

# Dissertation Completion: No Longer Higher Education's Invisible Problem

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Researchers agree that one in two doctoral students will not complete their degree, but there is little agreement on how to support and encourage these students in their scholarship. A qualitative inquiry was used to examine the reasons for delayed or expedited dissertation completion by doctoral students in an educational leadership program at a Midwestern university. Identified challenges of the dissertation process included imposter syndrome, writing anxiety, and overall productivity. Also identified were supports for the dissertation process, including the cohort model and strong mentorship. Findings indicated that doctoral candidates were highly influenced by personal or environmental factors and the perceived value of institutional support. Additionally, once delayed completers overcame their barriers and engaged in the dissertation process, their behaviors and strategies mirrored expedited completers.

**Keywords:** *dissertation, dissertation barriers, dissertation completion strategies, imposter syndrome, writing anxiety*

## Introduction

Students who quietly walk away from doctoral programs, burdened with guilt, embarrassment, and accumulated debt, were once considered higher education's "invisible problem" (Lovitts, 2001, p. 4). Cassuto (2013) claimed that this attrition may have been concealed by graduate schools because it suggested institutional as well as individual failure. Programs and universities are now seeking viable strategies to address this problem with full transparency (Grasso, Barry, & Valentine, 2009). The future of higher education institutions may be dependent upon moving doctoral students to completion more successfully. The researchers opine that more research is necessary to fully understand this phenomenon.

Golde (2005) offered three reasons in defense of an examination of doctoral attrition: (a) despite 40 years of research, little is known about low doctoral graduation rates; (b) attrition may be an indicator of departmental, university, or societal problems; and (c) there is a significant economic and human capital cost associated with high attrition rates. Ehrenberg, Zuckerman, Groen, and Brucker (2009) estimated that, nationwide, approximately 50% of doctoral students never complete the degree, a rate that seems to remain relatively constant. Out of the students who graduate with doctoral degrees in the humanities, time to completion takes more than 8 years, and attrition takes

place later in the program than experienced by peers seeking degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs (Ehrenberg et al., 2009).

With the rising costs of doctoral degree programs, noncompleters are strapped with loss of financial investment, and delayed completers accumulate growing debt with every delay that arises. Consequently, the researchers sought to explore the lived experiences of students who persist to completion at a university where it is an expectation that candidates will persist to graduation, whether they delay completion or complete expeditiously. To understand current doctoral graduation trends, this qualitative inquiry examines the reasons doctoral students delay or expedite completion of the dissertation in an educational leadership program at a Midwestern university.

## Challenges to Completion

Cassuto (2013) identified three different types of doctoral completers: (a) those who cannot complete because of time commitment, lack of research skills, personal challenges, and other outside factors; (b) those who can complete but choose not to, leaving the program for personal or professional reasons; and (c) those who successfully reach dissertation completion. How the personal and professional challenges impact those who do complete the dissertation became the focus of this study.

### Personal or Environmental Factors

To successfully reach dissertation completion, the impact of outside factors such as managing work and family (Flynn, Chasek, Harper, Murphy, & Jorgensen, 2012) must be mitigated to ensure student progress. This is particularly true for practitioner scholars who negotiate both the professional and academic spheres. A frequent challenge to completion is the needs of families (Cassuto, 2013; Dominguez, 2006). Another relevant barrier to doctoral degree completion is lack of funding. Dissertating doctoral students may be conflicted with work concerns and money during this final stage in the doctoral process. Financial aid and fellowships for doctoral students are critical resources to ensure completion (Ehrenberg et al., 2009). Flynn et al. (2012) further explained that professional factors such as unemployment were barriers to dissertation completion.

According to Smallwood (2006), many of the issues related to non-completion may be attributed to admission selections. “Academic and affective factors that enter into the admissions process of doctoral students must be focused upon the student's ability to complete program requirements and ultimately be awarded the doctoral degree” (McCalley, 2015, p. 4). The immutability of these issues spans 3 decades, with doctoral degree candidates reporting similar barriers impacting completion (Bair & Haworth, 2004).

### Impostor Syndrome

Clance and Imes (1978) studied high-achieving individuals and observed that high-performing professionals may often struggle with fears of being exposed as an impostor. The groups they identified included persons for whom success came quickly, first-generation professionals, people with high-achieving parents, members of minority groups, and students. Nelson (2011) described impostor syndrome as “the crippling feelings of self-doubt and anticipated failure that haunt people who attribute their success to luck or help from others rather than their own abilities” (p. 129). Sherman (2013) warned that this self-doubt could create a paralyzing fear of failure: “Impostor syndrome can create performance anxiety and lead to perfectionism, burnout, and depression” (p. 31). Hendrikson (2016) noted that impostor syndrome often appears “after an especially notable accomplishment, like admission to a prestigious university, public acclaim, winning an award, or earning a promotion” (p. 1).

Young (2011) clarified that those with impostor syndrome believe erroneously that they lack intelligence, skills, and competencies; consequently, they feel undeserving of success. Young further predicted that times of transition, new challenges, and high-stakes assignments could cause impostor feelings to surface, even in otherwise confident, high-performing adults. Cuddy (2016) opined that impostorism is nondiscriminatory and knows no limits, as she recalled a conversation she had with Pauline Clance: “One more thing, if I could do it all over again, I would call it the impostor experience, because it’s not a syndrome or a complex or a mental illness. It’s something almost everyone experiences” (p. 95). Cuddy further explained that rates of perfectionism, performance anxiety, and societal expectations may contribute to the impostor syndrome. Nonetheless, Cuddy reported that fear of failure was recognized across numerous studies in different disciplines as the root cause of performance paralysis in otherwise highly capable individuals.

### **Writing Anxiety**

Candidates associated anxiety with producing doctoral level work, especially because “explicit instruction in areas such as ‘thesis writing’ and ‘writing for publication’ does not seem to be normal practice in higher education” (Ferguson, 2009, p. 286). Students can feel overwhelmed by feedback for revisions regardless of depth or breadth of the recommendations due to a lack of exposure to academic writing before program admission (Ondrusek, 2012; Thomas, Williams, & Case, 2014). When students can edit their work based upon the feedback of faculty or peers, students lacking research skills are likely to focus primarily on grammatical changes instead of strengthening their overall argument (Ondrusek, 2012).

Becoming a good writer requires a sense of vulnerability and discomfort inherent in the practice during multiple revisions. Additionally, O’Connor (2017) argued that when students face their intellectual inhibitions, it is not simply an issue of confidence in presenting ideas, but a compelling anxiety about the nature of formulating thoughts. Writing is a personal experience and receiving feedback requires a certain level of openness and willingness to take criticism (Ferguson, 2009; Liechty, Schull, & Liao, 2009). “We must recognize that the ability to write from a scholarly perspective is a skill that does not necessarily precede acceptance into a graduate program” (Ondrusek, 2012, p. 185). “Providing for supportive groups or peer review opportunities and providing prompt and meaningful feedback may foster writing efficacy in students” (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007, p. 817). O’Connor (2017) discussed how writing offers both an opportunity and a threat for students: “In the negotiation with the dissertation, there is a frustration in the inability we meet in ourselves, the lack of fluidity in expression and the sometimes torturous space between what we seek to express and what we actually express” (p. 3). Scholarly writing skills required in doctoral programs emphasize critical thinking, synthesis, and clarity of expression as essential for overall doctoral performance.

### **Productivity**

The final barrier to successful doctoral completion relates to overall productivity. Because graduate students are, on average, older, they often balance expectations of family, friends, community or civic involvement, and careers. Therefore, finding dedicated dissertation time can prove to be a barrier (Ondrusek, 2012). In a study of a predominantly Black female cohort, Holmes, Robinson, and Seay (2010) found that training in self-regulated learning in conjunction with effective mentoring can assure success for all students in the dissertation phase of doctoral study.

Ehrenberg et al. (2009) argued that graduate students who have assistantships and are provided opportunities to engage in research have increased levels of overall productivity and progress more quickly than peers with other jobs. Dominguez (2006) explicated the barriers to graduation linked to productivity as an inability to plan, procrastination, perfectionism, lack of research skills, and trouble selecting a topic.

## Supports to Completion

According to the Strategic Intervention for Doctoral Completion project, there are four conditions for optimal doctoral completion (Council of Graduate Schools, 2007). Condition 1 involves recruiting the right people for doctoral study and ensuring they clearly understand the rigors of doctoral education. Condition 2 logically involves admitting only those applicants who are the right candidates for doctoral study. Admissions committees are responsible for properly screening applicants and orienting them to the rigors and expectations of the program. In Condition 3, the study recommends promoting an environment in which students support each other's endeavors in a manner that prepares them for professional relationships that are collegial in nature. Last, Condition 4 emphasizes forming productive professional relationships between faculty and doctoral students so that doctoral students receive the support and mentorship necessary for completion.

### Cohort or Peer Support

Beyond the family, cohorts or writing groups can provide support for doctoral students. External factors tied to success include "advisor motivation, family support, and supervisor/institutional considerations" (Dominguez, 2006, p. 23). According to Varney (2010), the use of the cohort model is a program design option that positively impacts completion rates. Krueger and Peek (2006) noted that interpersonal relationships during the program of study was important for developing of academic skills associated with writing, teaching, and publishing.

### Mentors in the Academe

A faculty mentor can provide social and emotional guardianship in addition to the traditional academic support for the doctoral candidate during the dissertation. The dissertation chairperson has been found to be key to productivity as well as timely completion (Barnes, Williams, & Stassen, 2012; Burkard et al., 2014; Spillet & Moisiejewicz, 2004). Garger (2011) identified four essential roles of dissertation chairpersons as advocate, manager, leader, and judge, claiming the savvy chairperson applies the role appropriate to the needs of the protégé in varying situations.

Bloom, Propst Cuevas, Hall, and Evans (2007) claimed that the relationship between the chairperson and the candidate is the essential component in determining degree completion and must be based upon genuine care. For this reason, an understanding of selection criteria will help to guide decision making early in the dissertation process. Neale-McFall and Ward (2015) recommended that chairperson selection not be taken lightly, as it may determine the productivity and ultimately whether the candidate completes a doctoral program. The factors identified by students in selecting a chairperson in earlier decades centered around similar research interests, a potential chairperson's reputation for publishing, and whether the chair was knowledgeable in methodology (Lovitts, 2001; Smart & Conant, 1990). Alternately, current candidates seek a chairperson who is willing to support and nurture over one who is highly credentialed with an impressive research background or reputation (Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). Chairperson selection based upon genuine care and accessibility will move a student toward success. Additionally, a candidate should consider whether the potential chairperson acts as a role model in professional and personal matters, provides individualized guidance, and proactively integrates students into the profession, all indicators of a successful dissertation mentor.

In a metasynthesis of 118 studies on doctoral attrition, Bair and Haworth (2004) found most frequently that degree completion was directly related to the amount and quality of contact between doctoral students and their chairperson. Collaborative relationships with committee or other faculty members have also been found to positively impact completion results (Dominguez, 2006; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). When doctoral candidates can connect with research and learn about

publishing, they are more likely to feel connected to the community of the academy (Smallwood, 2006).

When candidates do not complete doctoral programs, along with psychological and economic losses, there are immeasurable voids in research both to the university and to the academe (Gilliam & Kritsonis, 2006; Grasso et al., 2009). After 40 years of research, and despite advancements in technology, pedagogy, and curriculum, the noncompletion rate may still be increasing (Miller, 2013). In this study, the researchers sought to understand the factors that thrust doctoral candidates to completion, whether quickly or on a delayed schedule.

## Methodology

The shared phenomenon of completing a dissertation in educational leadership at a Midwestern university was examined in this study. The use of phenomenological research allowed for the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' beliefs, values, attitudes, and past experience (Van Manen, 1997) based around a shared a common experience (Willis, 2001).

To examine this phenomenon, 30 degree completers were identified from a list of alumni from a doctor of education program in educational leadership at a Midwestern university to create a purposeful criterion sampling. The selected university doctoral degree program boasts a 95% completion rate, with only eight students identified as completed all requirements except the dissertation after 22 cohorts of this doctoral degree. For various reasons, 32 students did not advance to candidacy and, as such, are not included in the computation. Participants included 14 doctoral graduates, divided evenly between quick completers who completed their dissertation within 2 years of coursework completion ( $n = 7$ ) and delayed completers who took between 4 and 6 years after coursework to defend and complete their dissertations ( $n = 7$ ).

Individual, confidential interviews were conducted with each participant either in person or via Skype. Interviews, informed by a semistructured interview protocol, lasted between 30 and 45 min and began with a preformulated introductory question that allowed the research problem to remain in focus while the participants shared their stories (Witzel, 2000). Open-ended, thematic questions centered around guiding motivations, completion strategies, challenges/barriers derailing progress, triggers for reengaging, and general dissertation completion advice. This type of interview process allowed for the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to acquire additional information from the participant about the topic and to garner their feelings (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Welman & Kruger, 1999).

## Major Findings

Upon analysis, four major findings were found to inform the phenomenon of dissertation completion at this Midwestern university: (a) doctoral candidates were highly influenced by personal or environmental factors; (b) doctoral candidates may have experienced impostor syndrome; (c) the perceived value of institutional support was dynamic, varied among candidates, and changed over time; and (d) once delayed completers overcame their barriers and engaged in the dissertation process, their behaviors and strategies mirrored those of the quick completers.

### Personal or Environmental Factors

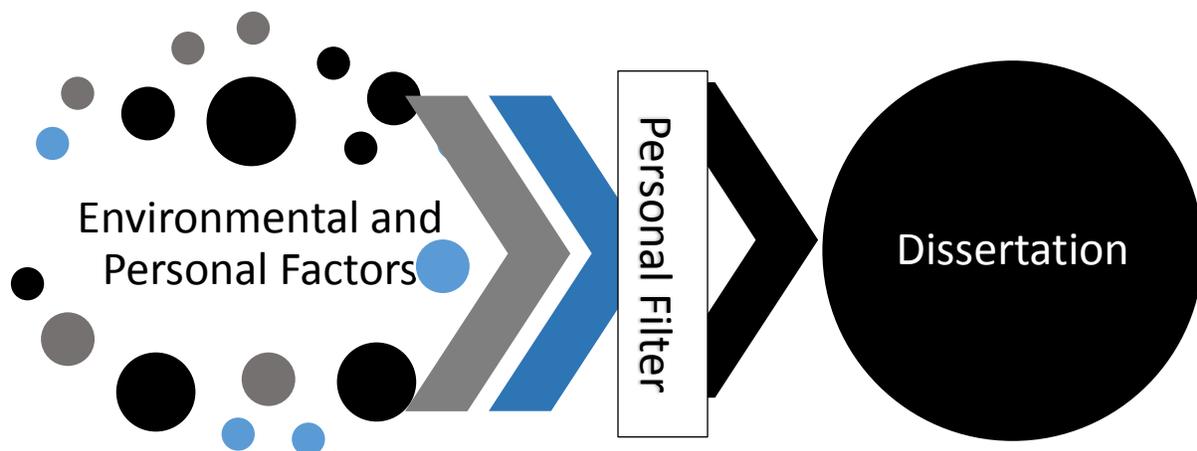
Personal or environmental factors proved to be serious considerations for candidates in pursuit of a doctoral degree. An event happened to each one of the participants during the writing process. Each story was unique. For some, a baby arrived. For others, a job change or health issue added chaos to their lives. Despite these changes, for the quick completers, these barriers did not delay their dissertation progress. One quick completer commented,

Moving, new job, surgery . . . I didn't let these stop me. I wasn't willing to not finish my dissertation. I invested a lot of money . . . you take time away from your family, your friends, your life and you commit to completing.

In contrast, a delayed completer commented on how change prevented him from moving forward with his dissertation:

I had some other job opportunities happening too. At that point, I was looking to be a principal. I had all sorts of change happening. I put the dissertation on the back burner. Initially I gave myself a year to attend to the new job and other things that would catch me back up with life. Little did I know that 1 year would turn into 4 to 5.

Regardless of the scenario, how the students responded to the environmental factors affected their journey through the dissertation process. The way students viewed their supports and barriers through their personal filters corresponded to their tenacity for degree completion, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** *Candidates Mitigate Environmental and Personal Factors Through a Personal Filter to Persist to Completion*

For the quick completers, the life event did not delay their progress or alter their drive toward completion. Conversely, these life events derailed many of the delayed completers for multiple years. Unable to overcome barrier(s) caused lengthy delays that resulted in a deficiency in their understanding of the dissertation process, research methodology, and academic writing. These candidates were more likely to delay completion extensively, often right up to the allowable 8-year completion deadline. As one delayed participant indicated, “You can only go so long without there being more and more negative consequences. My chairperson left the university and I knew I lost some of my understanding of methodology and how to write academically.” Another delayed student indicated, “My mother-in-law came down with Alzheimer’s disease so we were dealing with that and some respite issues. Those things were tough. Everything had a higher priority than my dissertation.”

Successful students overcame these environmental and personal factors. Accordingly, they assumed responsibility for their progress. They often communicated their challenge to their chairperson, reestablished their timelines, and continued to make progress. They identified the possible impact of the factor and created a plan for moving forward with their dissertations. Once candidates recognized the issue and trusted the process, they felt confident to move forward. As one quick

completer stated, “Sometimes you have to accept that things are not coming together for a reason. I had to be patient and persevere through each step in the process.” The sooner the students accepted responsibility for their progress, the more quickly they moved beyond excuses and forward with their dissertations.

Additionally, accepting responsibility for their dissertations was critical in overcoming unpredictable environmental factors that potentially impeded their progress. One participant, who was on a tight deadline, had her dissertation defense postponed. Rather than make excuses, she chose to learn from the delay and move forward:

I really didn't understand what I needed to understand. I really wasn't ready to defend. That was a really hard thing to accept because I needed to be done but because of my perseverance and my chair's unwillingness to give up on me, I never allowed myself to fail.

Overall, once engaged in the dissertation process, even delayed completers exhibited the characteristics of the quick finishers such as self-determination, making hard deadlines, redefining balance, and making the dissertation a priority. As one participant commented, “I was most productive when I had a deadline and structured time to meet the deadline. I had to set a schedule to set aside time to dig in and complete my work.” At times, this motivation was a result of a looming 8-year deadline. As one participant indicated, “Once I had my new chair secured, I knew my deadline was quickly approaching and that I had to really get busy.” As a result, this student regularly communicated with his chair, established firm deadlines, and wrote regularly. Again, these were characteristics exhibited by quick completers.

### **Impostor Syndrome**

A key finding from this research included students' ability or inability to mitigate the imposter syndrome successfully, as expressed by this candidate, “I'm sure others feel this way too, is you feel this sense of imposter's syndrome. Am I really in this program? Do I really have what it takes?” Delayed completers struggled with self-confidence regarding their ability to complete a dissertation. As one participant indicated,

Toward the end of the dissertation process I called my chair in tears and said, “I can't do this. I've gotten so many bad drafts from you. You have to think I am just a waste. I am a shame to [my university] because I can't do this. I can't give you what you're expecting or the quality of work that you need.” My barrier to finishing my dissertation was self-confidence.

Likewise, few participants indicated that they felt comfortable in their capacity as a scholarly writer. These feelings can be compounded by a lack of self-confidence in writing and research skills (Belcher, 2009; Ondrusek, 2012). Students reported great anxiety about their ability to complete an unfamiliar task as onerous as a dissertation, whether a quick or delayed completer. Some of the lack of confidence stemmed from how they were socialized into education. As one participant stated,

I was very hesitant to earn a doctoral degree for personal reasons. Everyone in my town thought I was a snob for staying in school. I came into my entire educational experience putting limitation on myself, thinking, “Oh, I could never do that. Oh, I could never do that.” So I always had a barrier in my mind that I couldn't do a dissertation. It was just something that I could never attain.

Overcoming doubt and establishing confidence in the dissertation process were critical to all participants. Once students embraced their discomfort and doubt regarding the dissertation process,

they could move forward. Often with the encouragement and support from their chairpersons, completers worked through their feelings of being an imposter.

Once engaged in the dissertation, behaviors of the quick and delayed completers mirrored one another. Both groups identified personal, individual research and writing structures that complemented them and often credited their expedience to their strong time-management skills or their personal success attributes. As one participant indicated, "I write in chunks. I need to sit down and spend some time with [my dissertation]. I had charts and graphs and I mapped things out. This organization allowed for a clear path to writing." Others detailed the importance of establishing timelines, having a designated workspace, and adhering to writing routines that worked best for them.

Another key characteristic to completion occurred when students realized and came to terms with the fact that the dissertation required time and sacrifice. Once they established reasonable expectations that the dissertation would require dedicated time and, as one participant stated, "would not write itself," they were more likely to complete in a timely manner. As one participant clarified,

[The dissertation process] changes you forever. It changes how you think and how you feel about research. I think you have to go into it understanding that you won't have much time for family and or friends or yourself. You are going to study and work and read and write and research constantly.

The delayed completers appeared to have an unrealistic understanding of the dissertation process. Upon completion of their coursework, most underestimated the time required to research and write a dissertation. Their initial expectations aligned with classroom assignments. As one stated,

I was used to having deadlines in my classes. I would write a paper, turn it in and receive a grade. Done! What I didn't expect is that with the dissertation, the first draft wouldn't be the final draft. A chapter would take three, four or five drafts.

Again, once students better understood the realities associated with writing a dissertation, they could move forward. As one student explained,

I received all As in my coursework. I thought the dissertation would be like writing a big paper. I underestimated the time and effort it takes to write a dissertation. I think I was used to turning in a paper, getting a grade and being done with it. The dissertation chapters kept coming back and coming back with more and more edits. I listened to graduates of the program explain the process and commitment but I never really understood until I had to do it myself.

Although many of the delayed completers contemplated quitting, most found some inner drive or external support. As one delayed completer shared,

I never quit anything before and by not finishing [the dissertation] was like a failure. There were lots of moments when I thought I was going to be a failure, to have to walk away, but I think having the support from my family kept me going.

Overall, students had great anxiety about their ability to complete the dissertation process. Often intimidated by the magnitude of the project and the perception that they lacked the skills to complete the dissertation, imposter syndrome was a reality for the students in the study. Despite

receiving affirmations from their faculty and high scores in their classes, completing the final state of the doctoral program was overwhelming for many. Rather than embrace the final challenge, many lost confidence and felt unprepared to complete the dissertation. As a result, they avoided the dissertation and delayed their progress. Despite feeling similar anxiety due to impostor syndrome quick completers did not let that fear overcome them. Although still nervous and unsure, they used their resources including their chairperson, peers, dissertation resources (books, workshops, online supports), and self-determination to move forward. In most cases, quick completers assumed responsibility for their progress. They created and stuck to a plan for completion. When they struggled with uncertainty, they utilized their support systems to help answer questions and overcome these barriers.

### **Institutional Support**

In this study, the perceived value of institutional support was dynamic, varied among students, and changed over time. Not every student needed the same support, as explained by this quick completer:

I set up an office in the basement and I spent 8, 10 hours down there. I'd stand and type and then when I couldn't stand anymore I'd sit and type because I had a tall table. I used our pool table and had every dissertation and every research student that I was pulling spread out. I created three giant binders with my chapter two support materials.

Another student who swiftly navigated the dissertation process with confidence commented, "You're off in your own world. This is fine for me because I am pretty self-directed. I know when to ask questions. I can do the research. I can stay focused." Whether support came in the form of the dissertation chairperson, committee member, program director, or peer, a variety of institutional supports were necessary to guarantee completion. Understanding the unique needs and motivations of students critically contributed to candidates' timeline for completion.

Candidates found that coaching from their dissertation chairpersons was vital to their completion, whether as a quick or delayed completer. Multiple students commented that the relationship with their chairperson was vital to their success. As one participant indicated,

When you have a partnership with a chairperson that's going to go beyond the norm, recognizing that you are giving them all you got, then you have a commitment to each other. I always felt I had a strong commitment from my chair.

Similarly, a student who struggled with self-confidence throughout the dissertation process relied heavily on her chairperson to keep her motivated and positive:

I had self-esteem issues. If it hadn't been for [my chairperson], I would have quit, but my chair would say, "We've come too far. We're not quitting." The fact that it was a partnership and a journey for both of us actually got me to finish.

Institutional-related support came in the form of peer support from the student's cohort member and another from an online support group. For example, one participant commented on how her relationship with a member of her cohort proved important:

One of the main keys to a person being resilient is that they have to have people who care and encourage them along the way. That's I think a big part

of what kept me going. I had a member of my cohort who was at the same stage as me. We really pushed and motivated each other.

Another participant, who was 6 years removed from his cohort and therefore felt disconnected from his university peers, found support from an online dissertation group. Suggested by his chairperson, this individual discovered peer encouragement another way:

I joined an online national dissertation-writing group. It was about \$50 and I became part of a group of people working on their dissertation. I did that for a semester where we kind of reached out to each other, tried to push each other a little bit. These were people I've never met before but we helped each other keep going.

Other institutional supports that participants found helpful included a summer dissertation-writing institute as well as faculty-developed online dissertation resources. Faculty offered a 4-day dissertation-writing workshop where students could connect with faculty, methodologist, and librarians as well as immerse themselves in the dissertation. Many participants who attended commented on how the dissertation camp either reengaged them in the dissertation process or moved them forward. As one shared, "The dissertation camp was helpful. I was able to refocus and get back on track mentally." Likewise, another workshop attendee and participant commented on how the summer institute was critical to her progress:

One thing that I think really helped me the most, at first, was the fact that the department offered kind of like a boot camp where [the instructor] went over everything about what we need to do in terms of what to expect. Here's all the chapters and here's what you include in the chapters, and here's how you do it. She guided us at the beginning, which really motivated me because that gave me direction. I'm the type of person who likes to go through everything, check off on the check list, needs to know what to do, so having that guidance, those prompts of direction of where to go really helped me.

Similarly, another participant appreciated how the program director sought her out and encouraged her to attend the camp to reconnect with her chairperson and her dissertation:

I think the biggest thing that helped me get back on track was the [program director] reaching out to help me reconnect with the department and reinforce the looming deadline. She also encouraged me to attend a summer dissertation boot camp where I was able to completely immerse myself in the dissertation.

Another critical institutional support was the online dissertation resources created by the faculty. These just-in-time resources included prerecorded lectures overviewing each aspect of the dissertation, methodology aids, example dissertations, and other dissertation-related tools, as one participant revealed:

The dissertation resources we had in the [online management system] really helped. The impact of having all the department resources available to me when I needed them was really helpful. Listening [to my instructor's] voice in her videos outlining the process was really inspiring. I felt like I was with [her].

Similarly, another participant commented on the helpfulness of the online resources: "All the advice I got [from the online tools] was invaluable. That stuff was amazing."

At times, this motivation was a result of a looming 8-year deadline. As one participant indicated, “Once I had my new chair secured, I knew my deadline was quickly approaching and that I had to really get busy.”

Students sought equitable support, whether they knew what institutional supports were available or not. One participant had back surgery during her doctoral studies. She thought about quitting but the program administrator provided the necessary encouragement for her to continue. She provided individual assistance and accommodations to “ensure that I didn’t quit. The health issues were detrimental to me. The faculty and administrators worked with me.”

## **Overcoming Barriers**

Participants in this study, especially delayed completers, found challenges similar to those experienced by cohorts of students studied over the past 5 decades. These challenges included insufficient knowledge of research and writing, lack of a sense of urgency, and chairperson difficulties.

### ***Insufficient Knowledge of Research and Writing***

Especially for the delayed completer, the extended time between research courses and designing dissertation methodology contributed to a deterioration in their understanding of research methodology and design. As one participant eluded,

You go back into those research classes and there’s an assumption that you already know some of that stuff, but it’s not familiar as it should be and my lack of understanding of research slowed me down in the dissertation.

Similarly, having been away from the classroom and academic writing for some time, delayed completers lacked confidence in their writing skills. As one participant shared,

[Writing and making progress] was a private thing for me. If I finished a chapter, I just sent it to my chair. I didn’t want anyone to know if I failed because she didn’t like it. I really struggled with confidence in my writing. I knew my first few drafts of my dissertation were horrible. The writing was so bad.

Their fear of writing extended to their anxiety related to receiving feedback and the desire to submit perfect versions to their chairpersons. For one participant, the extensive feedback she received on a submitted draft influenced her confidence moving forward:

I submitted my first draft of my dissertation. My chair cut it up and I thought, “I can’t do this. I can’t do this.” I kept putting off the rewrite and then I reminded myself that, “It doesn’t have to be perfect, just get it done.”

Likewise, participants’ perceived need to submit a perfect draft stagnated their progress. As one participant commented,

I had a hard time submitting work to someone I saw as a higher power than me of something that was not polished or perfect. I’m thinking, “I can’t waste my chair’s time with something that isn’t a polished product,” but I couldn’t get to that end, that polished product without her help.

Participants acknowledged that they often regarded the chairperson as an instructor in addition to serving as dissertation adviser. One candidate admitted, “I wish I would have had a stronger research background going into the dissertation. I felt I knew a lot, but when I got into it, then I

realized that I didn't." Students indicated that the role of the chairperson as advocate and leader was not beneficial until their admitted deficits in knowledge of methodology and writing were moderated.

### ***Lack of a Sense of Urgency***

Unlike the quick finishers, delayed completers had a lack of urgency to complete the dissertation. Aligned with their lack of urgency to complete, they also lacked the self-direction or structure we found in the quick completers. The delayed completers often intentionally took an academic break after completing their coursework. Knowing they had multiple years to complete their dissertations, they used the time away to acquire new professional positions, reconnect with family and friends, or simply decompress after the intense coursework years. As one participant reinforced, "I saw members of my cohort and the cohorts ahead of me take a year off between classes and their dissertation so I didn't think there was a sense of urgency." Little did this participant know that his 1-year break turned into 4. In hindsight, he wished he had never taken the initial break because, "once I removed myself from the program, it was really hard to reengage." Coupled with a lack of urgency was a lack of personal accountability or deadlines. As one participant informed,

There was no accountability in my nonproductive times. The only deadlines I had were the ones I made myself and those were like your New Year's resolution that nobody ever keeps. Because I didn't have the structure of a classroom setting, I didn't have any sort of accountability.

In offering advice to others to avoid delayed completion, most participants discussed the need for firm deadlines. Once clear accountability measures were in place, delayed completers often became more productive.

### ***Chairperson Difficulties***

Most relationships between students and chairperson were positive and integral to student success. There were a few occasions where disagreements between the chairperson and student or the chairperson leaving the university affected the student's progress. For one student, faculty turnover affected his progress:

There was a lot of faculty turnover. When I was done with coursework, I changed chairs three times because faculty left. If three hadn't been so much turnover, my story might have been different. I may have continued my momentum and finished much sooner. By the time I was ready to get back to my dissertation, my chair left the university. Her departure really stalled me again. I had phone conversations with new faculty in the department but didn't feel a strong connection with them.

Additionally, some participants felt that unclear expectations by their chairpersons hindered their progress: "The discrepancy between clear expectations was a challenge that made it nonproductive to me." In another instance, a student submitted what she thought was her final draft to her chairperson. Three weeks after the submission, the student inquired with her chairperson regarding feedback. She received none but an email stating, "Send it to your committee." The participant continued:

I knew the document wasn't ready but she told me to go ahead without any feedback . . . I felt blindsided at the defense and I don't think I should have been. I think she didn't read the document and sent me to defense before I was ready. . . I wasn't getting the guidance or support I needed from her.

Some of the participants relegated all managerial functions of the dissertation to the chairperson; others were forced to handle elements as volatile as committee tension:

I involved my three committee members throughout the process. They all did not want the same thing. I would change the document for one and then have to change it again for another. Finally, I had to say, “These are the points which you do not agree on and you two need to decide how you want me to do it.”

The academic hierarchy, often daunting for students, is the gateway into the academe. Participants who are now professors spoke strongly of the importance of the chairperson–candidate relationship and many have modelled their practice after the experiences they had on their dissertation journey.

## Implications

From the findings, multiple implications inform practice for students, faculty, chairpersons, and doctoral program directors. The associated implications for dissertation completion are not intended to be considered a generic template. Moreover, the findings from this study reinforce the notion that individual students’ motivation, drive and confidence levels determine the pace toward completion of the doctoral degree. Although common approaches to the dissertation span disciplines and institutions, doctoral students voiced the importance of their unique needs as they reflected on their dissertation completion. For students, self-awareness was essential and communicating their preferred learning style, writing preferences, and support systems were critical to their success.

### For Students

Based on the findings, there are multiple implications to inform students as they approach the dissertation. First, students must understand, recognize and address the insecurities related to impostor syndrome. Rather than allow impostor syndrome to impede their progress, students may increase productivity by creating partnerships with fellow students to serve as an accountability partner support the productivity of the writer (Ferguson, 2009). These partnerships may include setting timelines to which students are held accountable. If, for any reason, a student does not meet the deadline, reflection, discussion, and problem solving should be implemented. Ongoing communication with the chairperson is also essential. Regular, student-initiated contact with the chairperson is critical to student completion. Students must honestly communicate their challenges and insecurities with their chairperson and seek out their guidance and advice.

Next, self-awareness is critical at the dissertation phase. Students need to remain committed to the process by clearly understanding their motivations. Whether it be to make a family member proud or to move to the next professional level, their motivation to complete will keep them moving forward. Additionally, students need to know what works best for them. For example, they need to communicate what they need from their chairperson, know their productive writing times, understand the obstacles may prevent them from making progress, and implement the rewards systems keep them making progress.

Last, building writing and research skills throughout the coursework may improve a student’s level of confidence at the dissertation phase. By seeking out research opportunities throughout the degree program, research knowledge and practice increases. Additionally, preparing related literature reviews familiarizes the student with the synthesis process and provides opportunity for feedback on writing.

### For Doctoral Program Directors, Faculty, and Chairpersons

In the dissertation completion process, the role of the doctoral program director, faculty and chairpersons cannot be underestimated. One way to support students in reaching their graduation goal is to build in to internal characteristics tied to success include “planning, personal disposition and communication” (Dominguez, 2006, p. 22). Overcoming impostor syndrome is essential to their

completion. The role of faculty is vital. Faculty can help students enhance their dissertation-related skills and confidence by providing regular encouragement, offering constructive feedback, and incorporating meaningful assignments that relate to or inform the dissertation. These assignments can take the form of pilot studies, literature reviews, article critiques, and dissertation reviews. With the early identification of a dissertation topic, students may use course-related assignments to inform their understanding of the topic.

Additionally, the role of the chairperson is critical to a student's completion. Creating mutually agreed-upon goals and deadlines, with accountability measures are key (Ferguson, 2009). Similar to a classroom setting, by imposing deadlines with consequences, students are more likely produce. We strongly encourage regular communication between the chairperson and student. Gearity and Mertz (2012) offered guidance through an autoethnographical inquiry to inform practice on the student–chair relationship and effective mentoring in the dissertation journey. Understanding that imposter syndrome causes students to withdraw, chairpersons must regularly check in with students to offer encouragement, support, and guidance.

Departmentally, faculty and program directors cannot assume that because students completed their doctoral coursework, they are confident and prepared to write the dissertation. Departmental training in dissertation writing and research is recommended to aid students. This training can come in the form of workshops, additional coursework, or faculty consultations. We found that students often needed just-in-time dissertation information. They needed information and explanation of different components of the dissertation, when they were at that stage. We recommend using technology and the availability of virtual learning environments to provide students with dissertation-related resources including pre-recorded lectures.

## Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study also may inform future research. First, participants shared their personal experiences of how they made sense of the dissertation process. Imperative to gathering their insights, the findings are limited to their perspectives and recollection of the lived experience of completers. An interesting next step would be to interview the student and the chairperson and/or committee members to ascertain a more holistic perspective of the student's dissertation journey. Understanding the chairperson's role and perception of the student's progress would prove informative. Next, this study included participants from one institution and one doctoral program. Additionally, the participants had a familiarity with the researchers. The researchers did not chair or serve on participants' committees; participant responses may have been limited because of the researchers' collegial relationships with their chairpersons. Our recommendation is to expand the scope of this study by interviewing quick and delayed completers at other institutions and in other doctoral programs to include a larger, more diverse sample. Next, we recommend expanding the study to include quick completers, delayed completers, and noncompleters. Understanding why some students do not complete may allow for an informative comparison of dissertators' behaviors, strategies, motivations, and barriers that inform completion. Last, future research could include quantitative approaches to examine the institutional and sociocultural aspects of dissertation completion.

## Summary

The dissertation and doctoral degree completion is transformational by design. The mentoring relationship between the candidate and chairperson is pivotal to successful and timely degree completion, as well as to the mitigation of unavoidable personal and environmental challenges that present. Despite 4 decades of research on dissertation completion, little is known about the dynamics of the candidate–chairperson relationship. Further research is warranted on how this relationship is modulated by the personal efficacy of the doctoral student and the chairperson.

The impostor syndrome emerged as another area of interest for future study. The researchers found that when considering time-to-completion rates for doctoral candidates and indicators of student senses of self-efficacy and confidence, highly successful students may present impostor syndrome attributes. Further, the study results suggest that informed selection of chairperson, based upon genuine care and nurturing, will benefit all students, whether they are quick starters or delayed completers.

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