

PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLES

The Online Doctoral Framework as an Academic Sanctuary: Leveraging Institutional Distance to Examine Educational Censorship and Policy Regression

Darrell W Evans, Ed.D.¹ 

¹ School of Multidisciplinary and Professional Studies, Purdue University System

Keywords: academic freedom, doctoral research governance, educational censorship, online doctoral education, policy regression

<https://doi.org/10.65201/001c.161596>

Journal of Online Graduate Education

Vol. 9, Issue 1, 2026

Doctoral research addressing educational censorship and policy regression increasingly unfolds within higher education environments shaped by political polarization, legislative intervention, and institutional risk management. These conditions can constrain scholarly inquiry, particularly at the doctoral level, where students remain structurally dependent on supervisory approval, ethics review, and institutional endorsement to progress. This article argues that online doctoral programs function as an academic sanctuary for politically contested research by leveraging institutional distance to protect scholarly autonomy while maintaining rigorous standards of methodological and ethical accountability. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature related to online doctoral education, academic freedom, research governance, doctoral persistence, and scholarly community formation, the article conceptualizes the online doctoral framework as critical scholarly infrastructure rather than a logistical alternative to campus-based study. Online doctoral programs expand access to distributed supervisory expertise, support research embedded within professional and policy contexts, diffuse institutional risk, and cultivate resilient scholarly communities capable of sustaining inquiry under political pressure. In doing so, these programs enable doctoral researchers to investigate educational censorship and policy regression without narrowing intellectual scope or retreating from analytically challenging questions. The article concludes that online doctoral education plays an increasingly essential role in preserving academic freedom and supporting socially responsive knowledge production in politicized educational contexts.

Keywords: academic freedom, doctoral research governance, educational censorship, online doctoral education, policy regression

Doctoral education represents the highest level of formal academic training and remains central to the mission of higher education as a site of advanced knowledge production. Through doctoral study, universities prepare scholars to generate original research, interrogate complex social problems, and contribute meaningfully to disciplinary and public discourse. The doctoral dissertation, in particular, functions as the culminating scholarly artifact of this process, requiring sustained intellectual engagement, methodological rigor, and the articulation of an original contribution to knowledge. Despite

this central role, doctoral research does not occur in isolation from broader institutional, political, and cultural forces. Instead, it is shaped by the environments in which inquiry is encouraged, constrained, or strategically managed.

In contemporary higher education, those environments have become increasingly politicized (Chick, 2025; Ertem, 2025; Ramlo, 2025). At the same time, Ramlo (2025) notes that the meaning, scope, and perceived threats to academic freedom are interpreted differently by various stakeholders within higher education. Universities now operate within contexts characterized by legislative oversight, public contestation of academic authority, and heightened sensitivity to reputational risk (Chick, 2025; Ertem, 2025). Research addressing politically contested topics, such as education policy, immigration, environmental regulation, public health governance, civil rights, social inequality, and institutional accountability, frequently intersects with these dynamics. While such topics are deeply aligned with the civic and democratic mission of higher education, they are often perceived as volatile precisely because they challenge dominant narratives, critique policy decisions, or expose tensions between governance structures and lived experience. As a result, research of significant social importance may encounter resistance that is unrelated to its scholarly quality (Chick, 2025).

For doctoral students, the implications of this politicization are particularly consequential. Doctoral candidates occupy structurally vulnerable positions within academic hierarchies, lacking the professional security and institutional authority afforded to tenured faculty (Li et al., 2025). Their progress depends on supervisory approval, ethics clearance, committee consensus, and continued institutional support (Li et al., 2025). When research topics are politically sensitive, these dependencies can shape not only how research is conducted, but which questions are deemed feasible or strategically advisable. Even in the absence of explicit restriction, doctoral students may encounter subtle pressures toward caution, neutrality, or topic modification, with lasting effects on the knowledge produced through doctoral education.

Against this backdrop, an urgent question emerges. How can doctoral education continue to support rigorous, independent inquiry on politically sensitive topics without narrowing the scope of scholarly engagement? Online doctoral programs have become an increasingly prominent feature of the doctoral education landscape. Although early discussions of online doctoral education emphasized access and flexibility, a growing body of scholarship suggests that these programs also perform essential epistemic and protective functions. This article argues that online doctoral programs are uniquely positioned to support politically contested research by expanding supervisory networks, enabling research embedded in professional contexts, promoting resilient scholarly communities, supporting methodological pluralism, and sustaining doctoral persistence under conditions of political

pressure. In doing so, online doctoral education contributes not only to student success but also to the preservation of academic freedom and the advancement of socially responsive scholarship.

Politically Contested Research and Doctoral Vulnerability

Research that engages politically sensitive topics often unfolds under conditions of heightened institutional caution (Chick, 2025; Ertem, 2025). Universities operate within regulatory, political, and financial environments that incentivize risk management, particularly when research has the potential to attract public scrutiny or political backlash. These dynamics shape how research proposals are evaluated, how ethics review is conducted, and how institutional actors respond to projects perceived as controversial. At the doctoral level, where research trajectories are closely monitored and progress is contingent on multiple layers of approval, such dynamics can exert a substantial influence on scholarly development.

Research ethics review processes provide a clear illustration of this intersection. While ethics review is designed to protect research participants and ensure methodological integrity, it also functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that shapes what research proceeds and how it is framed. Hedgecoe (2016) demonstrated that ethics committees may prioritize reputational considerations when evaluating politically sensitive research, particularly when institutional exposure is perceived as high. For doctoral students, ethics review often represents the most consequential approval stage in the research process (Li et al., 2025). Extended review timelines, requests for substantial redesign, or heightened scrutiny can disrupt research momentum and intensify the already demanding nature of dissertation work.

Educational research offers a particularly instructive example. Sikes and Piper (2010) argued that ethics review procedures can inadvertently constrain academic freedom by reshaping research questions and narrowing methodological options. When doctoral candidates are required to soften or reframe politically sensitive dimensions of their work, the resulting scholarship may lose analytical depth or avoid critical aspects of the problem under investigation. Over time, these patterns can shape doctoral norms, signaling which forms of inquiry are institutionally acceptable and which are better avoided.

Beyond formal review structures, politically contested research increasingly unfolds within a public sphere shaped by digital visibility and polarized discourse. Doctoral dissertations, conference presentations, and open-access publications are now widely accessible through online platforms. While increased visibility enhances scholarly reach, it also exposes doctoral researchers to public scrutiny at early stages of their careers. Oksanen et al. (2022) documented the prevalence of online harassment within academic contexts and linked such experiences to psychological distress and professional insecurity. For doctoral candidates whose scholarly identities are

still forming, the prospect of public hostility can influence topic selection, research framing, and dissemination strategies in ways that may constrain inquiry.

These pressures intersect with broader challenges associated with doctoral persistence. The dissertation phase is widely recognized as the most vulnerable stage of doctoral education, characterized by isolation, uncertainty, and elevated attrition rates. Research consistently identifies academic integration, social integration with faculty, and satisfaction with institutional support as critical predictors of persistence. When doctoral research is politically contested, the need for structured, durable support becomes even more pronounced, underscoring the importance of doctoral environments capable of sustaining inquiry without narrowing intellectual scope.

Online Doctoral Programs as Scholarly Infrastructure

Online doctoral programs possess structural characteristics that directly address many of the constraints associated with politically contested research. One of the most significant of these characteristics is the decoupling of doctoral supervision from geographic proximity (Li et al., 2025). This decoupling allows doctoral candidates to access supervisory expertise aligned with their research interests without being constrained by local political climates or departmental cultures. In traditional, campus-based doctoral programs, supervisory options may be limited by faculty availability, institutional priorities, or regional sensitivities (Chick, 2025; Li et al., 2025). Online doctoral programs, by contrast, enable broader alignment between student research agendas and faculty expertise.

Research on online doctoral supervision consistently emphasizes the importance of intentional, sustained mentoring relationships. Kumar et al. (2017) identified communication clarity, mentor availability, and relational trust as foundational elements of effective online doctoral mentoring. Becker et al. (2025) further demonstrated that structured supervisory practices, including iterative feedback cycles and explicit writing support, significantly enhance doctoral students' scholarly development. For students conducting politically contested research, these mentoring relationships provide not only methodological guidance but also affirmation of scholarly legitimacy in environments where such legitimacy may otherwise feel uncertain.

Online doctoral programs also support distributed mentoring structures that reduce reliance on a single gatekeeping authority. Dissertation committees, cohort-based advising models, and peer review groups create multiple points of scholarly engagement. This distribution of authority strengthens doctoral autonomy by ensuring that no single institutional actor controls the trajectory of a politically sensitive research project. Instead, scholarly judgment is shared across networks, reinforcing academic independence while maintaining rigorous evaluative standards.

In addition to supervision, online doctoral programs are uniquely positioned to cultivate resilient scholarly communities. Berry (2017) described online doctoral programs as sites of nested community formation,

where cohorts, peer groups, and writing circles collectively support academic and emotional persistence. These communities function as intellectual infrastructures that sustain doctoral engagement over extended research timelines, providing continuity even when external conditions become challenging.

Discussion on Autonomy, Methodology, and Knowledge Legitimacy

A central contribution of online doctoral programs lies in their capacity to support scholarly autonomy while maintaining methodological and ethical rigor. Doctoral supervision, methodology, and knowledge legitimacy converge most visibly in the context of politically contested research, where decisions regarding framing, design, and interpretation carry heightened stakes. In traditional doctoral settings, these decisions may be shaped by localized norms or institutional risk perceptions. Online doctoral programs reconfigure this landscape by redistributing authority, normalizing methodological pluralism, and embedding transparency into the research process.

Doctoral supervision in online environments plays a decisive role in this reconfiguration. Supervisory relationships are not neutral conduits of academic guidance. Instead, they are sites where power, expertise, institutional norms, and risk perception intersect. In traditional settings, supervision is often embedded within tightly bounded departmental cultures, where shared assumptions regarding acceptable research topics and methodological approaches may implicitly guide doctoral work. Online doctoral programs disrupt this dynamic by emphasizing dialogic engagement and evidence-based critique rather than hierarchical oversight (Kumar et al., 2017). For politically sensitive research, this dialogic orientation centers scholarly reasoning over conformity, allowing doctoral candidates to defend analytically challenging positions through sustained argumentation.

Methodological legitimacy represents a second critical dimension of this discussion. Research designs that interrogate power, policy, or governance frequently rely on qualitative, critical, or mixed-methods approaches that challenge positivist assumptions of neutrality. Online doctoral programs support methodological legitimacy by requiring explicit epistemological justification and sustained engagement with methodological literature. Sikes and Piper (2010) argued that academic freedom is sustained when methodological decisions are evaluated on scholarly grounds rather than perceived political implications. Online doctoral curricula operationalize this principle by embedding methodological justification into coursework, proposal development, and committee review.

Transparency further strengthens legitimacy. Written feedback, archived drafts, and recorded supervisory meetings create clear records of scholarly deliberation and decision-making. These records function as both pedagogical tools and protective artifacts, demonstrating that politically contested research emerges through rigorous, defensible processes rather than ideological advocacy. In digitally mediated environments, such transparency enhances accountability while reinforcing scholarly autonomy.

Finally, online doctoral programs support knowledge legitimacy through strategic engagement with digital dissemination. Doctoral candidates develop fluency with open-access publishing, virtual conferences, and networked scholarship, enabling them to engage academic audiences while navigating public visibility with care (Oksanen et al., 2022). This fluency is particularly valuable for politically sensitive research, where dissemination choices can shape both scholarly reception and personal risk.

Institutional Risk, Academic Freedom, and Protective Capacity

While academic freedom is often framed as an abstract institutional principle, its practical realization depends heavily on program-level design decisions that govern how research is supervised, evaluated, and defended. Nowhere is this more evident than in doctoral education, where students lack the employment protections afforded to tenured faculty and must navigate complex approval structures to complete their research. In politically contested environments, institutional risk management increasingly shapes these structures, influencing how universities respond to research perceived as controversial. Online doctoral programs possess distinctive design features that allow them to absorb and redistribute institutional risk in ways that protect doctoral inquiry rather than constrain it.

Institutional risk in higher education is rarely articulated solely in scholarly terms. Universities operate within political, legal, and economic environments that reward caution, particularly when research intersects with public policy, governance, or ideologically charged social issues. Administrators may feel pressure to avoid public controversy, legislative scrutiny, or donor backlash, even when research meets established standards of rigor and ethical conduct (Chick, 2025; Ertem, 2025). Hedgecoe (2016) demonstrated that reputational risk frequently enters research governance decisions, shaping ethics review and oversight processes in subtle but consequential ways. For doctoral candidates, whose research lacks the buffering effect of faculty status, these dynamics can translate into heightened scrutiny or informal discouragement.

Online doctoral program design offers a structural response to this problem by dispersing the sites at which risk is assessed and managed. Unlike traditional doctoral programs rooted in a single department or campus, online programs often draw faculty from multiple institutions, disciplines, and professional backgrounds. This dispersion reduces the likelihood that political sensitivity within a specific local context will determine the fate of a doctoral project. When responsibility for supervision and evaluation is distributed, institutional anxiety is less likely to crystallize into constraint.

This protective capacity is further strengthened by the formalization of research processes common in online doctoral education. Program milestones, proposal templates, dissertation rubrics, and structured review cycles make scholarly decision-making explicit and auditable. Rather than relying on informal norms or tacit expectations, online doctoral programs document how research questions are justified, how methods are selected,

and how ethical considerations are addressed. In contested research contexts, this documentation functions as an institutional shield, demonstrating that doctoral inquiry proceeds through established scholarly procedures rather than ideological advocacy.

Academic freedom at the doctoral level is therefore not preserved solely through policy statements, but through the operationalization of freedom within program architecture. Sikes and Piper (2010) argued that academic freedom is most vulnerable when ethical oversight becomes indistinguishable from content regulation. Online doctoral programs mitigate this risk by separating methodological and ethical evaluation from political interpretation. When committees focus explicitly on research design, evidentiary coherence, and ethical safeguards, the political implications of findings become secondary to scholarly quality.

The online modality also alters how universities engage with external visibility. Because online doctoral programs are accustomed to digital dissemination, asynchronous engagement, and geographically dispersed stakeholders, they tend to develop more nuanced approaches to public exposure. This orientation is particularly valuable for politically sensitive research, where visibility can be both an asset and a liability. Oksanen et al. (2022) documented the ways in which online academic engagement can expose scholars to harassment, but also emphasized the importance of institutional strategies that support safe participation. Online doctoral programs often prepare candidates to navigate visibility strategically, selecting dissemination pathways that prioritize scholarly audiences while maintaining professional boundaries.

Importantly, the protective capacity of online doctoral programs does not depend on obscurity or withdrawal from public discourse. Rather, it rests on procedural clarity and collective responsibility. When controversial research is supported by clearly articulated program expectations, distributed supervisory authority, and documented evaluative processes, it becomes more difficult for external pressure to be reframed as legitimate academic critique. This distinction matters because it allows institutions to defend doctoral research without appearing partisan or defensive.

Institutional courage, in this context, emerges not from rhetorical commitment alone but from design coherence. Online doctoral programs that align supervision, ethics review, methodological training, and assessment criteria create environments in which doctoral candidates can pursue difficult questions with confidence that their work will be judged on scholarly merit. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016) emphasized that institutional consistency and transparency are key predictors of doctoral persistence. In politically contested research, they also become predictors of intellectual survival.

This design-based protection has broader implications for the role of universities in democratic societies. Doctoral research often shapes future scholarship, policy analysis, and professional leadership. If politically sensitive inquiry is systematically discouraged at the doctoral level, the long-term

consequence is a narrowing of expertise precisely where nuanced understanding is most needed. Online doctoral programs counter this trend by sustaining pathways through which contested knowledge can be produced responsibly and rigorously.

From a field-level perspective, online doctoral education thus functions as a stabilizing force within higher education's research ecosystem. By absorbing institutional risk through distributed governance and formalized processes, these programs allow universities to uphold academic freedom without exposing individual doctoral candidates to disproportionate vulnerability. This contribution is not ancillary to the mission of doctoral education. Instead, it is foundational to the continued relevance of scholarly inquiry in politically complex environments.

Practitioner-Researchers, Embedded Inquiry, and Community Support

Online doctoral programs expand access to doctoral study for scholars whose professional commitments preclude traditional residency models. Many doctoral candidates researching controversial topics are embedded in education systems, policy environments, healthcare institutions, or regulatory agencies (Chick, 2025). Online doctoral education enables these scholars to remain situated within their fields of practice, enhancing empirical depth and analytic relevance while supporting scholarly distance through structured engagement.

Goodfellow (2014) demonstrated that professional socialization can occur effectively within online doctoral environments when programs intentionally cultivate scholarly identity and ethical reasoning. Embedded inquiry allows doctoral candidates to observe policy processes as they unfold, while coursework, peer critique, and mentorship support critical reflection. This integration strengthens the relevance and credibility of politically contested research by grounding analysis in lived institutional contexts.

Community formation further supports persistence and scholarly development. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016) found that social and academic integration significantly predict persistence among online doctoral students. Cohorts, writing groups, and dissertation seminars provide continuity, validation, and intellectual companionship, sustaining momentum during extended research phases. For politically contested research, these communities serve as stabilizing spaces where scholarly risk can be navigated collectively rather than in isolation.

Ethical Capacity, Policy Alignment, and the Future of Doctoral Knowledge Production

Ethical competence is a defining requirement of doctoral scholarship, particularly when research addresses politically sensitive topics. Online doctoral programs cultivate ethical judgment through structured training, sustained mentorship, and iterative review processes. Eck and Cohen (2021) emphasized the importance of anticipatory ethics and researcher well-being

in politically sensitive research. Online doctoral education integrates these considerations into program design, reinforcing ethical reflexivity alongside methodological rigor.

Online doctoral programs also operate at the intersection of scholarly inquiry and policy environments. Alignment with accreditation standards, governance structures, and accountability frameworks legitimizes politically sensitive research within institutional contexts (Hedgecoe, 2016). By embedding rigor, transparency, and ethical oversight into program architecture, online doctoral education mediates between scholarly ambition and institutional responsibility.

Conclusion

Online doctoral programs now occupy a critical position within contemporary higher education, particularly as sites for researching politically contested topics. As universities operate within environments shaped by polarization, regulatory scrutiny, and intensified public contestation, the conditions under which doctoral research is conducted carry significant implications for the future of knowledge production. This article has argued that online doctoral programs function as essential scholarly infrastructure, capable of sustaining rigorous, independent inquiry without narrowing intellectual scope or retreating from complex and controversial questions. Rather than serving as peripheral alternatives to traditional doctoral education, these programs increasingly represent structurally adaptive responses to the political realities facing higher education.

By expanding access to specialized and distributed supervision, supporting research embedded within professional and policy contexts, normalizing methodological diversity, promoting resilient scholarly communities, and cultivating ethical judgment, online doctoral education safeguards doctoral research on controversial topics. These supports operate collectively, reinforcing doctoral autonomy while maintaining high standards of scholarly rigor and accountability. Importantly, online doctoral programs do not simply accommodate nontraditional students or offer logistical flexibility. They are much more important. They actively reshape the conditions under which doctoral inquiry can persist in contested environments. In doing so, they enable doctoral candidates to pursue analytically challenging work without undue pressure to dilute, reframe, or abandon lines of inquiry that hold social and political significance.

As political pressures on academic inquiry continue to intensify, the role of online doctoral programs in preserving academic freedom becomes increasingly consequential. These programs provide institutional pathways through which difficult questions can be examined thoughtfully, ethically, and transparently, even when such questions provoke discomfort or resistance. By supporting research that challenges assumptions, interrogates policy, and engages social complexity, online doctoral education affirms the democratic mission of higher education and strengthens its capacity to contribute meaningfully to public understanding. In an era when the

boundaries of acceptable inquiry are increasingly contested, online doctoral programs play a vital role in ensuring that doctoral scholarship remains both intellectually courageous and socially responsive.

Submitted: January 16, 2026 EDT. Accepted: February 10, 2026 EDT. Published: June 03, 2026 EDT.

References

- Becker, S., Jacobsen, M., & Friesen, S. (2025). Four supervisory mentoring practices that support online doctoral students' academic writing. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, 1521452. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1521452>
- Berry, S. (2017). Student support networks in online doctoral programs: Exploring nested communities. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 12, 33–48. <https://doi.org/10.28945/3676>
- Chick, J. C. (2025). Navigating academic freedom and student concerns in doctoral education at Hispanic-serving institutions: A faculty perspective. *Education Sciences*, 15(10), 1324. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15101324>
- Eck, K., & Cohen, D. K. (2021). Who says yes or no? Models of ethical and safety oversight for student-led political violence research. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 54(4), 761–766. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000627>
- Ertem, E. C. (2025). The university under threat: Academic freedom, authoritarianism, and resistance. *European Education*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2025.2574310>
- Goodfellow, L. M. (2014). Professional socialization of students enrolled in an online doctor of philosophy program in nursing. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 53(10), 595–599. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20140922-06>
- Hedgecoe, A. (2016). Reputational risk, academic freedom and research ethics review. *Sociology*, 50(3), 486–501. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515590756>
- Kumar, S., Henderson, S. E., & Johnson, N. (2017). Mentoring doctoral students online: Mentor strategies and challenges. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 25(2), 202–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2017.1326693>
- Li, Y., Xu, W., & Chen, J. (2025). PhD student-supervisor relationship and its impacts: A perspective on the interpersonal relationship model. *Frontiers in Education*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1570137>
- Oksanen, A., Celuch, M., Latikka, R., Oksa, R., & Savela, N. (2022). Hate and harassment in academia: The rising concern of the online environment. *Higher Education*, 84(3), 541–567. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00787-4>
- Ramlo, S. (2025). Examining views about academic freedom at institutions of higher education in the US. *Innovative Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-025-09845-6>
- Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., Spaulding, L. S., & Spaulding, M. T. (2016). Identifying significant integration and institutional factors that predict online doctoral persistence. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 31, 101–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.07.003>
- Sikes, P., & Piper, H. (2010). Ethical research, academic freedom and the role of ethics committees and review procedures in educational research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 33(3), 205–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2010.511838>