiness is separate from agency and motivation, in that being prepared is no guarantee that someone will take action.

The doctoral journey is long and developmental in that abilities gained at the beginning are necessary to be successful at the end (Gardner, 2009). As a result, readiness looks different at different phases, and later forms of it are built from earlier ones. For example, the higher-order readiness to complete a doctoral capstone relies on a student's abilities to resolve the academic challenges of mastering the academic content, learning to write in a scholarly manner, finding and analyzing existing research, and understanding how research is conducted—the early attributes of a steward.

Readiness is not a guarantee of success, of course, as many factors may result in departure from a doctoral program (Ehrenberg, Jakubson, Groen, So, & Price, 2007; Golde, 1998; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016). It is worth noting, however, that the research on doctoral student attrition appears aligned with the recognized phases of their program and their readiness to move through them, what is sometimes called threshold crossing (Kiley, 2009). For example, of the roughly half of all doctoral enrollees who do not complete (Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service, 2010), about 40% of these departures occur in the first year. At Walden, that number has been higher, especially in the first term. One could logically conclude that many of these individuals were not ready to be doctoral students, for one or more reasons, because they left before they really got started.

# The Phases of Doctoral Education

This paper does not duplicate the more in-depth discussion in the first report (Salter et al., 2013). Rather, a summary is provided of the key phases and thresholds or transition points for students during their doctoral studies. With this basic structure to guide them, the working group looked at the nature of readiness at each phase, the challenges to being ready that they see from their positions at the university, and ways that Walden supports their preparedness within the broader challenge of the online education (Kumar & Coe, 2017).

**Prospect:** *An individual who is considering doctoral studies at Walden University*

- Threshold: admission to Walden

**Admit (New Student)**: *An individual who is making the transition to doctoral studies.*

- Threshold: completion of first quarter/foundational studies

**Student:** *An individual who is progressing through degree requirements*

- Threshold: admission to doctoral candidacy

**Candidate:** *An individual who is completing the doctoral capstone experience*

- Threshold: graduation

**Graduate:** *An individual who has met all the requirements of the program*

- Threshold: functioning as a steward

# Forms of Readiness

If these phases are viewed metaphorically as the warp, the working group saw several subdomains of overall readiness that could be seen as the weft of this student-experience tapestry of the student experience (Tables 1 and 2). Many of these forms of readiness transcend the timeline and look different at different points because the expectations on students are different. And, as noted above, they also interact. For instance, students' initial technology readiness interacts with their abilities to complete written assignments and conduct library searches at the beginning, and later grows into their ability to manage and analyze the literature and data in their capstone (Dreher & Dreher, 2011).

- **Academic readiness** can be viewed as those cognitive skills and dispositions that allow doctoral students to learn the content of their discipline or professional area and eventually to become self-directed, independent learners (Cantwell, Bourke, Scevak, Holbrook, & Budd, 2015).

- **Technology readiness** can be viewed as having the technological resources, both hardware and software, and the emerging abilities or "digital literacy" to use them first as a doctoral student and later as a scholar-researcher (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Stelma, 2011).

- **Reading readiness** represents the set of skills involved with finding existing research and evidence, reading and comprehending that information, and making critical judgements about it based on a student's developing expertise. Later, students are able to accomplish the "deep dive" that is required by the capstone (Wisker, 2015).

- **Writing readiness** encompasses the ability to communicate in written form: from assignments and postings in the courses, to writing the capstone document, and ultimately to writing for publication (Aitchison & Lee, 2006).

- **Research readiness** reflects the outcome of the formal preparation to conduct academic/scientific research, which includes the various paradigms for research, design and methodological strategies, and analytical and evaluative techniques (Pival, Lock, & Hunter, 2008).

- **Capstone readiness**, commonly operationalized as admission to candidacy (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Kiley, 2009), involves having mastery over previous forms of readiness (reading, writing, technology, and research) and students' ability to use those skills in an integrated way to conduct a doctoral capstone appropriate to their degree, which includes identifying a problem, devising a strategy to understand and address it through research, discussing the implications of the findings in support of positive social change, and managing the overall project and people involved with it.

- **Professional readiness** or work-readiness (Robertson, 2017) relates to the preparation necessary for students to use their doctoral degree to advance their career while taking on the responsibilities of being a steward of their discipline or professional area. Their doctoral education should have prepared them for career success (Mello, Fleisher, & Woehr, 2015).

Table 1. *Forms of Readiness at Each Phase of Doctoral Education: Prospect and Admit*

| *Readiness* | Prospect | Admit/Student |
|---|---|---|
| **Academic** | <ul><li>Has appropriate graduate degree for admission.</li><li>Can provide required admission materials (e.g., transcripts).</li></ul> | <ul><li>Understands self as a learner, including time and energy.</li><li>Possesses time/task management skills (esp. school/work/life balance)</li><li>Demonstrates organizational skills (self and information).</li><li>Knows where to find support and services as needed.</li><li>Is a critical thinker and effective problem solver.</li></ul> |
| **Technology** | <ul><li>Possesses e-mail and basic technology.</li><li>Has the ability to move around the Internet.</li></ul> | <ul><li>Possesses or has access to equipment to be an online student.</li><li>Is able to use key software packages (O365) effectively, especially word processing.</li><li>Can function in an online classroom environment.</li><li>Communicates effectively online and manages virtual relationship.</li></ul> |
| **Reading** | <ul><li>Understands the importance of developing their critical reading skills.</li></ul> | <ul><li>Is able to read technical information in their discipline.</li><li>Demonstrates the ability to search for information in the Library and beyond.</li><li>Is a critical reader.</li><li>Has a strategy for information/document management.</li></ul> |
| **Writing** | <ul><li>Meets expectations for writing sample and/or graduate writing assessment.</li></ul> | <ul><li>Communicates in standard American English.</li><li>Is able to write posts for courses and academic papers.</li><li>Can apply APA Style from Day 1</li><li>Writes to be persuasive.</li><li>Can synthesize information and put conclusions back into words.</li></ul> |
| **Research** | <ul><li>Has initial understanding that research training is part of obtaining a doctorate.</li><li>Understands how research guides practice.</li></ul> | <ul><li>Can read and understand research articles—research fluency.</li><li>Understands the scholarly/scientific approach and its purpose.</li><li>Begins to identify own research strengths and weaknesses and how these relate to their career.</li><li>Has an initial understanding of research ethics.</li><li>Is trained in research design and methods.</li></ul> |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Capstone** | • Awareness of the capstone requirement for attaining a doctoral degree. | • Has initial ideas for capstone project.<br>• Has a preliminary understanding of the process and people involved in completing the capstone.<br>• Begins reading background information related to potential capstone topics.<br>• Addresses the potential psychological challenges of research anxiety and self-efficacy. |
| **Professional** | • Stays engaged during the enrollment process.<br>• Has financial resources to complete degree.<br>• Can make an initial alignment of program-of-study (POS) with career goals. | • Becomes involved in academic and professional communities.<br>• Understands POS and timing of events, including residencies.<br>• Begins identifying opportunities to build professional skills. |

Table 2. *Forms of Readiness at Each Phase of Doctoral Education: Candidate and Graduate*

| *Readiness* | Candidate | Graduate |
|---|---|---|
| **Academic** | • Takes responsibility for their learning outcomes—a self-directed learner.<br>• Has project management skills.<br>• Has demonstrated expertise in their discipline or area of practice.<br>• Able to juggle course competition with initial stages of capstone development. | • Functions as an independent scholar. |
| **Technology** | • Has strategies for document and data management (e.g., Zotero).<br>• Is trained to use data analysis software (e.g., SPSS).<br>• Comfortable with virtual communication and writing strategies. | • Has established an online identity as a scholar.<br>• Takes steps to remain current on technology trends relevant to scholars. |
| **Reading** | • Able to do a "deep dive" into the existing research literature, which is more advanced than the coursework expectations. | • Continues to monitor the existing research and scholarship to stay on-top-of current trends and new findings in their discipline/practice area. |
| **Writing** | • Understands and takes advantage of the iterative nature of writing.<br>• Open and responsive to feedback.<br>• Is familiar with the doctoral capstone templates.<br>• Sees the audience for the capstone as other scholars. | • Is able to be a published author.<br>• Writes at multiple levels (e.g., other researchers, practitioners, consumers). |
| **Research** | • Has developed a sense of research self-efficacy.<br>• Able to formulate a researchable problem for the capstone.<br>• Aligns a research approach with the nature of the problem. | • Chooses to continue their research journey or start a new one.<br>• Strategizes the next steps in their research. Begins to develop an articulated program of research. |
| **Capstone** | • Demonstrates mastery of all other forms of readiness.<br>• Understands how the capstone will be evaluated (the rubric). | • Disseminates the capstone findings in appropriate venues and to appropriate audiences. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | • Recognizes the various approvals needed at each phase (prospectus, proposal, final document).<br>• Is trained on using *my*DR.<br>• Understand research ethics. | |
| **Professional** | • Able to take feedback and to be mentored through the process.<br>• Fills in the practical experience as needed (e.g., volunteering, teaching). | • Can tell their professional story.<br>• Is prepared to advance in career, transition into a new position, or make a 180-degree change.<br>• For some, understands what is involved in an academic career.<br>• Ties their academic expertise to their professional lives.<br>• Able to market themselves because they are aware of their strengths and expertise.<br>• Networks with other researchers/scholars. |

# Recommendations

## Services and Programs

Appendix A contains a listing of services and programs aimed at supporting one or more of the forms of readiness identified during this working group's discussions. Of note, the working group was aware of many currently active efforts to respond to challenges facing students at various phases that align with recommendations related to readiness (e.g., updates to the multiple orientations aimed at new students). It is not the intention of this group to step-over or to redirect those efforts.

Rather than seeing a dearth of services in this accounting, the working group actually observed the opposite and its outcome: that sorting through the high volume of programs and services existing at Walden is a daunting task for students *and* for the faculty and staff who work with them.

> **Recommendation:** Continue efforts to streamline the organization and presentation of existing support for students, examining specific just-in-time, scaffolded by stage-in-the-program strategies consistent with Tables 1 and 2 (e.g., the Doctoral Research Coach, the Doctoral Orientation to the Capstone videos, peer-mentoring program).

> **Recommendation:** Relatedly, the technology solutions for various program and service delivery are equally disparate and only partially coordinated, and do not take advantage of modern solutions (e.g., artificial intelligence [AI]). Students need one place (portal) where they must go every day as part of their Walden experience, even before they officially enroll.

Three areas of potential added or enhanced programmatic responses seemed apparent in working group conversations, however. The first area involves assuring the basic readiness that seems to have downstream consequences if not effectively addressed early in the program.

**Recommendation:** As much as possible, make focused training for reading and writing readiness a requirement, not an optional, opt-in experience. These two aspects are critically important to downstream success in the capstone but may get misinterpreted as a form of research readiness because of their interaction with it. (See Assessment and Accountability below.)

**Recommendation:** For similar reasons, make technology training and accountability more prevalent: consider making it a required academic residency experience, especially in anticipation of the doctoral capstone phase.

Second, the working group observed that the doctoral foundations courses could benefit from some specific attention and realignment. These types of courses have the potential to address multiple aspects of readiness, along with the necessary socialization (Garcia & Yao, 2019). At one time, these courses were coordinated at the university level but are now left to each program to develop and staff.

**Recommendation:** Mirroring the approach used for the core research courses, return to a model of a common, initial Foundations for Doctoral Success course, grounded in evidence and appropriate andragogy, where students have early access to services that will support their preparation to succeed.

Third, obtaining a doctorate for Walden students is first and foremost some type of career choice, either to advance a student's current situation or to "do a 180." However, much of the existing student-facing support is about succeeding in the capstone as an end unto itself, even though many students leave Walden before this time. Further, many graduates struggle *after* degree completion because they have not been fully prepared to meet the career aspirations that brought them to Walden (i.e., they may have the credential but no practical experience).

**Recommendation:** Career development experiences need to be more fully integrated into the entire student timeline, from enrollment through graduation.

**Recommendation:** Specifically, introduce or reinforce the use of a Professional Development Plan (PDP) for all doctoral students, possibly integrated with the Doctoral Research Coach app and/or as part of the common Foundations course. This PDP could also serve to leverage academic and capstone work in support of students' career plans, possibly taking the form of a doctoral portfolio (Cobia et al., 2005).

**Recommendation:** An added benefit from development and refinement of a PDP as an academic component is the role that faculty can have in students' career development process. Added training for faculty (e.g., to conduct mock interviews, review a CV, or serve as a reference) will be needed.

**Recommendation:** All existing and future fellowship, internship, and assistantship experiences, which occur outside of the formal program of study, need to be framed within the larger career development process.

**Recommendation:** The university needs to provide more training related to dissemination, especially writing-for-publication. While the working group did not have specific strategies, leveraging the information in the New Scholars Workshops into earlier places in the timeline (e.g., building a dedicated course, implementing a module in the Dissertation Completion course, and/or returning some of this content back into academic residencies) would seem to be indicated.

## Communication and Collaboration

The working group saw two phenomena that partially explain abovementioned recommendations around content management. Many individuals and units feel a responsibility for students' success and for doing delivering these services effectively. But, those individuals/units are not always in touch with what others are doing or the reasons for it, and efforts are not always strategic.

**Recommendation:** Put an organizational structure in place to keep the mid-level administrators/managers of services in better contact with each other and to communicate key changes and initiatives. This collaboration group could also coordinate efforts, help sort through the myriad of existing services, and be responsible for communications with faculty who must also negotiate the changing expectations for students.

**Recommendation:** Because presenting problems are often not the actual problem, and students really do not care about the source of the support, the university should examine ways for more cross-marketing and cross-training of frontline support staff to create effective interventions and make appropriate referrals when necessary. Even the experienced members of this working group were surprised to learn of some efforts in other units during these discussions.

A second area related to communication concerns the students themselves. The working group feels that students do not have enough "tell my story" opportunities across the timeline, especially verbal experiences that support their success in the career domain.

**Recommendation:** Where feasible, continue to build opportunities for students to discuss their professional plans and research goals verbally, perhaps tied to development of the PDP. More real-time interaction is needed, whether face-to-face or virtually.

## Assessment and Accountability

The phrase "they don't know what they don't know" was used in some way in nearly all the working group meetings. Often, the working group's discussion was not about whether a program or service was needed to get a student ready, but rather, concerned strategies to help students (and faculty) to understand when they are underprepared so that they can be directed to the appropriate resource. A just-in-time intervention is relatively useless if students do not understand the need for it.

> **Recommendation:** Consider making "get ready for your degree" experiences part of the enrollment process to help prospects stay engaged from reserve to enrollment, which can be as long as 1.5 years.

Finally, students should be taught to self-assess their readiness and then to take appropriate measures, thereby developing the independent functioning and self-reliance expected of a steward. Therefore, the working group recommends instituting two key interactive readiness self-checks for students, similar to existing models (e.g., Ivanitskaya, Laus, & Casey, 2005). In both instances, a self-identified deficit would provide an opportunity to direct students to a specific resource that would help them address it, thus fostering increased accountability and scholarly independence.

> **Recommendation:** The first self-check was discussed as "day one readiness": basic skills they need when they come in the door that set the stage for future success. This type of self-check could fit within current efforts to revamp and realign the various new-student orientations or could be incorporated in a revised Foundations course strategy. It also aligns with current discussions of an initial writing assessment strategy.

> **Recommendation.** The second assessment, for capstone readiness, should occur prior to admission to candidacy, similar in intent to the comprehensive exam used at other universities but without the high-stakes aspects (Baker & Pifer, 2011). This experience might fit well in existing prospectus courses and could give students and committees a strategy for heading off problems before the proposal development process begins in earnest.

# Summary

The goal of doctoral education is not to produce "smarter smart people." Rather, the experience is designed to be transformative in a way that students have very likely not yet experienced. The Carnegie Foundation on Teaching and Learning (Walker et al., 2009) provided a view of the end result of this transformation by invoking the metaphor of stewardship. In turn, a doctorate-granting university is responsible for assuring this transition from dependence to independence by providing scaffolded challenges and necessary supports along the journey to becoming a steward. Framed as readiness, this working group examined how these supports are currently being implemented at Walden and tried to identify places where those strategies can be improved and augmented.

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# Appendix A: Existing Services

Below is a list of programs and services, large and small, that support the readiness of students moving through different phases in the capstone process. It is by no means exhaustive and does not reflect current initiatives.

**Admission/Enrollment**
- Consultive Student Advising (CSA) approach
  - Coaching and feedback
  - Developing an understanding of prospects' goals
  - Making a personalized recommendation
- Business group directors and acquisition and engagement managers
- Regular meetings with college subject matter experts (SMEs) and leaders
- Alumni-dedicated enrollment team

**New Student**
- Foundation courses
- First academic residency
- Customer Care Team and Academic Skills Center (ASC) support
- Doctoral Writing Assessment
- New Student Orientation / Student Readiness Orientation / Successful Start webinar
  - Currently in review and revision

**Continuing Student**
- Walden Library
  - Countless standalone webinars and online training/support
  - Dedicated library staff
- Academic residencies, aligned with stage in the process
- Center for Research Quality (CRQ)
  - Research courses
  - Doctoral Orientation to the Capstone (DOC)
- Customer Care Team and ASC support
- Walden Writing Center
  - Writing instructors/tutors
  - Dissertation editors
  - Countless webinars and resources
  - Guides and templates for all manner of assignments and capstones

**Doctoral Candidate**
- Academic residencies
- CRQ
  - Checklists and rubrics
  - *My*DR
  - Methodology support

- o   Research resources (webinars, data sources, etc.)
  - o   Ethics reviews (Institutional Review Board [IRB])
- Supervisory committee
  - o   Chair, member, university research reviewer (URR)
- Student support services
  - o   CAEX Internship course

**Graduate**
- Alumni services
  - o   Walden LinkedIn group
- Career Services (throughout the timeline)
  - o   Career advising/coaching
  - o   Webinars, videos, and website resources
  - o   Optimal Resume
- Library and Writing Center
  - o   Publication resources and materials
- CRQ
  - o   New Scholars Workshops