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Jacqueline M. Gaffner

Celia M. Wilson

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Jacqueline M. Gaffner

Texas Wesleyan University

jmgaffner@txwes.edu

Celia M. Wilson

Texas Wesleyan University

cewilson@txwes.edu

Abstract

Literature regarding advanced degree completion illustrates multiple factors attributing to completion or abandonment of dissertation research. Contributing factors are typically linked to the environment associated with the institution in which a doctoral candidate is enrolled, or personality characteristics held by individual candidates. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gather data from current doctoral candidates regarding factors that inhibited their completion of the doctor of education degree.
Initial responses from participants appeared to confirm findings from similar research studies exploring dissertation non-completers. Most participants noted personal factors for non-completion, while a few mentioned institutional factors. In order to improve the success rate of doctoral degree completion, it is important to explore further the factors influencing non-completion among candidates, including specifically examining the transition from coursework to independent research and by seeking input from all parties involved in the process.

Keywords: dissertation completion, doctoral, degree completion, environmental factors, personal factors

Introduction

The doctoral dissertation represents a major achievement in a student's journey from novice to expert. In most cases, the dissertation is intended to embody a superior example of a student's ability to engage in self-directed, rigorous research. Indeed, Jones (2009) outlined the major purpose of dissertation research as a student's demonstration of his or her ability to think and write critically, develop and demonstrate research skills, and to contribute to the knowledge base of a given field. However, students often encounter numerous difficulties when engaging in dissertation research. Environmental factors, such as institutional program structure, curriculum, expectations, and communication can affect doctoral candidates' completion, as well as student-related factors (Green, 1997), such as personal attributes, demographics, motivation, and persistence (Lovitts, 2008; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). These issues, and others, contribute to only 56.6% of doctoral students in the United States completing their degrees within ten years of enrollment in doctoral programs (Sowell, Zhang, Bell & Redd, 2008).

Literature regarding advanced degree completion illustrates multiple factors attributing to completion or abandonment of dissertation research. Contributing factors are typically linked to the environment associated with the institution in which a doctoral candidate is enrolled, or personality characteristics held by individual candidates. Examples of environmental factors include, but are not limited to: program type and structure, such as distance learning, cohort, or residential programs, curriculum, expectations, and support from program advisor or staff members (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Student-related factors may include personal attributes, such as intelligence, motivation, procrastination (Green, 1997), persistence, ability to balance responsibilities, and coping skills, particularly in stressful situations (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Purpose

As providers of the highest level of education in the United States, doctor of education degree programs serve to produce education leaders. Educational leaders, in turn, are responsible for "the thinking and research that underlie the philosophies and theories of education, the foundations for the policies, structures, and programs of education" (D'Andrea, 2002, p. 42). When doctor of education students fail to complete the degree, consequences can extend beyond the students themselves. Doctor of education graduates often serve as administrators or teachers of elementary and/or secondary level administrators and teachers, and when a failure to graduate occurs, the link can be broken. Other consequences of the failure of a student to persist to graduation include economic factors for both the student and Ed.D. program, and damage to the college reputation (Baird, 1993; D'Andrea, 2002; Katz, 1997).

In spite of the consequences, it can be difficult to predict whether a particular candidate will successfully complete the entire process at the time of enrollment. University faculty can provide valuable insight by contributing their perspectives regarding why some of their candidates are able to fulfill all dissertation requirements, while others do not (Lovitts. 2008). However, though faculty may be keenly aware of contributing institutional factors, and may also recognize contributing personality traits, they may not have firsthand knowledge of personal factors influencing their candidates' ability to follow through to conclusion. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gather data from current doctoral candidates regarding factors that inhibited their completion of the doctor of education (Ed.D.) degree. To that end, the following research question guided this study: What factors contribute to degree non-completion among doctor of education candidates?

Method

A qualitative case study methodology was used for this study as it allows for the exploration of a phenomenon, within the context of the phenomenon, using a variety of research tools and data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Yin (2003), a case study approach is appropriate when the researcher desires to investigate the 'why' of a phenomenon, and seeks to uncover contextual factors believed to be important to the phenomenon under study.

Case Identification/Participants

Participants for this study included students who, in their Ed.D. program, persisted to doctoral candidate status but failed to successfully complete the dissertation. All participants were from one small, private university, located in the southwestern United States.

Data Collection

Data collection for the current study was divided into two stages. Stage 1 consisted of the creation of an anonymous, open ended survey, distributed electronically to all candidates who failed to successfully complete the dissertation process. All survey items were based on factors for non-completion suggested by current literature on the topic (e.g., Green, 1997; Lovitts, 2008; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). At the conclusion of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to provide contact information in the event they were willing to participate in a one-on-one interview. Data collection in Stage 2 includes one-on-one interviews with all participants who indicated availability in the Stage 1 survey. Results presented herein are based on data collected in Stage 1 and include responses from five participants.

Data Analysis

In an effort to enhance data credibility, in addition to survey responses and one-on-one interviews, other data sources will be consulted. These include published program details, and interviews with faculty and

program directors. Data analysis and collection is concurrent and ongoing.

Results and Conclusion

Responses from candidates indicated institutional factors affected completion of the dissertation: factors associated with university faculty, staff, or advisors, and factors associated with their research topic. Lovitts (2008) reported advisors assigned to doctoral students differ in their approaches with doctoral students, which may affect progress towards completion. Faculty who model academic behaviors, coach, and communicate with students may be more effective in guiding students through difficult sections of the dissertation process (Lovitts, 2008). Support for this assertion was found in our study as one participant responded that a "lack of timely communication as stated by university faculty in response to the candidate or in work submitted" affected completion, also noting "frustration with communication overall from committee."

Further, students may have difficulty transitioning from the coursework phase to independent research phase, or lack the intellectual curiosity necessary to engage and explore their own research topic (Lovitts, 2008). Labaree (2003) reported students felt a sense of developmental discord as they move from "normative to analytical, personal to intellectual, and experiential to theoretical" (p. 13). Our findings seem to support Labaree (2003) as one doctoral candidate contributed, "The limited background information on my topic has made it difficult to research."

Responses from candidates also indicated personal factors affected completion of the dissertation such as: factors associated with my personal life, and factors associated with my personality. All candidates chose "factors that are beyond my control" as a reason affecting dissertation completion. One participant volunteered information about her personal life that has contributed to non-completion, stating, "During this process, I have been married, divorced, and [I am] now re-married. I have moved 4 times in 2 years and all the while I had a small child, my nephew, in my care….Additionally, after writing 3 chapters, my life turned upside down. The process of editing and changing the dissertation while feeling how I did in my personal life was too hard…I could not endure another 'this is not good enough' response from my chapters during that time in my life."

Other responses from candidates indicated additional personal factors, such as work, interfering with completion. Further, personal factors such as a "lack of focus and resources especially with technology at home" were also reported. One participant pointed to a lack of structure affecting progress, explaining, "I need structure. I think a scheduled time each week to have writing sessions would be greatly beneficial." Although all participants chose to select, "Factors that are beyond my control." only two provided more detail. One respondent explained, "Job requirements and changes have impacted my time and opportunity to finish the dissertation," while the other merely wrote, "Work."

Initial responses from participants appeared to confirm findings from similar research studies exploring dissertation non-completers. Most participants noted personal factors for non-completion, while a few mentioned institutional factors. In order to improve the success rate of doctoral degree completion, it is important to explore further the factors influencing non-completion among candidates, including specifically examining the transition from coursework to independent research and by seeking input from all parties involved in the process. We continue data collection using the Stage 1 survey, Stage 2 follow up interviews, document review of programmatic policies, and program director interviews.

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