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The Relationship Between Early-Stage Structured Feedback and Doctoral Capstone Milestone Completion

Michelle Brown, EdD & Beate Baltes, EdD

Problem

Doctoral students are often unable to complete their independent capstone research at the conclusion of their coursework and of those who do complete the capstone, time-to-completion is often longer than anticipated. In the online environment, time and distance are cited as challenges, and completion rates at the online university under study are between 20% and 30%. The time-to-complete capstone milestones is also problematic at the study site, with an average of 30 months from committee initiation to proposal approval and 50 months to capstone completion. Researchers have found that students are best supported by providing effective feedback early and often in their independent research work. As such, an early-stage feedback process was introduced.

Purpose

The purpose of this quantitative, causal-comparative study was to examine the relationship between early-stage structured feedback - the Research Program Director (RPD) review of the prospectus - and differences in the number of days to proposal approval and the number of research reviewer returns at an online university.

Significance

This study contributes to a gap-in-practice related to the effect of a recently-implemented step in the capstone review process intended to reduce discrepancies between students' performance on their research plan development and the university's goals for research plan development.

This research supports professional practice at the study site, providing data the university can use to make decisions related to the process.

Social Change Implications

Failure to complete a doctoral program results in losses for the student, the university, the work force, and society, which may benefit from the contributions to knowledge and practice.

Theory

Similar to Hattie and Timperley's (2008) model of feedback, the early RPD review reduces discrepancies between students' performance on their research plan development and the program's goals for research plan development by providing feedback that answers:

a. Where am I going? (What are the goals?);
b. How am I doing? (What progress is being made toward the goal?); and
c. Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?)

Relevant Scholarship

Depending on the field, **40-50% of students who begin doctoral programs never complete** (Litalien & Guay, 2015). Additionally, the inefficiency of many doctoral programs creates timelines for completion of 8 to 10 years or more (Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service, 2010).

Research on attrition and improvements suggests that early **feedback/guidance is important** (Lovitts, 2008). Regular and uniform progress checks and review systems, along with early advising and guidance are noted as making the biggest effect (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008).

Online student enrollment continues to grow, and while most academic leaders rate the learning outcomes equal to or better than traditional face-to-face learning (Allen & Seaman, 2014), **challenges still exist for the online student.** In online doctoral programs, distance is a key challenge and students may benefit from additional early feedback/guidance to support capstone research development (Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013).

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the difference in the mean number of days from capstone committee initiation to proposal approval between the two independent groups (RPD review and no RPD review)?

RQ2: What is the difference in the mean number of research reviewer returns of the capstone proposal between the two independent groups (RPD review and no RPD review)?

Participants

The 151 participants included students from one doctoral program, who either received RPD prospectus feedback or did not, between the dates of 1/1/13 and 6/30/16.

Procedures

Deidentified data collected from the university's record system included the number of days from committee initiation to proposal approval, the number of research reviewer returns, and factor group (RPD).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed to discern the mean number of days from committee initiation to proposal approval (RQ1) and the mean number of research reviewer returns at the proposal stage (RQ2). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for group differences.

Findings

Results indicated that the group of students who had their prospectus document reviewed by the RPD had a significantly lower mean number of days ($M = 499$) to proposal approval than the group of students who did not have their prospectus reviewed by the RPD ($M = 957$), $F(1, 133) = 24.495$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$.

The group of students who had their prospectus reviewed by the RPD had a significantly lower mean number of proposal returns ($M = 1.48$) than students who did not go through the RPD review ($M = 2.03$), $F(1, 149) = 9.304$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$.

Interpretation

The significant results suggest that students who were provided the additional guidance and early feedback from the RPD review achieved proposal approval significantly faster than students who did not receive the RPD review feedback.

Students also experienced a slight reduction in research reviewer returns at the proposal stage, on average, compared to students who did not receive the RPD review feedback.

Findings appear to support the use of an early-stage additional feedback process to provide guidance on the direction, progress, and next steps for completing independent capstone research that aligns with the goals of the program.

Limitations

The findings may have been limited in two ways:
- no other student and/or committee characteristics were examined.
- The non-random assignment of students

Recommendations

The early findings appear to support the use of an additional early, structured feedback process in online doctoral programs.

Further research is recommended with larger samples of students, additional programs, and additional data points on student, committee, and program characteristics to strengthen the validity of the research.

In addition, the relationship between the RPD-review stage and other doctoral capstone milestones should be examined.