


COMMENTARY

Reflections on creating and maintaining supportive graduate program culture online: Lessons learned from a top-ranked doctoral program

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We agree with Kraiger et al. (2022) that creating and maintaining a strong and positive culture (p. X) is a primary challenge for developing and maintaining high-quality online industrial-organizational (I-O) graduate programs, especially doctoral programs. To elaborate on this topic and provide initial insights into best practices, we offer an analysis of our experience in translating our program culture, which ranked at the top for culture in a recent survey of I-O graduate programs (Roman et al., 2018), to an online setting in response to the global pandemic. The coauthor reflections represent multiple perspectives, including that of the doctoral program coordinator who has a 30-year span of experience and knowledge regarding the evolution of the program's culture, a senior doctoral student who experienced the program entirely in-person for 4 years prior to online conditions, and a graduate student who entered the program under strictly online conditions. Our analysis is also informed by discussions with I-O faculty members and interviews with students who joined the program online in 2020 and 2021.

What is program culture?

I-O graduate program culture has been described in terms of atmosphere and norms, interactions and relationships among students, and relationships between professors and students (Kraiger & Abalos, 2004; Roman et al., 2018). Reflecting on the history of our program, building a collaborative and supportive culture has been an intentional strategic decision by I-O faculty requiring continuous commitment and structural support (e.g., equal funding and resources across students, rewards for collaborative research and publications). The program culture has been reinforced by students who adopt its norms and internalize its values, as observed in camaraderie among students that encourages peer learning and the accomplishment of milestones as well as support in dealing with the demands of graduate school. In addition to academic and career-related support, students have provided essential social support for one another, which helps them navigate the various personal demands and unforeseen obstacles encountered in the pathway to obtaining a doctorate.

Reflecting on the maintenance of program culture generally and during the online transition, three mechanisms stand out as essential: recruitment and selection, onboarding, and student relationships. Each is discussed below from faculty and student perspectives.

Online recruitment and selection

Faculty perspective

Attracting and admitting students who resonate with a supportive and collaborative culture is critical to its maintenance. “Meet and Greet Day” (i.e., the campus visit to which top applicants are invited prior to final selection decisions) communicates supportive and collaborative culture in several respects, starting with the name, which accurately reflects the tone of the event. At the time of invitation and throughout the day, applicants are encouraged to think of it as an opportunity for mutual information gathering in the interest of program and personal decisions that will yield the best person–environment fit. Replicating important aspects of Meet and Greet Day online via Zoom video meetings worked remarkably well. Faculty and current students collaborated in planning and hosting the event. Applicants were able to have the typical individual and group meetings with faculty members to explore mutual research interests and fit with prospective advisors and labs. Applicants and current students were also able to spend significant time interacting, and current students offered their email addresses to prospective students so they could reach out with any program-related questions. Additionally, hosting the event online was less expensive and less labor intensive for faculty and current students as well as prospective students, which made it possible to include a bigger pool of finalists. As usual, faculty made individual admissions decisions with input from their peers and current students. Zoom interactions were as revealing as in-person interactions for assessing applicants’ fit with the program culture.

Student perspective

Senior students, having been strongly influenced by their observations of an authentic, prosocial, and collaborative program culture during their own in-person Meet and Greet Day experiences, were invested in translating that experience to an online setting. Having experienced the value of Meet and Greet Day as a tool for selecting applicants who contributed to positive program culture was also motivating. For first-year students who entered the program online, hosting Meet and Greet Day marked an important transition from newcomer to insider, providing an opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences as program “experts.” Additionally, working with senior students to create presentations and activities for online applicants helped develop relationships and informal mentoring across labs. The processes of hosting Meet and Greet Day led students to encourage one another to enact espoused program prosocial values.

Students who were recruited via Meet and Greet Day online cite it as important in conveying the program culture and an influential factor in their decision to join the program. Host students’ engagement in formal and informal discussions with perspective students and organic interactions with each other led applicants to perceive themselves as seen and valued while highlighting the friendships that exist within the program. Subtle cues, such as hearing current students refer to faculty by first name, signaled the friendly and collaborative nature of the program. Even online, Meet and Greet Day left applicants feeling welcomed and supported by faculty and current students.

Remote onboarding

Faculty perspective

The socialization of students into the program online required a seemingly paradoxical combination of greater formality and informality. For instance, a 2-semester professional development course was created to formalize onboarding and reinforce elements of culture new students would normally absorb through informal in-person interactions with faculty, more senior students, and alumni in individual and group settings. Conducted entirely via Zoom, with additional coordination and collaboration via email, synchronous collaboration in online platforms, and feedback via

email and comments in electronic documents, the course created a low-stakes space for “checking in” and was intended to facilitate candid conversations about the adjustment to graduate school and promote bonding among new students. Another goal of the course was to serve as a platform for training and modeling behaviors that contribute to graduate school and professional success (e.g., time management, building a regular writing routine, presentation skills, networking, etc.), which had previously been the responsibility of individual faculty mentors and senior students in their labs. From a faculty perspective, the course was successful in conveying the program culture and demonstrated, perhaps better and more concretely than informal methods, the relevance and value of senior students and alumni in socializing new students as doctoral candidates and future I-O professionals.

Student perspective

For online first-year students, the mere provision of the professional development course conveyed clear program investment in their well-being and success. The opportunity for students to develop relationships with the program director, faculty, senior students, and alumni highlighted the supportive culture and prosocial norms that extended beyond graduation. Moreover, the course provided a space in which students felt safe having sensitive conversations that would have been very challenging to have without such a course, particularly in an online setting. These opportunities promoted the development of self-efficacy, commitment, and identity for new students; highlighted the program’s strong comradery; and displayed the values and norms associated with community and giving back.

In addition to the formal course, students felt other online courses were influential in their socialization experience. One faculty member conveyed support by regularly making time for check-ins during class and sharing their own experiences as a new professor being socialized online. Early-career students highlight this time for informal conversations, which were held via synchronous Zoom video meetings and chats in Slack channels, as being critical to building of relationships with faculty. Zoom video meetings were valuable because they allowed people to put a face to a name and provided visual communication cues. Similarly, Slack channels on noncourse topics (e.g., pets, shared social interests, and hobbies) helped foster comradery and facilitated communication. In contrast, online courses in which time was not deliberately set aside for informal conversations and content was the sole priority were experienced as formal and rigid, suggesting that program culture was not adequately conveyed in such courses. It was more difficult for students to be honest with these faculty members or ask them questions regarding coursework and assignments, both during virtual class sessions and via email outside of class hours, and students reported feeling more isolated and disconnected from fellow students in those courses.

Online student relationships

Faculty perspective

Our faculty members recognize the essential role of student relationships in maintaining program culture and have generally had a tacit knowledge of the functioning and quality of those relationships. In the online environment, relationships among students were more opaque to faculty, and it was challenging to discern the extent to which students were receiving adequate peer support. Even using face-to-face technology (e.g., Zoom), the status of student relationships and their influence on maintaining a strong collaborative culture was less readily apparent than when observing student interaction in person. To have a clear understanding of the ways in which peer relationships may be affecting program culture online (e.g., reinforcing or undermining supportive culture), faculty had to rely on more explicit information sharing from students via

one-on-one virtual meetings, synchronous video chats, and technology-mediated communication (e.g., email and texts).

Student perspective

Influential in reflecting the program culture were the relationships students developed with peers outside of formal program structures. Student proactivity and program commitment were central in creating opportunities for informal student interactions. Relationships between cohort members and lab members were fostered via frequent informal Zoom calls that allowed students to share academic and personal experiences, including challenges and highlights. Senior lab members, familiar with the value of informal mentoring, were deliberate in meeting with early-career students to involve them in lab projects and tasks, often forwarding emails that provided perspective on graduate work-related tasks and using screen-share functionality on tools such as Zoom to provide opportunities to observe role-related behaviors such as data cleaning, developing code, and conducting analyses. Synchronous editing tools, such as Google Docs and SharePoint, allowed senior students to collaborate on projects with more junior students, model writing behaviors, and provide in-the-moment feedback via comments to facilitate learning. Proactive relationship building with senior students outside of labs was more challenging for newcomers in an online context compared with in person due to the absence of informal opportunities to become acquainted and identify shared interests on which mentoring relationships could be established. Moreover, many new students “don’t know *what* they don’t know,” making proactivity on the part of more senior students in the program essential in an online environment.

To facilitate program-wide relationship building and foster the maintenance of the established program culture while online, the I-O graduate student organization met biweekly via Zoom, in which all students elected to enable video to build a sense of community and belongingness. In these meetings, students had the opportunity to share experiences, offer social support and guidance, identify student concerns, and identify potential role models and mentors from labs outside of their own. The informal tone of these student meetings allowed the collaborative nature of the culture to come across in the absence of in-person opportunities to connect.

Although check-ins had benefits, they also added to the challenges of building new relationships. For senior students, check ins became an opportunity to lament about program grievances. New students who had not yet experienced some of the challenges of graduate school would sometimes leave these meetings feeling disconnected from senior students and disheartened about graduate school. Despite the drawbacks, these online check-ins made it apparent that the program’s supportive and caring nature went beyond just a faculty initiative to something students valued and perpetuated themselves. Furthermore, students, both newcomer and senior, reported that these informal get togethers were essential in helping them fight off feelings of isolation that came with being online. Because students demonstrated a collective, active interest in developing lasting relationships, fueled by a carefully cultivated and perpetuated program culture, the online platform did not prevent the relationships from initiating and flourishing, it merely made the process more intentional.

Limitations

In writing this reflection, it is important to note that a strong program culture existed prior to moving online. Transitioning to a completely online environment, students and current faculty members shared a mental model regarding their expectations for the culture. Moreover, new pretenure faculty members, who accepted positions in part based on the collaborative culture, were instrumental in the success of the transition from completely online to a hybrid model (e.g., expertise in online communication tools, creative ideas for moving traditional activities online). These factors contributed to the maintenance of the positive and collaborative culture.

When creating online doctoral programs, especially those not linked to a traditional master's or doctoral program, establishing a strong and positive culture may require actions not included in our reflection. Faculty from such programs would benefit from formally discussing their desired culture and clearly communicating this with students. In addition, we are a doctoral program where students remain in the program for several years in contrast to master's programs where degree completion is typically faster. In doctoral programs, students have more time to be socialized and to perpetuate a supportive culture as they grow throughout their time in the program. Thus, there may be limitations of the generalizability of our reflections, but the best practices summarized below are likely to widely applicable.

Best practices for building and maintaining supportive program culture online

As we engaged in reflection and analysis of our positive graduate program culture and our varied experiences transitioning it online, three overarching themes emerged tentatively pointing to best practices:

1. **Use I-O psychology:** As I-O psychologists, we have a within discipline expertise regarding the process of building organizational culture that readily applies to the graduate program context. Additionally, I-Os have expertise in the strategies essential to maintaining culture, including recruitment, selection, and development practices.
2. **Intentionally facilitate serendipity:** As Kraiger *et al.* (2022) observed, most of us earning degrees from in-person programs can point to the informal and “serendipitous” interactions that reflected supportive program culture. In online graduate education, space must be made for this type of informal interaction within more formal structures (e.g., courses).
3. **Proactively build relationships:** Strong and positive graduate program culture is defined by the quality of relationships between faculty and students as well as supportive relationships among students. Compared with in-person settings, the online environment demands greater proactivity in relationship building. It is especially important for program “insiders” (i.e., faculty and more senior students) to take the initiative in developing relationships with new students.

Despite the misgivings discussed by Kraiger *et al.* (2022), our analysis regarding the viability of building and maintaining supportive program culture online leaves us optimistic about the future of online doctoral training programs.

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