



DOCTORAL SUCCESS LAB

Building the Foundation for Doctoral Success

September 19, 2026 from 9 a.m.—NOON
Hall of Honors

FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT WELCOME



On behalf of the Doctoral Community Network, I am pleased to welcome you to the inaugural Doctoral Success Lab.

Doctoral education provides many lessons, but some of the most valuable ones are learned only when we need them. We discover which questions to ask, how our approach to scholarly work must adapt, and how essential it is to learn from others who understand our experiences. The Doctoral Success Lab was created to facilitate these conversations sooner. There is no single formula for earning a doctorate, nor is this Lab intended to offer one. Instead, today brings together faculty, staff, campus resources, and fellow doctoral students to share practical

knowledge, strategies, and perspectives that can help make the doctoral experience more manageable.

As you participate today, please be curious and take advantage of what the Lab has to offer. Most importantly, find something you can carry with you, perhaps an answer you needed, a useful resource, or simply a clearer sense of what comes next. And of course, meet new people!

As the Founder and President of the Doctoral Community Network, witnessing the inaugural Doctoral Success Lab come to life is particularly meaningful. What began as an idea to better support doctoral students has evolved into a collaborative effort made possible by individuals and departments across our university community. Thank you to our presenters, campus partners, university leadership, and everyone who helped make this first Lab a reality.

Please leave today feeling more informed, connected, and prepared for what's to come!

Marquita Gill

Founder and President

Doctoral Community Network

INLD Doctoral Program – Higher Education Administration Track Cohort 14

ABOUT DCN

The Governors State University Doctoral Community Network (DCN) is an interdisciplinary organization that aims to strengthen the doctoral student experience by connecting students across GovState's five doctoral programs. Student-led, DCN provides a space for doctoral students to build relationships beyond their individual programs, learn from one another, and find support through the shared experience of pursuing a doctorate.

DCN also focuses on the components of doctoral education that extend beyond the classroom. Through programming, campus partnerships, and interdisciplinary engagement, the organization helps students better navigate doctoral study while creating opportunities for continued growth as scholars, professionals, and leaders. Just as importantly, DCN recognizes that persistence requires more than academic ability. Students need connection, access to support, and space to sustain themselves through the demands of doctoral work. Our purpose is to make those things a more visible and intentional part of the doctoral experience at GovState. DCN seeks to build a community where students are not isolated within their programs, where knowledge and experiences are shared across disciplines, and where doctoral students are encouraged to grow, connect, and succeed together.

FOUNDING OFFICERS

Marquita Gill, Founder & President

Marquita Gill is the founder and president of the Doctoral Community Network. She is pursuing a Doctor of Education in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. With over 17 years in education and student-focused roles, her background includes secondary education, academic advising, student success, and college teaching. She currently teaches English at South Suburban College, serves as a graduate assistant at the College of Education and Human Development, and has held senior advising and student-success roles at Chicago State University and Prairie State College.

Marquita earned an M.A. in Higher Education Administration from Chicago State University and a B.A. in English from Southern University and A&M College. Her interests include student success and creating support systems for navigating higher education. She is a 2026-2027 DFI Fellow, a member of Top Ladies of Distinction, Inc., and the Southern Conference on African American Studies, Inc. Through DCN, she aims to enhance the doctoral student experience through community, collaboration, professional development, and support.

Jennifer Schindler, Founding Vice President

Jennifer Schindler is a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program. As Vice President, she provides strategic leadership alongside the President by supporting organizational planning, campus partnerships, and executive initiatives. Jennifer is also responsible for overseeing outreach and engagement efforts that strengthen the Doctoral Community Network.

Tara McNeal, Founding Treasurer

Tara McNeal is a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program. As treasurer, she oversees DCN's financial operations by managing budgets, grant funds, and fundraising activities. She helps ensure the organization has the resources needed to support its programs, events, and future growth.

PROGRAM SCHEDULE

9–9:30 A.M.

Registration, Continental Breakfast & Doctoral Resource Lounge
Room 1496

9:30–9:55 A.M.

Opening Assembly

Hall of Honors | Room 1490

Welcome and Introduction to DCN

Message from GovState President, Dr. Joyce C. Ester

The Purpose of the Doctoral Success Lab

Recognition of Presenters and Campus Resources

Session Instructions and Logistics

9:55–11:35 A.M.

Concurrent Workshop Sessions

Participants will attend one workshop during each session block. A five-minute transition period is provided between sessions.

9:55–10:25 A.M.

Session I

10:25–10:30 A.M.

Transition

10:30–11:00 A.M.

Session II

11:00–11:05 A.M.

Transition

11:05–11:35 A.M.

Session III

11:35–11:40 A.M.

Transition to Hall of Honors

11:40 A.M.–NOON

Closing Assembly

Student Reflection, Key Takeaways and Survey Completion

DCN Updates and Upcoming Opportunities

Closing Remarks

LAB SESSIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

Research Like a Scholar: Advanced Library Strategies for Doctoral Students

Library Services | Dr. Cari Didion

Learn how to make the most of the university's library resources to support doctoral-level research. This session will introduce advanced search strategies, research tools, and library services that can help you locate, organize, and evaluate scholarly sources more efficiently.

Scholarly Writing Essentials for Doctoral Students Presented by the Writing Center

Dr. Jarrett Neal

Strong writing is essential to doctoral success. This session will cover practical strategies for scholarly writing, APA style, document formatting, and common writing challenges while highlighting the resources available through the Writing Center.

Designing Your Doctoral Life: Strategies for Success During the Coursework Phase

Dr. Amy Bala

Explore practical strategies for navigating the coursework phase of your doctoral program. From managing expectations and balancing responsibilities to developing productive academic habits, this session will help you build a strong foundation for success.

Designing Your Doctoral Life: Surviving and Thriving Through the Dissertation Phase

Dr. Karen Williams Blackman

The dissertation is one of the most challenging and rewarding stages of doctoral study. Learn practical strategies and tools to maintain momentum, overcome common obstacles, and navigate the dissertation process with confidence and resilience.

Thinking Like a Researcher: Building a Strong Foundation for Doctoral Research

Dr. Matthew Cooney

Strong research begins with strong thinking. This session will explore the mindset and habits of successful researchers and introduce key concepts to help you approach doctoral research with confidence and purpose.

Mindfulness and Doubt in the Doctoral Journey

Dr. Timothy Pedigo

Doubt is a common part of the doctoral experience, but it doesn't have to define it. Through discussion and a guided mindfulness exercise, this session will explore practical strategies for managing self-doubt, reducing stress, and building resilience as you navigate the challenges of doctoral study.

The Unauthorized Orientation: What No One Tells You About Doctoral Study

Dr. Isis Martin, Jillian Roth, Sarah Gruber, Dr. Alaina Neuber

A panel discussion featuring current doctoral students from across GovState's doctoral programs.

Hear candid advice from current doctoral students about the realities of doctoral study. This interactive panel will explore lessons learned, unexpected challenges, and practical tips to help you navigate the experience with greater confidence. *Highly recommended for new students, but returning students are also welcome.*



Dr. Karen Williams Blackman serves as Manager of Recruitment, Marketing, and External Relations for the College of Business at Governors State University. A recent Doctor of Education graduate in Interdisciplinary Leadership, her research examined culturally responsive support spaces, belonging, and persistence among African American Alumni. Having successfully navigated the dissertation journey while balancing professional and personal responsibilities, Dr. Williams Blackman is committed to helping doctoral students thrive through the most challenging phases of their programs. Her presentation, *Designing Your Doctoral Life: Surviving and Thriving Through the Dissertation Phase*, provides practical tools and strategies for achieving doctoral success.



Dr. Matthew Cooney (he/him/his) serves as Associate Professor of Education in the Interdisciplinary Leadership Doctoral Program in the College of Education and Human Development at Governors State University. As a faculty member, Dr. Cooney collaborates with scholars and leaders in the education and not-for-profit industries to guide doctoral students in creating positive social change in the communities they serve. His scholarship focuses on how the higher education environment impacts faculty and staff members' personal and professional development.



Isis Martin, MOT, OTR/L, is a school-based occupational therapist and Doctor of Occupational Therapy student at Governors State University. Passionate about supporting students with diverse learning and sensory needs, she promotes meaningful participation in school-based occupations through collaborative and inclusive practices. Her doctoral research focuses on sensory processing and regulation education for paraprofessionals, emphasizing their confidence in supporting students. Isis is committed to bridging research and practice, strengthening collaboration among school teams, and advancing supportive educational environments. She is an active member of the American Occupational Therapy Association and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.



Jillian M. K. Roth is an early childhood educational leader, doctoral candidate, and first-generation college student with more than 15 years of experience serving young children, families, and educators. She serves as Family Services Director at Governors State University's Family Development Center, where she oversees family services, enrollment, community engagement, staff development, and continuous quality improvement across federally and state-funded early childhood programs. Jillian holds a master's degree in educational administration and is pursuing an Ed.D. in Interdisciplinary Leadership. Throughout her career, she has remained committed to strengthening early childhood programs, developing educators, supporting families, and expanding opportunities for young children.



Sarah Gruber serves as a school counselor at Crete-Monee High School and is pursuing a doctoral degree in Counselor Education and Supervision at GovState. Over the past two years, she has been the graduate assistant for the counseling department. With 20 years of experience in mental health across inpatient, residential, and school settings, she brings extensive expertise. She is also a board member of the Glasser Institute for Choice Theory, a certified grief specialist, and certified in Reality Therapy. Additionally, she owns and trains Arlo, a therapy dog certified by the Alliance of Therapy Dogs. Her doctoral research focuses on women diagnosed with autism later in life. After completing her doctorate, she aims to secure a university teaching position, continue counseling, and volunteer with therapy dog visits.



Alaina Neuber is a second-year student in the Doctor of Physical Therapy program. She received her undergraduate degree in Kinesiology from Olivet Nazarene University and played soccer all four years she attended there. Alaina is the current graduate assistant for the physical therapy department. She serves as the DPT 2028 class liaison and a PTSA board member. When Alaina is not at school, she works as a personal trainer in a local fitness center and loves to exercise as well. A fun fact about Alaina is that she got married in May this year!



Dr. Timothy Pedigo is a Professor Emeritus at Governors State University, where he taught and conducted research on relational mindfulness for over 15 years. He is a clinical psychologist who has been in private practice for almost forty years, where he integrates mindfulness in his clinical work with clients. He is also the leader of a local meditation group and a contemplative Christian Sunday school, both at St John's Episcopal Church in Flossmoor.



Dr. Amy Bala is an Assistant Professor in the Doctor of Physical Therapy Program at Governors State University, where she also serves as the Capstone Coordinator and mentors students in developing doctoral scholarly projects. A licensed physical therapist with more than 20 years of clinical experience, she previously served for ten years as the program's Director of Clinical Education. Dr. Bala earned both her EdD in Interdisciplinary Leadership and transitional DPT from Governors State. Her work reflects a strong commitment to student development, with interests spanning leadership, mindfulness, compassion, and evidence-informed practice in healthcare and higher education.

Dr. Jarrett Neal is the Writing Center Coordinator at Governors State University. He holds an MFA in writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a doctorate in adult and higher education from Aurora University. His short story collection, *Leave Wiser Than You Came*, is scheduled for publication by the University of Wisconsin Press in March 2027.



Doctoral Resource Lounge

The Office of Career Services empowers students and alumni to achieve lifelong career success by providing comprehensive guidance, career resources, experiential learning opportunities, and employer partnerships that connect education to meaningful employment and professional growth.

The College of Graduate Studies supports graduate education at GSU and serves as a resource for students throughout their academic experience. The College supports graduate advising, assistantships and other aspects of graduate education while advancing programs and initiatives that strengthen the university's graduate community.

Supporting Campus Partner

The Counseling & Wellness Center, in partnership with Advocate Health Care, provides medical, mental health, and case management services to support student well-being and academic success. Services include individual, group, and couples counseling, crisis intervention, consultation, outreach, and wellness education. CWC also collaborates with campus partners to promote a healthy and supportive student experience.

Wellness resources are generously provided in the Doctoral Success Lab participant bags.

WHAT'S NEXT WITH DCN

DCN will continue bringing doctoral students together throughout the academic year through experiences that create space for connection, shared learning, and continued growth.

Beyond the Research: A Cinematic Evening of Community, Culture, and Connection

October 16, 2026

Doctoral students deserve some fun, too! Grab your blanket or lawn chair and join DCN for an evening under the stars as we trade deadlines and research for music, movies, and good company. A DJ will get the evening started with Michael Jackson favorites before we settle in for a screening of Michael, his highly anticipated biopic. Doctoral students, alumni, and doctoral program faculty, staff, and administrators are all invited to join the fun. Come ready to unwind and enjoy a different side of the doctoral community. Michael Jackson-inspired outfits are encouraged!

DCN Workroom: In Good Company

November 2026

Sometimes you need dedicated time to focus on your work, and it's helpful not to do it alone. Bring whatever requires your attention and join other doctoral students for a shared work session. Write for a while, study for an upcoming exam, or discuss a research idea that has you stuck. This informal format allows you to use the time in the way that best suits your needs!

Becoming: Professional Growth, Readiness & Opportunity

Spring 2027

What does it mean to prepare for what comes after the doctorate while you are still earning it? Becoming will bring doctoral students into conversation with people who can speak to that question from experience. The focus is not simply on finding the next position, but on thinking more deliberately about how the person and professional you are becoming now can shape where you go next.

DCN Momentum & Planning Summit

Spring 2027

The doctoral process can make it easy to focus on the next deadline without looking at the larger picture. The Momentum & Planning Summit creates a dedicated space to do exactly that. Students will take stock of where they are and think deliberately about where they need to go next. The goal is to leave with a realistic plan that can guide the next stretch of doctoral work.

Pizza & Perspective: A Conversation on Well-Being, Balance, & the Doctoral Journey DCN & CWC Collaboration

Summer 2027

Pizza & Perspective is back after a successful first year! This collaboration with the Counseling and Wellness Center offers a candid space for conversations, providing a safe environment to discuss how to maintain well-being while managing the demands of doctoral work. There are no presentations to prepare or academic goals to achieve, just an open, guided, and genuine conversation with peers who understand the experience.



STAY CONNECTED WITH DCN

DCN grows through the participation and ideas of doctoral students across GovState. Attend an upcoming event, become a member, share an idea for future programming, or explore opportunities to contribute to the organization. Whether you want to connect with other doctoral students or take a more active role in shaping the community, there is a place for you in DCN.

Click the link to learn more about opportunities to contribute to DCN's growth and development.

<https://forms.gle/cUBpPT6jcWLQ8BFg6>

Thank you



The Doctoral Community Network appreciates everyone who made this possible. Our presenters shared their knowledge, campus resources fostered connections, and university leaders provided space for this first Lab. Every contribution was essential to its success.

Most importantly, we thank the doctoral students who participated. Your involvement is the true purpose of this work, strengthening the doctoral community at GovState. As the first Lab ends, we hope you gained new insights and a stronger sense of community. We also hope you take something valuable into your doctoral journey.

