

# Student-Centered Approach at a Research-Intensive University: A Gap Between Theory and Practice in Higher Education

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## Tags

Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Student Services; University/Higher Education

## Setting

A medical/doctoral university in North America promotes itself as a leading research university and is committed to bringing the best students to produce cutting-edge research and innovation. The university also emphasizes its commitment to student-centered pedagogy and improving diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

Jane Smith is an international student studying for her doctorate in a social science program with a focus on peace and conflict studies at the university. Jane speaks several languages, including English at the bi-lingual level, and has over 20 years of professional experience in peace studies. To recognize her outstanding achievement as a professional expert, Jane received an additional scholarship package on top of her general funding from the university. Jane is a non-traditional student, is a parent, and has come to the university with her family. Her situation requires her to be organized and efficient in her time. Jane has struggled through the program but finally arrived at the final stage during the summer in her fifth year: her doctoral defense.

## Case

During the last few months before her graduation, Jane received an email about her designation in a specialization program in her field. An administrator wrote to Jane that she needed to fill out a form for the designation to appear on her transcript. She asked a few questions for clarification and then filled out and returned the form via email. She thought that was the end of the administrative matter.

The next day, Jane received another email from the same administrator. The administrator explained to Jane that she failed to meet the requirements for the specialization. The administrator wrote that, on the form, Jane noted that she had given a presentation at the special program seminar. However, the administrator noted that no record was available for such a seminar in the special program. Jane explained to the administrator that she was invited to present her dissertation research to a special interest group, where her supervisor was present. The administrator replied,

Although you were invited to present to the interest group, the program office was not notified about the presentation. The required seminars are directly managed and linked to the program, while these interest group events such as yours are just social events. Unfortunately, your presentation does not count towards the program requirement.

The administrator explained to Jane that this matter needed to be discussed with a program coordinator who was a faculty member in the program.

The next day, the administrator wrote again and explained that this special interest group seminar did not count as a fulfillment of the requirement, according to the program coordinator. However, the program coordinator suggested sharing Jane's research in the program newsletter as a solution. Frustrated, Jane replied,

Unfortunately, I am unable to complete the article by the date required. I wish I had known about this in advance so that I could have planned accordingly. I am dropping the special program designation.

Jane explained to the administrator that she is a parent with family obligations and needs to be organized to make things happen. Jane also complained to the administrator that this problem often occurs at the university.

On the following day, Jane received a long email from the program coordinator, a faculty member of the program. The program coordinator explained that "an assumption was made" for this special interest group to fulfill the requirement. However, the program coordinator was making "an exception" to this situation so that Jane could still receive the designation once she completes a 1,000-word article for the program newsletter. Flabbergasted to read such an email, and feeling as if she was being blamed, Jane responded to the program coordinator:

Thank you very much for your email and willingness to make an accommodation. I think I have explained to the administrator as well, but without going into detail, my family obligations do not allow me to commit to additional tasks at this point. Although I saw the presentation requirement on the website, I found no mention that a presentation to a special interest group would be excluded. I accept the consequences and will graduate without the specialization.

The program coordinator quickly responded, "Thanks for confirming your decision. Congratulations on your graduation. Wishing you all the best in your future endeavors."

Jane is now pausing for a moment to reflect on what has happened to her over the last few days. Initially, she thinks her withdrawal from the special program was out of her control since she simply did not have time to write the article. Upon further reflection, Jane feels like there is a broader issue. She has spent the previous five years finishing her doctoral study in this special area of scholarship in peace studies only to be told that she couldn't earn the specialization due to a technicality. While the university is a leading institution and claims itself to be committed to the student-centered pedagogy and "equity, diversity, and inclusion," Jane feels that it isn't living up to its ideals.

## Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are the responsibilities of the administrator and the program coordinator to ensure students understand the program requirements? Are having the website, reminding students during the orientation, and frequent emails enough?
- In what ways can university programs support student parents?
- In what ways can university programs support international students?
- The complete text of the email to Jane is below in the Appendix. From Jane's perspective, how is the tone of this message? How could it have been delivered differently?
- What does the "student-centered" pedagogy mean in practice when faculty members have power over students?
- What can we learn from this case about equity, diversity, and include?

## Appendix

Dear Jane,

I'm writing about the issue of meeting the specialization requirements so that I can approve your graduation form. I understand that you "wish you knew", but the fact is that all students are told the requirements when they start, with this information reiterated at the orientation each year. The requirements are also listed on the website. The administrator also sends several emails to thesis-stream students each year to remind them of the presentation requirement.

It seems that an assumption was made that the presentation you gave to the special interest group counted as the presentation requirement; however, we do not have record of you having asked about or confirmed this. Had an inquiry been made, this last-minute stress could have been avoided.

I know that you have been actively involved in the specialization program, and I don't want you to miss out because you made a wrong assumption about the presentation requirement. That said, for the sake of fairness

to other students, you need to somehow share your work with the community, to meet all graduation requirements.

With this in mind, I offered the option to write a short (750-1000 words) newsletter item that summarizes your doctoral research (and ideally, a picture of yourself to include). This shouldn't be too difficult as you can simply develop your abstract, for example. If you can commit to submitting this newsletter item, I will approve your graduation form now, so that you can meet the deadline. Please understand that I am making an exception in this case and trust that if you commit to crafting a summary of your doctoral work, you will do so.

Please advise if you're willing/able to do this.

Dr. Janet Johnson, Professor and Program Coordinator