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Wait! Don't Quit! Stay with your Doctoral Program During the Global Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Program Completers

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Wait! Don't Quit! Stay with your Doctoral Program During the Global Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Program Completers

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Abstract

Using the self-determination theory framework developed by Ryan and Deci (2000), this study explored the facilitation strategies doctoral candidates used to stay on task during the global pandemic. Areas of inquiry included academic progression, dissertation research writing processes and addressing impacts on work, academic studies and persistence. The study used a phenomenological approach of qualitative research design. Ten participants were selected using a convenient sampling method. Three themes emerged from the data that included (1) Balancing work and life quality issues, (2) Mastering academic protocols (3) Developing collective efficacy in scholar development. This study revealed that student dependence on the guidance of the chair and committee is a critical component to individual decision-making regarding program persistence and project completion. Study results affirm the importance of faculty intentionality in providing more support for students during times of crisis.

KEY WORDS: doctoral student persistence, academic protocols, collective efficacy, scholar development

Introduction

The high attrition rate of doctoral students remains a significant problem in higher education and remains a troubling phenomenon. Alarming, 40-60% of doctoral students will not complete doctoral studies and this trend continues upward for virtual doctoral programs. Still today, attrition rates maintain at unacceptable levels, and the institutions granting doctoral degrees are faced with the undaunting tasks of identifying the contributing factors for low attrition rates, (Bogle, 2010; Levitch & Shaw, 2014). The Council of Graduate Schools continues to explore doctoral completion and attrition nationally. A recent study explored 49,000 students attending 30 institutions in 54 disciplines comprising 330 programs. Surprisingly, the completion rate ten years after students begin doctoral program remains low at 56.6% (Council of Graduate Schools, 2015a, 2015b).

This research finding confirms that low attrition rates for doctoral students to complete programs are a confounding and perplexing problem for academic entities. Universities are challenged to provide the support structures needed to keep doctoral students connected to their studies. Doctoral students are among the brightest students enrolled in advanced studies and it is a significant loss to the student and the university to lose this level of academic talent. This study is important because it seeks more information that is needed to assist doctoral candidates in successfully completing doctoral programs that are currently exacerbated by the global pandemic. This research seeks to better understand how the pandemic impacted doctoral candidates' academic progression, dissertation research writing processes, and strategic approaches needed to stay on task.

Statement of the Problem

Doctoral students remain a highly vulnerable group in persisting through to program completion (Börgeson, et al., 2021). Several researchers Rigler, Bowlin, Sweat, Watts, Throne, (2017) concluded that traditional doctoral programs experience attrition rates exceed 50 percent and attrition in online doctoral programs sometimes exceeds 75 percent. When the disruption caused by the pandemic is factored in, doctoral students may struggle with mental health issues including staying focused on academic work, balancing multiple priorities, and persisting through to degree completion. Universities must become more intentional in informing doctoral students of the rigors associated with doctoral study. Holmes et al. (2014) pointed out that students should be informed of the rigor associated with a doctoral program before program admission, especially when candidates are unclear about what is expected of them, what doctoral study entails, or the educational process, as these lead to increased attrition.

Literature Review

The literature review supporting this study explored the issues associated with doctoral student persistence and attrition. The extant literature helps to fuel understanding of the persistent nature of doctoral student attrition and its related causes; The purpose of this critical review explores literature focusing on accelerated factors during a pandemic that contribute to students withdrawing from doctoral programs. The literature also explores reasons and attributes for improved persistence to completion of doctoral programs. Overall, the review focuses on four different perspectives: 1) doctoral student attrition, 2) doctoral student concerns, 3) doctoral student supervision, and 4) impact of pandemic disruption.

Doctoral Student Attrition

Pyhältö et al. (2012) concluded that doctoral study is complex and is impacted by a variety of factors outside of the control of the student. Factors affecting the doctoral learning experience include the support structures in the scholarly community, the supervisory relationship, student's self-efficacy and research beliefs and the academic norms of the disciplinary. Consequently, students may experience high degrees of anxiety.

Since the 1970's, studies suggested that the relationship between the doctoral student and the dissertation chair (mentor) is a major factor in doctoral student success (Heinrich, 1991, 1995; Heiss 1970; Spillett and Moisiejewicz, 2004; and Zhao, Golde, and McCormick, 2007). Additionally, doctoral students' persistence is influenced by the quality of mentoring received. Roberts et al. (2019), emphasized there are many assigned responsibilities for mentors of doctoral students (e.g., teaching, advising, subject matter and methods expertise) that may impact the time available to support individual doctoral students. Sugimoto (2012) further advised that mentoring of doctoral students involved activities carried out by multiple individuals (the dissertation chair, dissertation committee members, and fellow doctoral students). Consequently, no one person has singular responsibility for assuring the quality and quantity of mentoring proffered.

As doctoral students continue to engage in experiences designed to enhance knowledge while achieving specific milestones related to dissertation topics, situated learning theory posits that these learners move along a continuum of accumulated successes (Throne and Oddi, 2019). Therefore, multiple factors explain why doctoral students leave programs. Researchers revealed through empirical investigation that doctoral student attrition is associated with three primary factors: 1) stress (Lovitts, 2001), 2) feelings of social isolation (Ali and Kohun, 2006 and 2007; Hawlery, 2003; Lewis et al. 2004) and 3) personality (Furnham et al., 2013).

Doctoral Student Concerns

Eigege, Kennedy (2021) reported that doctoral students' main concerns involved having to shift learning priorities, such as transitioning to online learning and changing research agendas. Other disrupting concerns were worrying about health-related problems, mental health issues, and financial limitations. One doctoral student found it difficult to maintain a healthy routine when confined to the house and not being able to have an active lifestyle while at times dealing with bouts of depression. Another participant expressed concern about eating habit changes particularly when the pandemic forced the ordering of food and eating in isolation. In addition, study participants reported increased alcohol consumption causing a concern for not being able to maintain a robust dissertation process development routine (*Dan, Interview, 11/23/21*).

Doctorial Student Supervision

There is growing literature on doctoral supervision recognizing the significance of reviewing student-supervisor expectations during the doctoral program (Parker-Jenkins, 2016; Sambrook, 2016; Stracke & Kumar, 2020). A key finding is developing and maintaining good student and supervisor rapport which is viewed as an increasingly essential part of the supervision process (Howells et al., 2017; Mantai, 2019; Vereijken et al., 2018), and a major factor for student success (Roach et al., 2019). Developing and facilitating such a relationship, however, presents challenges to students and supervisor. Prazeres' (2017) research illustrated how the supervisor and their role is very important to the success of the doctoral student and program completion. Research also illustrated doctoral candidates need access to regular communication with the dissertation chairs (Holmes, Trimble, & Morrison-Danner, 2014). Holley and Caldwell (2012) found that students in doctoral programs were more likely to

complete doctoral programs and experience greater satisfaction when engaged in meaningful interaction with the dissertation chair. Chairs who were overly involved in their own research agenda and thus not available for regular candidate supervision and feedback were a detriment to candidate success (Herman, 2011; Holmes et al., 2014; Van de Schoot, Yerkes, Mouw, & Sonneveld, 2013); whereas advisors who were not only available but also initiated regular student meetings had advisees with higher completion rates (Stock & Siegfried, 2014). Prazeres (2017) posited that the supervisor's role is very important to the success of the doctoral student and career success.

Impact of Pandemic Disruption

The COVID-19 pandemic created the largest disruption of education systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries. Closures of schools, institutions and other learning spaces impacted more than 94% of the world's student population (Sintema, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption for students in doctoral programs and perhaps the most difficult for doctoral students working on dissertation research. The complete nationwide lockdown was implemented on August 1, 2020 (Palden, 2020). The pandemic disruption caused numerous of colleges and universities to discontinue face-to-face teaching and forced some students to be introduced to virtual learning. The rapid and unanticipated shift to remote instruction proposed challenges for some students and instructors who lacked the requisite computer skills to implement online education (Goldstein et al., 2020). The common finding in various research studies indicated that doctoral students experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, which was noted due to the lack of resources during the pandemic (Zahneis & June, 2020). An elevated amount of work assignments also caused higher stress levels amongst doctoral students (Van Rooij et al., 2021). Even though prior research illustrates stress related to financial support and other challenges in the academic community existed before the global crisis; it has been noted that during the pandemic, the financial considerations affected more doctoral students' workload and mental health. This had a direct effect on doctoral student dissertation progress, and was intensified by the pandemic. (Fernandez et al., 2021; McAlpine, 2017).

Theoretical Perspective

Self-Determination Theory may be useful in understanding the doctoral attrition phenomenon. Self-Determination Theory is presented and used as a framework to identify potential causes and barriers in the doctoral student experience that may lead to not completing the doctoral program. These concerns were explored to understand the concerns expressed by doctoral students. Self-Determination Theory focuses on study of human motivation and personality and the psychological needs that an individual requires to function at their "best". Specifically, these needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The theory posits that if an individual has these needs met, the individual will be more motivated and experience better mental health than if these needs are not met, or are not met adequately (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Methodology

This inquiry employed a phenomenological research method to explore the lived experiences of participants who experienced the journey to dissertation completion. During November and December 2021, 18 doctoral graduates from various doctoral-granting institutions were invited to complete an online questionnaire consisting of demographic questions and six open-ended questions about experiences in completing the doctoral program. Of the 18 students invited to participate, 10 students completed the survey. The analysis involved several cycles of reviewing and coding the data, which yielded common codes, categories, and eventually themes. The researchers collaborated in discussing the codes and determining the themes that summarized participant responses.

Sample Population

Study participants (N = 10) had different professional backgrounds and work experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the emergent nature of the pandemic, no face-to-face interviews occurred. Alternatively, the investigators utilized the Zoom video conferencing platform to host a focus group interview session.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Job Title	Ethnicity	Gender
Participant #1 "Dan"	Chief, Patron Awareness Marketing Director	Caucasian	Male
Participant #2 "Stacey"	Teacher	African American	Female
Participant #3 "Ronald"	Associate Professor	African American	Male
Participant #4 "Charles"	Area Superintendent	Caucasian	Male
Participant #5 "Martha"	Chief Executive Officer	African American	Female
Participant #6 "Paul"	School Principal	African American	Female
Participant #7 "Luciana"	School Counselor	Hispanic	Female
Participant #8 "Pamela"	Assistant School Principal	African American	Female
Participant #9 "Teresa"	Director of Admissions	African American	Female
Participant #10 "Carol"	School Principal	African American	Female

Ethics and Confidentiality

An ethical issue of research is important, and therefore, the researcher applied pseudonyms to the study participants to protect anonymity. The researchers made sure there were

ample provisions made to protect the privacy of all participants and the confidentiality of all data collected. All participants were assured there would be no violation of privacy or infringement of confidentiality from the researcher.

Ethical Consideration is critical to qualitative research, as is confidentiality and consent (Creswell, 2013). The researcher honored the virtues of integrity, sincerity, respect, and dignity for all human subjects (Macfarlane, 2010, Polit & Beck, 2012). The researcher sent an encrypted email to each participant to read and sign the written letter of consent form prior to any initiation of the interview process. The researcher also verbally explained to the voluntary participants in the research study of their rights as research subjects. Each participant signed a written letter of consent and emailed the signed consent form back to the researcher. Each participant was also advised of the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any unfavorable consequences.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of transcripts presented below resulted in the development of three emerging themes that include (1) Balancing work and life quality issues, (2) Mastering academic protocols (3) Developing collective efficacy in scholar development.

Theme One: Balancing work and life quality issues

Each of the 10 study participants made mention of balancing work and life quality issues. Balancing of work and life quality issues would be attributed to time management and mental health. These factors are associated with increased student stress. The Committee on the College Student (2000) summarized that doctoral students face enormous demands upon their time, intelligence, energy, patience, and organizational skills which heightens stress levels. Larger amounts of stress are experienced when it involves multiple and persistent stressors, rather than a single stressor (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Notably, (Dan) mentioned time constraints such as “Balancing my class schedule while working a fulltime job. Also, my dissertation chair was in a different time zone.” (Dan) said “I set goals and time limits for what I was going to write each day.”

Theme Two: Mastering Academic Protocols

Beauchamp et al, (2009) detailed the academic protocols that define the doctoral student experience in North American universities and explained that the academic protocol structure for doctoral students to master is a series of formal stages as part of a doctoral program process. Doctoral students have required courses, writing comprehensive examinations, passing program milestones, defending a dissertation proposal, and finally writing and defending a dissertation. At any stage in the process, students may be unsuccessful and vulnerable to attrition. Doctoral students must become keenly aware and intuitive about individual academic progress and the development of the scholarly identity. A doctoral student’s sense of progress is critical to a student’s sense of community, of belonging, of academic scholarly identity. Several participants in the study expressed frustration with specific benchmark points in the doctoral program with most responses focused on the breakdown in the chair /committee relationship. Responses from

participants were similar in nature when discussing the dissertation experience. Participants reported some type of failure experienced when attempting to develop a relationship with the committee. For example, (Charles) indicated that “he was disappointed in his chair’s lack of knowledge on his dissertation topic and progress.” (Paul) noted “it was frustrating not having accessibility and quality time to converse about his topic with the supervisory committee on regular basis”. (Paul) also stated “the supervisors’ committee did not assume accountability for making sure the research direction stayed on track or provided feedback in a timely manner.” (P). (Pamela) expressed that “expectations from the supervisory committee were not met in regard to meeting frequently, program guidance, setting deadlines, and receiving recommendations on her dissertation topic.” All participants concurred there was minimal effort from their supervisory committee to build a relationship, which caused no rapport to be established. This is not shocking, given that research is stressing the significance of a supportive committee that provides academic direction, providing feedback, updating on research progress, and allowing supervisor access (Abiddin, 2018; Gunnarsson et al., 2013; Naim & Dhanapal, 2015; Parker-Jenkins, 2016; Tahir et al., 2012)

Theme Three: Developing Collective Efficacy in Scholar Development

Donohoo, Hattie and Eells (2018), emphasized that higher levels of student achievement transpired when educators believe in their collective ability to lead the improvement of student outcomes. This collective efficacy is apparent when educators see themselves as part of a team working for their students. This study revealed a breakdown in collective efficacy as students progressed through the doctoral program.

Willis and Carmichael (2011) explored relational efficacy among doctoral students and supporting committees. This study revealed that doctoral students identified that the greatest barrier to their success in the degree program was a problematic relationship with the dissertation chair. One of the most critical factors in the successful completion of a doctorate degree is incorporating a positive and non-hierarchical relationship between the doctoral dissertation chair and the doctoral candidate (Bitzer, 2011; Stallone, 2011; Storms et al., 2011). All participants spoke candidly about experiences with the dissertation chair and or committee. (Carol) stated that the dissertation chair “Was not as responsive as I'd hoped.” However, (Luciana) experienced a different result describing that “It was excellent. I was very lucky to have a very strong chair and supportive readers.”

When referring to the dissertation committee, (Teresa) observed that, “the doctoral committee was spread thin with multiple doctoral students.” (Luciana) further explained, “I changed committees three times before I graduated, so not good!” In addition, (Charles) posited “I had a committee member to drop when my chair left the university.”

Results and Discussion

Summary

This study continues to inform understanding of the challenges faced by doctoral students in completing academic programs. It also contributes literature on doctoral education by documenting a range of impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. Although this study took place during a statistically rare crisis, institutions of higher learning need to clarify and prioritize its mission in doctoral education and the structures that support those students (Donohue et al., 2021). A key transitional point appears to center around the development of the academic relationship with the chair and committee charged with guiding the dissertation project to completion. This study reveals that the dependence of students on this guidance is critical to their decision-making regarding program persistence. Therefore, collective efficacy may offer a strategic response to student concerns. In collective efficacy, both student and committee share the commitment to work together until successful completion. This involves paying more attention to the stress points and stressors that impact the doctoral journey. Donohoo (2018) suggests that collective efficacy is manifested when instructors and students view themselves as part of the same team driven by the improvement in student achievement outcomes. Doctoral student persistence is important to the academy and being more intentional about improved student outcomes may benefit the student and the academic enterprise.

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