

Chapter 11

A Case Study of an Intervention to Support Ed.D. Students in Dissertation Writing

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ABSTRACT

Dissertation writing is often the most challenging aspect of the doctoral program. In an effort to raise completion rates and lower time-to-degree as well as increase student satisfaction with the program, professors in an Ed.D. program developed a semester-long course to support students writing their dissertations. This case study describes the development of the course and the implementation of the first semester. The course consisted of a series of workshops on various aspects of dissertation writing as well as various other activities such as peer review. The students did not receive a grade for the course. After reviewing data, students in the course were classified by their productivity that semester and engagement in the course. Students who were highly engaged but not highly productive were the most prevalent group. In this article, the authors also provide follow-up, including changes made the next semester and data on student completion.

INTRODUCTION

While most high schools and undergraduate programs in the United States intensely focus on graduation rates, the spotlight is only recently beginning to shift to this issue for graduate programs.

As enrollment in graduate programs increase and jobs require more education, graduate programs must begin to examine their own completion data in detail (Wendler et al., 2010). Doctoral programs are notorious for their attrition rates, which are even worse than medical or law schools (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Attrition from doctoral programs

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2062-9.ch011

is rarely calculated on a program or institutional level, and Lovitts and Nelson (2000) call it a “national crisis.” While not every student who enrolls in a doctoral program should necessarily graduate, universities and departments should investigate the reasons students fail to complete the program, like Golde (2000) did in his four case studies of students who left their programs. Often, faculty or administrators believe that students fail to graduate because of their own shortcomings rather than because of the program (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). If the reasons can be traced to university or department policy, lack of writing or research skills, or the dissertation process itself, then supports or professional development could be offered to the students and faculty in these areas.

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) (2010) made many such recommendations after conducting a seven year study on Ph.D. Completion. “There is widespread recognition that students at the dissertation stage feel isolated and vulnerable and universities are putting into place a number of efforts to help students overcome these feelings and remain on track” (CGS, 2010, p. 57). While the three part monograph detailing the Ph.D. Completion Project provided brief descriptions of some of the interventions different programs are utilizing, longitudinal data is still being collected on the effectiveness of the interventions. Other studies have been conducted detailing specific interventions at specific institutions such as Nerad and Miller’s (1997) description of one university’s efforts to increase the doctoral graduation rates in the humanities and social sciences, which at the time had the longest time to completion and lowest completion rates. They also conducted a qualitative study to verify the quantitative completion information. From this information, they created “an intellectual support structure to help students at the dissertation-writing stage of the doctoral program break the isolation, establish intellectual communities, overcome their anxieties about the dissertation’s scope and character, and make the transition from ‘book reading’ to ‘book writing’”

(p. 81). Their interventions, including a series of interdisciplinary dissertation writing workshops, were successful in increasing completion in these fields by 11%. Other universities must follow this example. The authors of this case study will examine not only the content and development of one such intervention but data evaluating its immediate effectiveness. Data are still being collected on if the intervention has any impact on completion rates and time-to-degree longitudinally.

LITERATURE OF BEST PRACTICES FOR DISSERTATION WRITING

For most new faculty, their only experience with dissertation supervision was their own as a student. Thus, they may mentor doctoral students as they were mentored, with little knowledge of what is actually effective or how to meet the needs of different doctoral students. “The traditional model of graduate student supervision can no longer work. It is simply inadequate to the demands of a situation where many supervisors are barely socialized into the demands and rigours of an academic scholarly and research culture” (Yeatman, 1995, p. 9). Kluever (1997) compared responses of doctoral graduates and ABD students in the field of education, finding “regularly scheduled meetings with an advisor, seminars on approaching the dissertation, and a thorough understanding of college and university dissertation guidelines were rated most highly” by completers (p. 52). Similarly, De Valero (2001) examined departmental factors and their influence on doctoral student time-to-degree, making recommendations such as orientations and dissertation workshops, but not implementing any such programs. While articles have been published describing the different responsibilities of a dissertation supervisor, such as “Cheerleader, Coach, Counselor, Critic: Support and Challenge Roles of the Dissertation Advisor” (Spilleti & Moisiewicz, 2004), few have examined

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