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Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained: Intellectual Risk Taking and Transition in a First-Year Doctoral Cohort

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Pursuing a doctorate poses myriad challenges and intellectual risks to students (Austin, 2003; Golde, 2000; Twale & Kochan, 2000); however, risk is believed to be the way to progress, innovation, and creativity (Kehrer, 1989). Professionals will be expected to deal with risks encountered on their jobs, yet the topic has received limited coverage in the higher education literature (Stein & Short, 2001; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001; Zhang & Strange, 1992). If we expect leaders to undertake the risks associated with systemic change and reform, we must first understand risk-taking behavior and the role it plays in the lives of students preparing to be those leaders. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how an entering cohort of students dealt with risk and intellectual risk-taking behavior both as individuals and as a group in their first year of a doctoral program. Insights from this group not only may inform entering doctoral students but also students entering all phases of college in terms of their ability to address risk and take risks.

Theoretical Framework

Conceptualizing the Socialization Process

If new members are to become effective in a particular culture, they must internalize expected norms and behaviors (Tierney, 1997). According to Clark (1972), challenging the normative expectations inherent in a prevailing organizational culture entails risk in and of itself, especially if one is to make a successful transition. Risk means thinking differently, "out of the box" and critically, in order to challenge prevailing norms and sentiments, and to seek change and encounter uncertainty (Kehrer, 1989). Weidman, Twale, and Stein's (2001) model of professional socialization, subtitled "a perilous passage," implied that there is risk inherent in the decision to enter graduate school. This risk is multiplied by the cumulative experiences surmounted as one moves through a program to the dissertation defense and into professional practice. Intellectual risk taking refers to a deeper level of risk associated specifically with learning, as opposed to everyday mundane risks performed. It involves stretching beyond boundaries and exposing one's thoughts and feelings. This can include expressions about the meaning of concepts, opinions about controversial issues, and determinations of what has value.

Risk taking can be minimized in several ways as evidenced in Holland's (1966)

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structural-interactive theory of career choice. Smart, Feldman, and Ethington (2000) asserted that if personal career selection aligns with student personality and ability, then over time, greater congruence occurs. When graduate student behavior is congruent with cultural and faculty expectations, the student will likely experience a smoother transition to the program, thus minimizing risk.

In a qualitative study, Golde (2000) traced the paths of 68 doctoral students who chose not to persist in a doctoral program. She found a relationship in the two parallel roles they were playing, that is, the role of student and the role of professional. Performing the student role meant a greater likelihood of integrating into the academic culture. However, that choice might have been incongruent with all other roles the student had to play. Typically, entering students were more likely than experienced students to feel this incongruence, thus increasing the risks encountered. Gradual exposure to the environment, faculty, and peers rendered greater integration into the culture. Those who failed to integrate perpetuated their isolation and risked disengagement; however, the level of comfort tended to increase the longer the student stayed in the program. Ultimately, those who remained would incorporate expected values and norms, and invest in and commit to their profession (Antony, 2002; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

Conceptualizing Risk and Risk Taking

Antony (2002) contended that the personal values of entering students might be incongruent with values espoused by the professional field, thereby fueling cognitive dissonance, emotional distress, and eventual failure. Furthermore, Antony advised that persons who are marginal, who pose alternative viewpoints, and who challenge normative expectations are precisely the intellectual risk takers who will advance professional fields of study beyond their current boundaries. While risks may result in failure, it is the only way to explore other possibilities and move beyond the present.

Individually, risk is situational, subjective in nature, and laden with value judgment (Brehmer & Sahlin, 1994; Kehrer, 1989), thereby rendering risk-taking behavior proportional to expected returns (Rescher, 1983; Viscusi, 1992). Because knowledge acquisition relates to risk taking, more information about entering a graduate program, for instance, renders students better able to calculate risk and maintain some level of perceived control over their choice (Kehrer). While knowing all the risks may not be possible, insight into the consequences of some risky actions can prove helpful in modifying subsequent behavior. Students' personal and professional growth evolves, in part, through the ways in which they modify their behavior. In other words, the more students are involved, the more likely they may be to take risks—resulting in potentially greater momentum in their transition from entrance to professional development (Viscusi).

Collectively, risk takers beget risk takers. Venturing into the unknown is often undertaken with the help or assistance of others (Kehrer, 1989). Young (1991) believed that teachers should model risk-taking behavior because their behavior encourages their students to take more risks. When risk is assumed by the group or the group involves

itself in risk-taking activities, it may affect how individual members of the group take individual risks (Rescher, 1983). Fear, risk, and uncertainty associated with entering a graduate program may be lessened as individual students derive strength from a cohort group, for instance. Group strength inspires boldness as behavioral consequences are shared by the group. Once oriented, students will likely encourage greater risk knowing that the cohort tolerates and sometimes supports their risk-taking behaviors (Kehrer).

The authors posed the following research questions: (a) How does a first-year doctoral student cohort describe risk and risk taking? (b) How do members engage in individual and group intellectual risk-taking behavior? and (c) What implications does this have for students entering college at any level in terms of risk and risk-taking behavior?

Method

Wanting to discover and reveal the potential meaning of risk and intellectual risk-taking behavior among participants in a doctoral program, the researchers studied a first-year cohort of educational leadership students at a private, research university. Qualitative research methods were used to discover and understand participants' realities and the meaning of certain phenomena in their lives (Newman, Ridenour, Newman, & DeMarco, 2002). This approach was practical for the topic of risk and intellectual risk taking because meaning could be derived both through the graduate students' own perspectives and lived experiences, and through the researchers' interpretation of that meaning processed through their own particular lenses (Merchant & Willis, 2001). Students' entering status rendered them as marginal to the system and, thus, vulnerable. Their placement in a cohort allowed for the study of group risk-taking behavior.

To gather empirical material, the researchers used a focus group approach. Focus group interviewing proved to be a powerful research tool, in that the posed questions uncovered how a group of individuals who share similar experiences reflected on and made sense of intellectual risk taking upon entering graduate school (Morgan, 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). While individual interviews may have been revealing, the focus group setting allowed the exploration of the premise that higher levels of individual risk taking could influence group risk taking and test the strength of the cohort as a contributory factor (Kehrer, 1989; Rescher, 1983). As passive researchers, we allowed individuals to "spark [responses] off of one another" and natural unencumbered flow lent validity to the trustworthiness of their words (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 140).

Because the researchers were intimately involved in both teaching and administering the Ph.D. program and because each had worked with the participants, an "outsider" was enlisted to moderate the student focus group (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This faculty colleague was familiar with the Ph.D. program, but unfamiliar with the students, thereby minimizing bias and allowing her to evoke as much response as possible unrelated to prior personal relationships. She had experience conducting focus groups, and her expertise added credibility to the resulting transcripts.

Participants

At the time of the study, Ph.D. students in educational leadership entered as a cohort, consisting usually of eight to twelve students. Beginning in the fall, students enrolled in two courses together for three consecutive semesters, after which they branched out into their individual programs followed by two semesters of residency, comprehensive examinations, and the dissertation phase.

All eight members of the first-year cohort participated including graduate assistants and part-time graduate students working full time as professionals in the surrounding school districts or as teachers and administrators in nearby colleges and universities. Participants were 1 male and 7 female students, which included 2 African-Americans, 1 international student, 1 student with a disability, and 6 white students. The largest proportion were American, white, and female. We also invited Ph.D. faculty to a separate focus group to discuss their interpretation of risk and risk taking. Of the 11 faculty eligible to participate, 4 white male faculty participated.

The student focus group conversation was audio taped in late spring 2001 and lasted approximately 2 hours while the faculty focus group lasted 1 hour. This time frame allowed students to be together through 7 months and at least four classes. Seated around a conference table with place card pseudonyms, students' conversation began with the primary probe: "What does risk taking mean to you?" The moderator expanded the discussion to include questions on individual and group risk-taking opportunities as well as an open dialogue on how faculty and the program structure encouraged and supported risk-taking behavior. While not rigidly adhering to the prepared set of questions at her disposal, the moderator served to keep the discussion on track. She attended closely to the interpersonal dynamics throughout each session, intervening unobtrusively from time to time to make sure that each participant contributed as fully as possible and as much as was desired (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). A Ph.D. graduate assistant who was not a research participant took notes during the student session and transcribed the audiotapes. Faculty members responded to similar questions posed by one of the researchers in their focus group session.

Data Analysis

The researchers used a grounded theory strategy in analyzing the transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Janesick, 1998). Independently, the researchers, moderator, and transcriber read all transcripts through, holistically. During a second reading, an open coding process was used, highlighting the key words on each page of text as the basic "units of meaning," growing increasingly aware of periodic emotionality in some voices. Clearly, "feelings" came through the text (Gilbert, 2001). During a second coding sweep through the transcripts, the researchers focused more on staying with the original language of the participants as much as possible, and combining codes into preliminary categories. Interpreting domains of meaning and major themes constituted the third phase of the analysis. At this time, a lengthy debriefing session was held, during which

the researchers discussed their individual interpretations and together drew conclusions about the meaning of risk and intellectual risk taking in these first year doctoral students.

Results

The new doctoral students revealed many instances of "all or nothing" thinking during their conversation. The major themes constructed from the transcripts included, first, that risk was highly *personal* and, second, that risks were *inherent* in being a Ph.D. student. From a third theme, it was clear that the cohort structure of the Ph.D. program could ameliorate some risks, that is, *negotiating* risk was possible, individually and especially as a group, an insight not lost on these relatively new students.

Risk Is Personal

Students expressed the very personal nature of risk and discussed it as part of daily life, with mostly negative affect. Within their language, they mentioned the uncertainty and unpredictability that feelings of risk evoked. For one student, risk meant the vulnerability of extending "boundaries, based on my comfort zone" and the perception of what will result as a consequence of risk taking. Students speculated about the various risks inherent in graduate study, such as moving "outside their boundaries" which would "open them to criticism," "vulnerability," "failure," and "realizing that loss is possible." One student speculated that what may not seem risky now "can turn into a risk at any point in time," and that, as a cohort member pointed out, would affect them "psychologically or emotionally."

Concerned about vulnerability in academic performance, one student said, "It's a blow to the ego, to your self-confidence…a big risk to your whole self-esteem," if one is judged incapable. Another admitted, if "I have to ask for help, that's a risk, but I'm feeling more comfortable about taking this risk." Self-assessment manifested itself in key academic ways. One student said, "exposing your knowledge base…or lack thereof…gives you the idea that you belong in this group…you're not alone." One student realized that "to come to the table with the assumption that we all know the same things is wrong." Revealing unfamiliarity with technology was a risk for some, as was doing assignments differently than other cohort members and wondering which ones the instructors praised. In fact, one student remained unsure of course expectations, saying "that's when you begin to concern yourself."

Opening oneself to outside criticisms and potential failure became the core of risk as did negative feelings and harmful images. While they agreed that entering the program was risky, one person queried, "If I leave the program what will people think of me; what will I think of myself?"

Contrary to the fear and uncertainty that risk entailed, appealing aspects of risk emanated from its "spontaneity," "creativity," and "out-of-the-box thinking," according to one student. Ambiguity overshadowed individual risk taking, as one student said it

was "real spontaneous…if I feel very strongly about something," while another deemed individual risk to occur "because on the one hand we are students and on the other we are colleagues…working administrators, teachers." One student implied that risk was both a personal and collective phenomenon:

> Is it not important to differentiate our personal risks from collective risks of the group? And in the relationship we have with the faculty, I think it is our responsibility individually to reflect our personal feelings in this. But at the same time I sense it is also important that the group bring together a collection of risks, which we share.

Inherent Risks of Being a Doctoral Student

Individual reflections. Students described entry into the doctoral program in terms of disengagement from family, friends, and work. One student dealt with unpredictability in that the rest of one's life "is on hold" while wondering "what [jobs] will be there 3 or 4 years from now." Another added, "by the time I finish, assuming I stick it out, I am going to be in my late 50s; who is going to hire me?…*Then* there's the financial risk because this is costing me a ton of money and it is all in loans." Because of the time spent studying for graduate classes, one student felt she was bypassing immediate job opportunities, which she perceived as risky.

Possible failure in the Ph.D. program risked a diminishment of self-esteem and professional reputation. The last risk, potential failure, might seem overblown at first glance. It may well be that because these were first-year students, not all felt sufficiently secure in being able to complete the degree. As a matter of fact, one student suggested that "requiring prerequisites would lessen the risk" of being a Ph.D. student.

Once admitted, Ph.D. students found that expressing one's opinion in classes or being unprepared was risky. "Challenging professors" in class proved even riskier. One student suggested that "missing a week of class" or "taking a vacation" was risky. Another student offered that "not reading an assignment" was a risk. One student felt a sense of risk in not knowing professors' expectations. She might have been describing a feeling of vulnerability rather than active risk taking, however. Another student explained that risk involved "not doing the work or not doing it on time."

One student discussed the risk that came from not knowing faculty reaction to their work. Some students perceived faculty support to be as prevalent as peer support, but they had limited exposure to faculty at this point. One student realized, "you are not right unless you get some kind of confirmation from others who are experienced and have the knowledge." She acknowledged that the faculty members who provided support were taking similar risks to those the students took.

Risk grew as students revealed their writing to others, a practice in the Ph.D. program both from student to student and student to faculty. Similarly, students hinted at risk when valuing differences, not just differences of thought and ideas, but also cultural differences. The cohort acknowledged diversity as a strength that challenged students in terms of "seeing how different minds handle things and different experiences make a topic different from different lenses."

Risk, to these first-year students, came mostly from the prospect of the far-off dissertation. Students expressed the fact that the "feasibility of one's topic" was not assured early on. Being unfamiliar with faculty and the expectations for the dissertation process at this point in the program, they felt some ensuing risk in thinking ahead to their own research. Lack of procedural knowledge at this time in their program exacerbated the risk for them because completion of the degree hinged on the dissertation defense.

Collective Perceptions. In their discussion of group risk taking, students echoed words like, "belonging," "empowered," "supportive," "finding out who has what strengths in the group," and "surrounding the ones who have a problem." This cohort characterized itself as being friends, feeling comfortable, being cohesive, and "giving a collective effort," which they felt "made people in the group take more risks." One student offered, "We have a really diverse group which I think is great just because we are around each other for this period of time. So I think that's always a risk this group takes in valuing differences beyond what we think." Articulating ideas of diversity seemed the intent here, but the logic was missing. If diversity is "great" and differences are "valued," where is there a risk?

One student suggested that "the group bring together a collection of risks, which [they] share" with the faculty, so the cohort can "learn as part of that experience to manage those risks." Interacting with faculty, devising a research direction, and choosing a committee increased the risk level, thought one student, in saying, "What if you get shot down or what if little faculty support for that topic existed." But another student countered that faculty "seem to experience similar risks…[and] are able to share what they have experienced and relate it to you," indicating that support and empathy were available.

Developing Ways of Negotiating Risk

Individual Negotiations. The third major theme was constructed as students' ways of negotiating the program. Strategies for reducing risk emerged in their discourse. Their language suggested that mobilizing not only one's personal resources but also using group dynamics both helped to manage risk. Students used phrases such as "cushioned risk," "assessed risk," "formatted risk taking," and "expected method of risk taking" during the conversation. The meanings of these phrases suggested that students constructed risk in specific ways. Students regarded programmatic support for risk as "regulated" and "formulated" in that "these are the avenues that are acceptable for academic risk; you should start taking those risks." Another used the term "cushioned risk" because it is expected and beneficial, supported by faculty, and "a necessary risk for the program." Another student acknowledged that the program "broadened the view of educational leader…in ways other than administration," indicating their current knowledge of the doctoral program differed from their initial perceptions.

Perhaps student descriptions of risk involved multiple ways of "calculating" risk. In other words, if risk should be "cushioned," obviously some sort of buffer surrounded the risk, making it less costly or "less risky." Using a phrase such as "expected risk taking"

added fuzziness and possibly even contradiction. "Uncertainty" became one meaning associated with risk that was repeated. Coupling the word "risk," then, with the word "expected" diminished and perhaps neutralized it, as one student's remarks revealed when she said, "Risk isn't risk if it's built in."

Further evidence of negotiating the risks students felt individually surfaced in their language. In discussing risks of the Ph.D. program experience, students were not totally susceptible to the threats risk entailed. For example, one student hinted that control was possible because one "manages cost-benefits." Gains in knowledge as a Ph.D. student were "worth" the risk, a benefit that was "worth" the cost. Perhaps, on the one hand, these phrases embodied some modicum of "control," the antithesis of risk. On the other hand, the meaning suggested that, at least, one might be able to calculate the risk (the difference between cost and benefit). Given the student naivety, which was proclaimed of *all* of the facets of the Ph.D. program at this point, any feelings of control may have been idealistic or unrealistic.

Collective Negotiations. Students discussed the cohort structure of the program as a possible foundation needed to address risk. They described their cohort as "a collective," and one that alleviated risk for its members. Belonging to the group helped the students "feel that you're not alone." One student said, "We know who we can kind of defer to [to] help pull the group through." Another student suggested that the cohesiveness of the group might be due to the fact that it was mostly female. She said, "I don't know if it's gender or just the chemistry of the group." Use of e-mail encouraged growing friendships within the cohort, solidifying the group and lessening the feeling of risk.

As this cohort group gradually bonded together, they supported one another while establishing a comfort zone in which to "ask for help" as well as challenge others' thoughts and ideas. One said, "We're more willing to share personal news and feelings [that] you may not share with anyone else…because the group has come together and knows that it's okay in letting this part of myself be known." Another student added, "I am able to relate to other members of the cohort…. They help me remove some of my 'unknowns' to minimize my personal risk." However, another added, "Engagement with one another is more important than the assignment." One summarized, "It never gets personal despite our disagreements of opinion."

Negotiating the program also included assessing both individual and group risks and the power of the cohort itself. According to one student, each student faced risks but there were group risks as well. Contrary to the risks the group felt as a collective, the group served to ameliorate risks to individuals. The group faced risk and the group diluted risk. One student clarified, "When the whole group comes together and the group coherence is an element that mitigates that particular risk …when we all talk together." Referring to members of her cohort, one student shared that "they help me remove some of my 'unknowns' to minimize my personal risk."

Another student revealed ambiguity about the group's collective spirit. At the beginning of one remark she suggested that the supportive cohesiveness of the group lessened the risk of expressing personal feelings: "We're more willing to share personal news and feelings you may not share with anyone else…because the group has come

together and know[s] that it's okay in letting this part of myself be known." By the time she reached the end of the same remark, however, she described the risk of providing feedback on written papers to others in her cohort:

> Will this person think my comments are acceptable, will this person see them as a benefit to them or think that they weren't useful at all? So there's a risk in letting your feelings, your thoughts, really be known about someone else's writing.

She had, in one remark, simultaneously sounded safe and secure in revealing herself to the others and, yet, was uncertain about that very security. Such ambiguous feelings were probably natural during the first year in the program as the cohort began to coalesce.

The group negotiated risk as a collective. A student described an assignment and how the group "managed" it: "There was an assignment that we had from one faculty member that was very vague [and] unspecified, and we as a group decided no one would write more than three pages. And the group determined that that would be the standard. And we had to all feel comfortable that everyone would agree to that. And we all did."

This event happened early in their first term, suggesting that perhaps perceiving big risks (an unspecified assignment by an as yet unknown professor) triggered risk management by the group rather than by individuals, each of whom was not yet fully known to the others. The students evoked the emotion of "not feeling alone" as well. Clearly, early in their program, risk management strategies seemed designed to respond to power, to decrease uncertainty, and to increase the group's sense of comfort. Comfort in taking individual risks came later.

Over time, group members identified the strengths and weaknesses of group members—another strategy in negotiating risk. For example, risk management by the group involved what one student described as "finding out who has what strengths in the group. And so when different assignments or different knowledge come up we know who we can kind of defer [to] to help pull the group through," a quote mentioned earlier to illustrate the cohort dynamic.

Negotiating with Faculty. Taking advantage of opportunities to negotiate with faculty members was a strategy to ameliorate risk. The word "community" was used by one student who somewhat dramatically proposed that the faculty who were sympathetic to their professional work lives helped develop "a community among the cohort, the engagement with one another is much more important than…the assignment." Such faculty members were characterized as "flexible," "open to engagement," and "willing to listen." She suggested that a faculty member would subordinate academic tasks to promote the sense of community. While it is not known if professors did sacrifice academic assignments to build group cohesion, this student believed that faculty placed a strong priority on the community ethos. The following quotation remained somewhat cryptic and unclear: "The faculty's view of those collective risks is less than the collective view of the cohort." Regardless of its potentially more substantive intent, the meaning definitely dichotomized the faculty and student perspectives.

Interestingly, among these first-year students, one negotiating strategy flew in the face of faculty beliefs and values. One student suggested that students "shouldn't take a

big risk and study a topic where there hasn't been a lot of research done." Another student, encouraged by a faculty member countered, "Let your knowledge go outside the domain of [the university] and out into the wider spectrum…[because if you]…believe your ideas are good here, why don't you share them with the rest of the educational community?" The student added, "I appreciate that someone thinks that that's a good risk to take." Another student realized that "there have to be more risks that you have to be willing to take if you're going to succeed." From faculty members' focus group comments, this approach is the exact opposite of what faculty members want. The faculty dialogue bemoaned the fact that students generally fail to take on sophisticated theory-building studies. The faculty members' comments even hinted that perhaps students were not capable of that high level of scholarship. These student remarks might suggest that the rigor such studies require is not the barrier. Indeed, the barrier might be risk aversion.

Discussion

First-Year Doctoral Cohort Describes Risk and Risk Taking

The data reveal pure speculation about personal success in the first doctoral year, coupled with the apprehensions of self-disclosure that entering students face with other individuals and in a group. First-year students cannot reach that point until they are further immersed in the academic culture (Golde, 2000). Golde believed students entering graduate schools are more likely to feel incongruity despite the fact they have already received one or two college degrees. The graduate socialization process still seems to manifest itself in linear ways such that an entering cohort has to relearn the normative behaviors and expectations for this new academic program, drawing little from their previous degree programs. They cannot challenge anything they have yet to grasp because aspects of the doctoral program still remain shrouded in mystery (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). This is especially true for part-timers who work outside academia and have not had opportunities to mingle formally and informally with Ph.D. faculty. These students express feelings of uncertainty that are ameliorated somewhat throughout cohort identity and group support. But a "blind-leading-the-blind" situation still seems to prevail, however much it draws them together as a group.

Students characterize risk from personal and professional perspectives as they offer few positive and many negative images. They assume risk by giving up tangibles like jobs, time, family, and a social life to face risks associated with entering a doctoral program, so it becomes a double-edge sword (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004).

Faculty members express how they invite risk by exposing their own knowledge and posing challenges to students, knowing *that* is the basis for student learning. They balance traditional lecture and discussion with more risky activities such as critique and reflection. Unbeknownst to the each other, both faculty and students are taking risks yet neither group fully realizes the total extent of the risk calculations to the other. This may be difficult as education itself is a culturally conservative profession that rewards conforming rather than bold behaviors. For this doctoral group, risk taking often seemed

imbued with decidedly negative meanings and perhaps was avoided especially in a conservative doctoral program. As Young (1991) suggested, if teachers are not modeling risk, students are not seeing it. Given that more students in this study were female and the faculty was male, the role of gender posed an additional postulate about risk assumption (Antony, 2002; Tierney, 1997; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001) and should be studied further (see also Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004).

Engaging in Individual and Group Intellectual Risk Taking Behavior

Strong feelings of affiliation with the group were present among these students. They also recognized a need to stay together so the stronger could nurture the weaker members; thus, there may be survival through maintained unity. Their ability to manage risk through cohort strength and support was, however, complicated by their inability as first-year entrants to comprehend much of the politics and dynamics of the academic culture, the department, and the professorate (Golde, 2000; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Ponticell, 2000; Zhang & Strange, 1992). These first-year students maintained a level of group solidarity that shielded members who invoked risk to themselves or the group. Not all attempts were made in the best interest of the student, however. Their marginality in the program, coupled with their daily presence in another culture [public school, another university], placed them at greater risk (Anthony, 2002; Golde, 2000; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Realizing that the power of the faculty outweighed the power of the cohort was revealing to students individually, despite the safety inherent in group risk (Kehrer, 1989). Ironically, minimizing risk may need to be achieved, but that defeats the purpose of preparing leaders to be risk takers. Further study needs to introduce innovative strategies that entail risk and needs to evaluate them for effectiveness in terms of the challenges posed.

After students are introduced to one another through the cohort, faculty may feel their work is done. Furthermore, faculty may vary in their enthusiasm for the cohort structure. In fact, about 20% of the over 200 faculty respondents to the Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, and Norris (2000) national survey of educational administration programs expressed the negative consequences of cohorts for faculty. Student cohorts can create challenges to faculty authority. Groups of students, they reported, became difficult to manage, established expectations counter to those of faculty, and threatened weaker faculty members. Ironically, students in this study *wanted* faculty to minimize their risk. Students wanted them to ensure their success in the program in exchange, perhaps, for all they have relinquished to be doctoral students (see Cockrell, Caplow, & Donaldson, 2000). Faculty encouragement of risk is less evident among these newer students but could increase with time. Clearer use of assigned risk-taking opportunities for students may be the answer, but faculty's own fear of risk taking may prevent them. Researchers need to examine the cohort as a component of risk taking (Golde, 2000).

Students move from seeing life as a solitary risk to viewing risk as manageable because it is absorbed in the cohort culture (Ponticell, 2000; Zhang & Strange, 1992). While the cohort proves a powerful force in risk management for this group (Norris &

Barnett, 1996; Kehrer, 1989), these students also want faculty affirmation of their work and ideas. This is critical as the cohort will not remain intact up to the time students complete the program. The risks will change but so will students' knowledge of degree expectations. The development of a strong first-year cohort that buffers risk may affect the dynamics between faculty and student because of how it challenges the traditional power structure (Palmer, 1987). Students and faculty each take risks but not without discomfort; that is, they each want control over the situation but fear the consequences they cannot always calculate beforehand. Further study might explore the natural creative tension between faculty and students and how risk is addressed by cohort structures and with what consequences. Furthermore, study is needed to determine the effect of efforts to prepare students for individual risk taking and how group risk taking adds or detracts from that.

Implications of Risk and Risk Taking for Entering Students

Given the limitations of a sample size from one doctoral program, additional study is warranted in similar programs using quantitative as well as qualitative methods. Despite this limitation, the data imply the need to assist students in dealing with risk when they enter their graduate program. Faculty might begin to debunk the myths, raise the veil, and demystify the academic culture (see Senge, 1990), helping to ease the tension associated with students' marginal position (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Opening dialogue with students and providing them with a clearer understanding of what is expected could aid in risk management as a way to avoid subsequent disengagement. The authors suggest orientation programs, frequent symposia, conversation sessions with faculty, informal and formal luncheons, regular advising sessions, updated websites, e-mail communication, and newsletters. Students might benefit from writing personal growth plans to share with fellow students and faculty. Students should be encouraged to reflect upon the risks they took through reflective class assignments, cognitive maps, and critical thinking exercises. In this way, they can chart their own socialization process and manage risk more effectively (Antony, 2002; Tierney, 1997).

Effective mentoring is another means by which students bridging this transition to graduate school address risk. Students need to see examples of faculty modeling risk taking in their own professional development because faculty can offer support and affirmation to students, instilling trust and faith (Golde, 2001; Kehrer, 1989; Ponticell, 2002; Young, 1991). Full-time students might be better able to see faculty taking risks in their teaching, research, and service roles. Constructive challenges in class or coursework or through action research projects posed to students under faculty tutelage can be helpful to them. Part-time students need similar opportunities such as attending conferences and copresenting with faculty or co-consulting with them on local projects. Tierney (1997) believes that faculty support risk taking if they allow their programs to evolve or if they plan for change rather than be reactive to change. Periodic program evaluations, self-studies, consultations, and curriculum revisions that involve students provide additional opportunities to see risk in action in academia and learn how faculty

deal with it.

This article has touched on the power of the cohort group. While there is evidence that cohorts are valuable tools for student growth and support (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Norris & Barnett, 1994), there also are reasons for further studying cohort risk taking. This study supports Rescher's (1983) claim that the cohort group's assumption of risk could skew or have varying consequences for an individual member's risky behavior. Caution is warranted in that instances of groupthink may arise out of certain cohort groupings and may prove counterproductive to healthy risk-taking activity (Janis, 1982). Opportunities for individual projects, team work, and faculty/student interaction can balance the cohort effect and mirror more closely what students will encounter later in their program and following graduation. This qualitative study sheds light on the elements of risk and intellectual risk-taking behavior in student choice decisions, cohort formation, and mentoring. Kehrer (1989) reminds us that risk is liberating, as it is a logical way to move beyond where we presently stand. If nothing is ventured, nothing is likely to be gained.

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