Faculty Perspectives on Strategies for Successful Navigation of the Dissertation Process in Counselor Education

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This research was conducted as part of a larger qualitative study that involved the collection and analysis of in-depth interviews with 15 counselor educators at counselor education and supervision doctoral programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The participants were asked to identify strategies used to help students navigate the dissertation process and if the strategies were successful. Structural and relational strategies were identified as significant to the successful completion of the dissertation process. Although additional research is necessary to determine if the strategies are successful for faculty and students in other counselor education and supervision doctoral programs, we identified five themes that support the completion of the dissertation process: (a) mechanics of the program, (b) supportive environment, (c) selecting and working with committee members, (d) intentionality in developing a scholar identity, and (e) accountability.

Keywords: dissertation process, counselor education and supervision, CACREP, strategies, doctoral

Nearly 100,000 people pursue a doctoral degree in the United States every year (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). The pursuit of a doctoral degree in one's identified field of study is considered an extraordinary feat. Earning a doctoral degree is an indication that one has achieved the apex in their identified area of expertise. Nevertheless, across all disciplines, the doctoral completion rate lags at 57% (Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). There is a paucity of literature regarding how individuals navigate the process necessary to obtain a doctoral degree, including completing a dissertation. As with other fields, counselor education has a dearth of research into factors associated with doctoral completion and graduation (Golde, 2005; Hill et al., 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009).

The dissertation process can be confusing and arduous despite completing the journey with the support and guidance of a faculty member chairperson (Mauch & Park, 2003). The chairperson holds a senior position in terms of knowledge in the field and understanding of the process needed to ensure a successful dissertation. Although this process can take differing paths depending on the field, completing the dissertation is the ultimate goal in order to cross the threshold of earning a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or Doctor of Education (EdD) degree. For doctoral candidates who desire to progress through the dissertation process, a successful dissertation is the difference between achieving the pinnacle of one's educational and professional goals versus remaining at the "all but dissertation" (ABD) phase.

Two major themes exist in the research literature relevant to successful dissertation experiences: the development of research identity and the importance of the advising relationship (Limberg et al., 2013; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). Further, Flynn et al. (2012) developed a theory that explains the experiences

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of counseling professionals during the dissertation phase. Their specific theory of initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation includes three elements: relational factors (i.e., personal relationships and friends), professional factors (i.e., career and professional identity), and internal factors (i.e., within the person). These themes are explored to position this study in the context of what is currently known about high-quality doctoral dissertation advising from the perspective of the chairperson, which further supports the theory of initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation process.

Research Identity Development

The experiences and challenges associated with the pursuit of a doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision (CES) have received increased focus within scholarly literature (Hinkle et al., 2014; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lamar & Helm, 2017; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). Critical to the pursuit of a doctoral degree is the scholarly identity forged among students during the dissertation process (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Limberg et al., 2013). For some doctoral students, the pursuit of a doctoral degree in CES is connected to research interests and goals developed during post–master's degree experiences (Farmer et al., 2017; Hinkle et al., 2014). Upon entering a doctoral program, students often maintain those initial interests and goals or adopt new interests that align with expanded goals and/or faculty and program expectations (Lei, 2009). According to Hoskins and Goldberg (2005), congruence between students' goals, faculty expectations, and doctoral program goals is a key determinant of student attrition and persistence in CES doctoral programs.

Faculty have an important role in the development of a scholar and research identity among CES doctoral students (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Limberg et al., 2013). Relationships with mentors and faculty contribute to doctoral students' professional identity development as counselor educators (Limberg et al., 2013). To that end, faculty support is important in doctoral students' research identity development (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Lamar and Helm, 2017). Nevertheless, gaps persist within the study of research identity development in CES. Although there has been examination into students' rationales for the pursuit of graduate education in professional counseling and how this pursuit informs the development of one's professional identity (Limberg et al., 2013), less is known about the experiences of doctoral students in CES (Dollarhide et al., 2013). As a result, little is known about the professional, research, and scholar identity development of doctoral students in CES and how doctoral study impacts the aforementioned areas of identity development (Dollarhide et al., 2013).

Chairpersons provide research-related ideas, strategies, and requirements useful to the development of students' research identity. Examples of ideas and strategies include students seeing themselves as knowledge creators, the ability to identify gaps in literature, and a focus on completing a study that can be done in a reasonable time (Dollarhide et al., 2013). The dissertation stage is a place where students understand and accept their responsibility for creating new knowledge in the field. Yet, as faculty postulate these ideas and disseminate their recommendations to doctoral candidates, there may be a disconnect between seeing one's role as a knowledge creator (student) and gatekeeper (faculty).

As gatekeepers for their doctoral candidates, faculty create barriers and maintain rules around what they deem is research, a structure for how to conduct research, and how the research will impact the field of counselor education. Researchers have yet to explore how students receive this feedback. Having their needs considered and receiving consistent feedback have been outlined as helpful with doctoral students understanding how gatekeeping supports them throughout the dissertation process (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Hilliard, 2013).

Approaches to Advising

The dissertation chairperson has a number of roles to help a doctoral candidate be successful. According to Garcia et al., (1988), a lack of chairperson supervision or mentorship contributes to delayed completion or non-completion of the dissertation process. Given the importance of the dissertation chairperson, understanding chairpersons' approaches to advising and feedback is critical. Previous literature indicates three important elements of chairperson–student interactions in the dissertation process: (a) transparent and supportive feedback, (b) collaborative interactions, and (c) established communication expectations. These will be discussed below.

Transparent and Supportive Feedback

Hilliard (2013) provided a number of recommendations regarding transparent and supportive feedback to doctoral students. First, according to Hilliard, because chairpersons hold a major responsibility to ensure the student receives specific feedback for accepting improvements from other committee members, it is incumbent upon chairpersons to maintain positivity and professionalism when working with students. Second, chairpersons should demonstrate an ability to understand students' needs in the context of their current dissertation stage. Lastly, Hilliard advises chairpersons to make consistent efforts to provide appropriate and useful feedback to students that informs them of their progress toward dissertation completion.

Nevertheless, there are a number of additional challenges in addressing feedback, including the strategies and ideas provided through feedback. Giving and receiving feedback can be challenging. Questions regarding when, where, and how feedback should be given further complicates the feedback process (Purgason et al., 2016). The complication in the feedback process occurs largely because both parties, chairperson and doctoral candidate, have a responsibility to provide and share feedback and oftentimes expectations are not established. However, in general, the chairperson has the added responsibility of initially broaching feedback, as well as establishing norms and expectations around how and when feedback can occur (Purgason et al, 2016).

Finally, faculty provide critical feedback in a supportive manner. Learning is most likely to occur when feedback is critical yet supportive, provided in a timely manner, and given with time for the advisee to receive and respond (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Idrus et al., 2018). The challenge faculty members face in following this structure of providing and receiving feedback is that it can create growth but may lead to feelings of frustration experienced by both individuals (Idrus et al., 2018; Waring, 2017). A response to address this challenge is to consider the whole person (i.e., professional identity and social and emotional wellness beyond academics) and educate students on the usefulness of giving and receiving feedback (Idrus et al., 2018).

Collaborative Interactions

Neale-McFall and Ward (2015) found that CES doctoral students were most satisfied when working with chairpersons who they perceived to be collaborative. This was a significant contributor to doctoral student satisfaction with the dissertation process. Additionally, Hilliard (2013) recommended that chairpersons work collaboratively by utilizing dissertation committee members' expertise.

Established Communication Expectations

Hilliard (2013) noted that students are more likely to move successfully through the dissertation process if there are clear expectations communicated, written, and agreed upon with the faculty. Expectations that include each of these elements provide a foundation for the way feedback will be given and received. Moreover, clear communication expectations can help the doctoral candidate with

productivity and keep both parties accountable throughout the dissertation process (Hilliard, 2013). Clear expectations provide a structure for the dissertation process and help candidates efficiently move through this phase of their doctoral journey (Flynn et al., 2012; Hilliard, 2013). In establishing these expectations, department and program faculty share the roles of the dissertation chairperson as coach and supporter of the doctoral student. Faculty and students have named other essential parts of successfully advancing through the process, including the degree of involvement, having systems of support, mentoring, and fitting within the departmental culture (Dollarhide et al., 2013). Despite naming these essential parts for success, little is known about how these factors impact successful navigation of the dissertation process.

Purpose of the Study

Previous research with current and former doctoral students has found that students see a number of criteria as vital to their success in the doctoral process. These criteria include professionalism, clear expectations, and consistent feedback from their advisor, as well as a collaborative approach to the dissertation and mentoring processes (Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015; Purgason et al., 2016; Sinady et al., 2009). Although these studies provide a detailed picture from the students' perspective, limited research exists regarding the topic of successful dissertation advising from the perspective of faculty advisors. Faculty advisors play an integral role in the success of doctoral students as they progress through the dissertation process (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Limberg et al., 2013). To address this gap in knowledge, this research explored the following question: From a faculty member's perspective, what strategies help students navigate the dissertation process, and how successful are those strategies? A qualitative design was selected to elicit an in-depth analysis of the experiences of faculty members supporting students in the dissertation process, affording the research team the opportunity to value all responses regardless of the frequency or number of responses (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Methods

This study was a part of a larger qualitative research study that was led by the fifth author. That larger study utilized a basic qualitative research design, with the primary goal of collecting and analyzing qualitative data, and employed the constant comparative method to collect, code, and categorize the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data was collected using in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews (see Appendix) with 15 faculty members in CES doctoral programs. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved and no new ideas were presented. Saturation was determined when the same themes were repeated by multiple participants. Participants responded to interview questions regarding issues pertinent to doctoral CES programs, specifically the components of high-quality programs, strategies to recruit and retain underrepresented students, strategies for working with administrators, and strategies for successful dissertation advising. In this study, a research team comprised of the first four authors analyzed and coded interview data pertinent to the research question: From a faculty member's perspective, what strategies help students navigate the dissertation process, and how successful are those strategies? The goal of employing this research question was to identify successful strategies utilized by faculty to support doctoral students in completing the dissertation process and to understand the effectiveness of these strategies.

Participants

Participants in this study were full-time core faculty members in CES doctoral programs accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The participants worked in CACREP-accredited CES programs that had doctoral-level students. All participants had experience serving as a dissertation chairperson. Maximum variation sampling—that is, deliberately selecting a wide range of extremes from the population—was used to select participants

to increase the likelihood of a diverse and representative sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were selected one at a time to ensure adequate variation of the selection criteria. The selection criteria included: a) gender self-identification, b) racial and ethnic self-identification, c) Carnegie classification of the university where the participant was currently employed (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2019), d) length of time working in doctoral-level counselor education programs, e) the method used to deliver the counselor education program where the participant was currently working (e.g., in person, online), and f) the region of the counselor education program where the participant was currently working. Based on previous research (Cartwright et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2005; Lambie et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2015), each of the noted criterion were believed to have some impact on the participants' perspectives and, ultimately, their responses. Data saturation occurred after 15 interviews. A constant comparative method was utilized to assure saturation.

All 15 participants interviewed for this study taught in separate and unique CES programs. No program was represented by more than one participant. The demographics of the participants included eight self-identified males (53.3%) and seven self-identified females (46.7%). No participants identified as non-binary or transgender. All but one of the participants identified as heterosexual ($n = 14$, 93.3%); the one remaining participant identified as bisexual (6.7%). Racial and ethnic representation, also self-reported, was largely White ($n = 11$, 73.3%). Other racial groups represented included African American ($n = 1$, 6.7%), Asian ($n = 1$, 6.7%), Latinx ($n = 1$, 6.7%), and multiracial/multiethnic ($n = 1$, 6.7%). According to the 2017 CACREP Vital Statistics report, 71.38% of counselor education faculty in CACREP-accredited programs are White (CACREP, 2018). Thus, our sample was representative of the CES profession as it relates to the cultural identification of being White.

The participants averaged 19.7 years ($SD = 9.0$ years) of experience as full-time faculty members. Most of the participants' years as faculty members were spent at the doctoral level in CES programs ($M = 17.3$ years, $SD = 9.2$ years, $Mdn = 16$ years). The number of years as a faculty member ranged from 3 to 33 years.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the last author's IRB, a database of doctoral-level counselor educator contacts who worked at the then 85 programs accredited by CACREP was created (CACREP, n.d.). Thirty-four faculty responded to the request to participate. Of the 34 respondents, 15 respondents (41% response rate) were selected to participate in the study. The process of selecting and interviewing the 15 participants was scheduled and conducted by the fifth author. The selection of the 15 participants was done using maximum variation sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes and were recorded with the consent of each participant via the Zoom online format. One interview was completed during a professional conference and was recorded with a Sony digital audio recorder. Participants were assigned an alphabetical identifier to protect individual identities during the data analysis process. This step allowed all researchers to be blinded to the participants' identities except for the fifth author. The fifth author did not participate in the coding and analysis process in order to enhance participant anonymity and reduce the potential for bias during the data analysis process.

Interview Protocol

The interview question analyzed for this study was "How have you helped students to successfully navigate the dissertation process?" To start each interview, participants were asked the demographic questions mentioned above. Following the demographic information, eight in-depth questions were asked that addressed the research questions of the larger qualitative study (see Appendix). Per Patton's

(2015) recommendations, interview questions were open-ended, "why" questions were avoided, questions were as neutral as possible, and questions were asked one at a time. The interview protocol was piloted prior to the study commencing. Several questions were divided into two questions to ensure that only one question was asked at a time. A conventional semi-structured interview was used with follow-up questions allowed to ensure understanding of the participant responses. Each participant reviewed and signed the informed consent agreement approved by the last author's IRB prior to the interviews.

Data Analysis

The team coded, categorized, and analyzed data from the 15 interview transcripts. Transcripts were coded using an open verbatim coding process, followed by the development of axial codes using the constant comparative method to create themes that emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The research team used a shared Google Sheet to document codes, descriptions for the codes, and, later in the coding process, broader categories. All members of the research team had access to each transcript in a Microsoft Word document through Dropbox. Each line of the transcript was read and discussed by team members, and then a verbatim portion(s) of the line that answered the research question was copied to the shared Google Sheet. Once the code was selected, the group determined a description for the code, using the context in the transcript as a guide. The first three of the 15 transcripts were coded collaboratively as a team during online coding sessions. This was necessary to establish consistency among the researchers and to increase trustworthiness in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transcripts 4 through 11 were coded in pairs and the final four were coded individually with a second researcher available if there were questions. The first and second authors established a code key upon the completion of the first four transcripts.

Following initial coding, the first two authors met three additional times to come to a consensus regarding the collapsing of codes. For example, the code "playing politics" was initially identified. After all transcripts were coded, this code only had two direct quotes for support. Therefore, during a subsequent coding team meeting, the first two authors determined that this code had limited evidence from the data and it was collapsed into the code "selecting and working with committee members." Creating a code book made it possible for the team to track categories and to ultimately identify the themes that emerged from the data. Verbatim quotes of participants were noted and organized into themes. Themes were agreed upon by the first two authors and reviewed and supported by the third and fourth authors.

The research team continued coding until completion, maintaining agreement on new categories and descriptions added to the code key. Any discrepancies were resolved by all team members, reaching consensus on the final coding. The following steps were adhered to by the team: 1) asking clarifying questions of each other to be sure every perspective was considered; 2) rereading previous lines of the transcript and reading ahead a few lines to better understand context; 3) allowing space to reflect on what each person was thinking and feeling about a code; 4) considering new codes when participant statements seemed to indicate different data points within the same line of the transcript; and 5) referring back to the research question when considering if a statement fit the purpose of the study.

Trustworthiness

To ensure a reliable process, the researchers adhered to a 4-step process proposed by Moustakas (1994). First, the researchers bracketed personal experiences and assumptions regarding what was instrumental in completing the dissertation process. For example, the research team discussed the nature of their own dissertation experiences as people of color at predominantly White universities;

their beliefs that advising has a critical impact on student success, particularly for students of color; and their awareness that the faculty members' perspectives may not speak to what is actually experienced by doctoral candidates. There also was a need to discuss what is actually meant by a *successful* dissertation. For the purpose of this research, the team determined *successful* as completing the dissertation process and having a degree conferred. Additionally, the first author participated in another project from the larger qualitative study that allowed access to participant responses regarding other topics that were not analyzed as part of this study. The information obtained from the other project was not shared during meetings for coding nor data analysis. Further bracketing was achieved by fleshing out any potential areas of overlap with the fifth author, who had knowledge of all transcripts but did not participate in coding. Memos were kept regarding each team member's process.

Second, the researchers completed line-by-line, verbatim coding to identify repeated concepts and words within the transcripts. Third, the research team met on a regular basis to ensure consistency in coding and to resolve any discrepancies in the analysis process. During each of these meetings, memos were maintained to track methodological decisions and reactions to the data. Memos were kept by each coder to note thoughts, reactions, and methodological decisions during paired and individual coding. These memos were reviewed periodically by the fifth author, who was not actively participating in the coding process. Finally, the researchers questioned and investigated the constructs for themes to be sure to indicate the depth and breadth of the participants' perspectives.

Positioning

The coding team was comprised of the first four authors. The coding team consisted of three counselor educators and one graduate school assistant director. Coding team members were from three institutions, with two team members working at the same institution (one counselor educator and one graduate school assistant director). Three of the coding team members identified as Black women, and one member identified as a Black man. All four coding team members held Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees earned within the last 7 years. Two of the four coding team members completed their dissertation process within the last 18 months. All four of the coding team members worked at institutions conferring doctoral-level degrees. All but one coding team member had etic (outsider) status, as they had not yet served on doctoral dissertation committees. One coding team member had emic (insider) status, having served on two dissertation committees and participated in three dissertation defense presentations and discussions. This coding team member had not yet served as a chairperson of a dissertation.

Coding team members with etic positioning knew that their own experiences as doctoral students would be the most present in their minds when coding data. This required a significant amount of bracketing and identification of a priori codes. The first four authors' initial meeting was dedicated to discussing these factors to ensure internal researcher accountability.

Potential biases of the research team included: (a) over-identifying with the data; (b) bracketing own negative experiences; (c) race and gender considerations (how our race and gender impacts how we see the recommendation); (d) having a higher education perspective and not a counselor education perspective; (e) role of privilege and how it plays out in the dissertation process and the lasting impact on early career progress; (f) awareness of differing program structures (some doctoral students mentored master's-level students and developed writing teams, setting them up to be more successful once they had graduated); (g) having participated in faculty searches and seen successful dissertation advising (turning dissertations into manuscripts) be a key component in who is hired; and (h) having projects prioritized over opportunities that helped the doctoral candidate be more successful (e.g., publications, grants). These were all areas that required the coding team to discuss

and process prior to delving into the transcripts. The coding team regularly challenged each other (i.e., suggested that a team member stop and reevaluate their position as it seemed more personal than based on the data) regarding these potential biases throughout the process.

The researchers identified a priori codes that included: (a) participants will be of the dominant culture; (b) how voices are centered would impact the data and results (hearing from the faculty member versus hearing from the student); (c) communication between student and chair, as well as student and committee, being important; (d) lack of awareness of race and gender influences on the dissertation advising process; (e) belief that the influence of the full identities of the doctoral candidate on their dissertation experience would not be captured in the data; (f) type of university (i.e., traditional, hybrid, online) impacts advising process; and (g) the doctoral student's timeline does not align with the chairperson's expectations of what the student needs (can impede the student getting to the end of the process successfully). Reconciling the a priori codes required coding team members to be open and honest regarding how their own experiences and perceptions have impacted their lens as educators and researchers. All researchers agreed to engage in these discussions during each meeting to ensure proper bracketing and to reduce the potential for bias negatively impacting the coding and analysis process.

Results

Five themes were identified based on the analysis of interviews with the 15 counselor educators who have served as dissertation chairpersons. The first and second authors collapsed 11 broader categories into the five emerging themes. The themes identified demonstrated some impact on a successful dissertation process: (a) mechanics of the program, (b) selecting and working with committee members, (c) intentionality in developing a scholar identity, (d) supportive environment, and (e) accountability. Each of these themes will be expounded upon below.

Mechanics of the Program

The mechanics of the program theme referred to program structures put in place that allowed students to move through the dissertation process. These program structures addressed the curriculum sequence and timelines. Faculty acknowledged that successfully navigating the dissertation process required a structured process on the program's part. A participant commented that, in their experience, having an unstructured program usually led to "more ABDs than if it is structured." Such a structured process started with "getting to know faculty members in terms of their research interests and identities and processes." As students developed this knowledge, they were able to see examples of different faculty research identities within counselor education, while also learning which professor might be a good fit as the chairperson for their dissertation committee.

From there, programs put curriculum sequences in place that allow students to begin thinking about the dissertation process from the start of their doctoral journey. According to multiple chairpersons, doctoral students in their programs had at least one class in which they wrote research papers or miniature dissertation proposals that could be a starting point for their actual dissertation proposal. Creating this structure in the program, they believed, also supported students in developing a scholar identity, a theme that will be addressed in more detail later in this article. As one participant shared, "Students would essentially write a mini version of their dissertation proposal with lots of feedback and guidance from the course instructor and lots of check-ins with their major professor." The class and check-ins became accountability measurements for the students, and these were established by the program as formalities rather than steps the students had to implement on their own.

Finally, chairpersons highlighted the importance of timelines as a necessary program structure to ensure student success in the dissertation process. These timelines are often externally imposed by larger entities, such as the graduate school and the university. In some circumstances, external deadlines created additional chaos for students. As a participant noted, sometimes an email was sent to the chairperson by administrators saying, "Grad College has changed their timeline for drops and deposits of thesis." In response, all the faculty member can do is "forewarn [the students]." Instances such as these were out of the control of the chairperson. On the other hand, internal deadlines created by the program and agreed upon between the student and dissertation chairperson were beneficial. Overall, chairpersons who highlighted timelines in discussions with students noted a higher level of success in completing the dissertation process.

Selecting and Working With Committee Members

Selecting and working with committee members specifically applied to which faculty members were invited to serve on the dissertation committee. The dissertation committee tends to include three, and in some cases four, faculty members. These members often include the chairperson, a co-chairperson, a methodologist and, in some cases, a specialty person (someone who has expertise with the identified topic). Participants indicated that the selection of these members could have a strong impact on the likelihood of successfully completing a dissertation rather than the student remaining ABD. Although there was some variability in whether the doctoral candidate selected the committee members or if this was done by the chairperson, all participants were consistent in disclosing the importance of selecting the "right" committee members.

Several participants reported that faculty and students should give careful thought to committee composition before inviting faculty to serve on a student's dissertation committee. Some faculty members can cause problems, such as being unresponsive and unsupportive. As one participant noted, "I don't let [doctoral candidates] select [faculty members] who have a history of causing problems on committees." Participants further noted that some students can get caught in political power dynamics between faculty. When this happens, the doctoral student has little to no power and has to rely on the chairperson to intervene.

Another participant noted that some faculty members are simply not able to be a part of a dissertation committee, stating, "Some faculty members are *horrible.* And some faculty members are not capable of being helpful to students. They have agendas of their own and they obstruct the progress." When faculty obstruct progress, it can have significant impacts on the student's likelihood of defending a dissertation successfully. When advising students, giving careful consideration to the composition of the dissertation committee seemed to be an important strategy to increase student likelihood of completing their dissertation.

Intentionality in Developing a Scholar Identity

Intentionality in developing a scholar identity was an important element of a successful dissertation strategy. Participants indicated that doctoral candidates should begin considering their dissertation topic and also identifying research methods of interest to them. As one participant shared, "When [doctoral candidates] are taking research methods . . . we encourage our students from day one to identify the general area of research that they're interested in and then apply that in research methods and stats and qualitative." Two participants both noted that students are more likely to go through the motions of completing a dissertation when they have not been thoughtful about their dissertation topic and have not been identifying a preferred methodology to address research questions pertinent to their topic.

In addition to helping students develop a research identity, participants identified the need for a balanced advising approach that helped students complete dissertations rather than becoming stuck in attempting to complete an unwieldy and unachievable dissertation. Participants reported that doctoral faculty needed to strike a balance between supporting the research ideas and interests of students and helping students identify projects that are achievable and realistic. As one participant noted, "It's more about finding the balance between what's gonna be a good and meaningful study for the student—hopefully what's going to be a potential contribution to the field—and then what can be done."

The participants noted that faculty should attend to the student's development of a scholar identity during the dissertation process. Per one participant, as the chairperson, there is a need for "demystifying what research development looks like."

Supportive Environment

The importance of creating a supportive environment was another key factor expressed by participants. A supportive environment, as described by several participants in this study, is relational: "[Mentoring] needs to happen in the context of relationship." A supportive environment appears to be established when faculty individualize their advising and mentoring to each student's personality and unique circumstances. As one participant stated, "Just as when we have to meet the client where they are, we also have to apply the same principle to our doc students." Participants also reported that doctoral students needed different approaches and styles of advising. One participant shared, "My style varies depending on the student and my assessment of the student's needs." Some students will need more direct instruction than others, as "not every student needs the same level of guidance." Other participants felt that faculty members could best guide students if they engaged in sustained relationships with them over time—"knowing somebody well enough and having enough contact with them over time to foresee some of those obstacles and help them navigate some of the roadblocks." Participants also spoke to the importance of the chairperson detecting how much challenge and support to provide. As one participant stated, "I constantly try to figure out how much [support] is enough for this person, without being so much that they're not learning what they need to learn in the process." A faculty member's established relationship with their doctoral students assists them in making such determinations.

The chairperson must provide feedback regarding whether a student's proposal fits within their identified timeline. As one participant stated, "My job is to ensure that the product is gonna be the best it can possibly be for the timeline that it is." Timelines, program structure, and the supportive environment overlap when the chairperson guides students to discern how to narrow their research idea into a manageable project that could be completed within the expected dissertation timeline. This conversation was another opportunity for faculty to mentor students and provide feedback in a way that would help the students be more successful in the dissertation process.

Many participants felt that a supportive environment enabled faculty to provide feedback and help students get "unstuck." Providing feedback must happen early, otherwise students "just keep making the same mistakes over and over again." When students become stuck in their dissertation process, a supportive environment helps students to be honest about their status. This honesty provides the chairperson with the information needed to give direction and feedback. As one participant shared, "Students almost embellish a little bit on how they were working because they were too afraid to say that they were stuck. So, for us, it's really dissecting that component. 'Where are you stuck? Let's talk about this.'" Engaging in such conversations in an honest and transparent way gave the chairperson the opportunity to target their support toward specific goals that helped the student make progress.

Accountability

Participants reported that faculty chairpersons were in regular contact with their doctoral candidates to provide accountability. For most participants, this contact needed to be face-to-face, whether in person or via an online platform. As one participant shared, "I want that student in my office or on a screen in front of me every single week with actionable goals." For this chairperson, a regular schedule of meetings ensured that there was a "constancy of contact." Another participant agreed with this suggestion and specifically noted that these check-ins should be weekly after the dissertation writing began. The concept of accountability seemed to intersect with the supportive environment because many participants saw accountability as a means of supporting the student throughout the dissertation process.

The five themes identified in this study highlighted what dissertation chairpersons believed led to a successful dissertation. Both structural factors (mechanics, committee selection, and scholar identity) and relational factors (supportive environment and accountability) appeared to impact the success of the dissertation process.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify successful strategies utilized by faculty to support doctoral students in completing the dissertation process and to understand the effectiveness of these strategies, as reported by the faculty members. The researchers engaged in verbatim coding to ensure that the perspectives of the participants were captured. Responses appeared to fall within two broad categories of structural and relational strategies. The structural elements highlighted the importance of a timeline and intentional department- and university-level scheduling and selection of committee members who are invested in the process of supporting the doctoral candidate in developing a scholar identity. Relational elements included a supportive environment and accountability as successful strategies in completing the dissertation process.

Structural Strategies

Institutions have their own timelines and processes, which doctoral candidates and chairpersons should know (e.g., approval of committee members, defense timeline, final submission procedures). When institutions change their processes or timelines, it greatly impacts the student's ability to complete the process.

Chairpersons hold a major responsibility in helping the doctoral candidate understand the process of completing the dissertation (Flynn et al., 2012). The chairperson should clearly communicate requirements and guidelines for successfully completing the dissertation process (Hilliard, 2013). Ineffective communication by the chairperson can result in doctoral candidates lacking a clear understanding of the structure, leaving the candidate feeling unsupported and discouraged (Flynn et al., 2012; Hilliard, 2013).

Chairpersons who know their doctoral candidate's strengths and weaknesses must seek committee members whose expertise fills gaps in areas where the student is not a content expert. The chairperson should also consider that the doctoral candidate's success hinges on everyone's investment in the process (Hilliard, 2013). The selection of committee members must thus be intentional, as not all faculty members are appropriate to serve on dissertation committees (Flynn et al., 2012). When the chairperson and doctoral candidate are strategic about selecting dedicated committee members, this may enhance the likelihood of a successful dissertation process. Students

may benefit from reviewing former student dissertations. This current study further supports these structural strategies previously highlighted by Hilliard (2013) and Flynn et al. (2012).

Although a successful dissertation is a goal, the participants indicated the need to also ensure that doctoral candidates develop a scholar identity. This scholar identity allows the doctoral candidate to establish themselves as a researcher beyond the program (Lambie et al., 2008; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011). The development of a scholar identity brings the process full circle as the former doctoral candidate represents their graduating institution and the profession (Flynn et al., 2012; Lamar & Helm, 2017).

Relational Strategies

Developing a supportive environment is a crucial strategy for a successful dissertation experience (Perera-Diltz & Sauerheber, 2017). Supportive environments include open communication, mentorship, providing helpful feedback, and providing appropriate challenge to candidates when writing the manuscript (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015; Purgason et al., 2016).

Communication primarily happens through the use of digital mediums such as email and virtual conferencing, or verbally through face-to-face meetings and telephone calls (Hilliard, 2013). This communication establishes support and a means of accountability. Both the candidate and chairperson should establish expectations regarding when to meet, the purpose of the meeting, and items to bring to the meetings (e.g., written sections of a manuscript, updates on the IRB decision regarding review requests).

Irrespective of the meeting format and candidate support, communication and feedback with candidates must be clear, precise, timely, and offer candidates some direction for how to move forward through their process. Feedback should also hold the doctoral candidate accountable for meeting any agreed-upon deadlines and items to submit. The style and type of feedback provided should be individualized to unique student needs and issues. Hilliard (2013) noted that feedback should (a) be given orally in meetings and electronically on items submitted from the candidate via their manuscript or email; (b) be frequent, with dates listed for each revision or submission of new information; (c) be detailed to what chapter or area in the dissertation the candidate needs to address; (d) be direct around dissertation progress and areas needing more development, and consistent so that candidates can move swiftly through their writing; and (e) include helping students understand the seriousness of academic integrity.

Doctoral candidates need the chairperson to be available and to communicate clearly and authentically. A defensible dissertation happens as a result of navigating the structural and relational components of the dissertation process. This study further aligns with Flynn and colleagues' (2012) theory of initiation, management, and completion. Specifically, the relational and structural categories that emerged, from the perspective of the chairpersons working with doctoral candidates, are all support elements of a successful navigation of the dissertation process.

Implications

Doctoral students' preparedness for the dissertation process varies throughout CES programs. Students' experiences during the dissertation process also vary. The dissertation chairperson plays an important role in both the students' preparedness and experiences. Yet, standards for best practices in dissertation advising in CES are not clearly articulated in the profession. It is possible that some doctoral students, particularly those who need additional support for research or writing, would benefit greatly

from more structured and intentional dissertation methods (Perera-Diltz & Sauerheber, 2017). Without such guidelines, faculty members may rely on their own dissertation experiences to inform their current advising practices as faculty (Knox et al., 2011). Over time, the lack of standardized dissertation advising may contribute to disproportionate outcomes in (a) CES doctoral program completion rates, (b) research identity development among graduates of CES doctoral programs, and (c) overall CES program reputations.

Although chairpersons have many strategies to use in providing feedback, they cannot determine how their feedback impacts their students' progression. Gaining a better understanding of how doctoral candidates internalize feedback may lead to more clarity regarding whether the strategy and style of feedback was successful. A similar study from the perspective of current doctoral candidates or recent graduates would add tremendous value to the field.

Quantitative studies could also explore relationships among variables. For example, the relationship between dissertation advising strategies and career choice is unknown. Schweiger et al. (2012) reported that approximately 50% of doctoral graduates in CES pursue non-academic careers, and it is possible that these graduates have different dissertation advising needs and/or received different forms of dissertation advising than candidates who entered academia after graduation.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, respondents were current faculty members in doctoral CES programs, and the data thus represents faculty perceptions and experiences. Future studies are needed to examine the perspectives of students when working with chairpersons to triangulate these strategies. Although prior research has shown that graduate students described similar strategies as those espoused by the participants in this study (Sinady et al., 2009), a follow-up study could be helpful to ascertain whether students felt the findings of this study were commensurate with their own experience.

A limitation of qualitative methodology is the ability to generalize findings. Because dissertation processes look different across programs and universities, it is unclear whether the strategies highlighted by participants in this study are transferable to other programs. Additional quantitative studies are needed that use a larger sample to examine the relationship between these strategies and outcomes such as dissertation completion rates and time to completion.

In this study, the research team only used one definition of success (i.e., completing the dissertation and graduating with a doctoral degree) when coding and analyzing data. Because the participants did not provide their own definition of success, we cannot say with certainty that they had the same conception in mind when responding to the question. Other definitions of success could include developing a scholar identity or being prepared to be an effective counselor educator. These alternative ways of understanding success could impact the way in which the participant responded to the question. In future research, it would be important to clarify these definitions with participants prior to their responding to the question.

Finally, two coding team members had recently completed their own dissertations and may have found it difficult to bracket their experiences during the coding and analysis process. To mitigate these potential biases, the research team frequently discussed and documented their personalized reactions to the data when coding, used multiple coders for the first 11 transcripts, and used consensus coding to resolve discrepancies.

Conclusion

Successfully navigating the dissertation process is a necessary step for obtaining a doctorate in CES. Though many doctoral students start the journey, the degree completion rate remains just above 50% (Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). The completion rate for doctoral students in CES is currently unknown. Understanding ways that chairpersons effectively support students in the dissertation process can lead to more students completing their doctoral journey. Some of these ways include creating a supportive environment, establishing consistent accountability, and providing timely feedback. As students successfully navigate the dissertation process, they build confidence in their scholar identity and counselor educator identity and move forward into the counseling profession to support future generations of CES doctoral students.

The current study explored strategies for successful navigation of the dissertation process from the perspective of faculty members. Future research should examine the generalizability of our findings throughout other CES doctoral programs. Although some norms and expectations regarding the path to the dissertation in CES may exist, it is possible that other strategies were not fully captured in this study. Moreover, while the current study examined successful dissertation advising from the chairperson's perspective, future research should examine the topic from the perspective of doctoral students and candidates. Moreover, it may be that current doctoral students and doctoral alumni may hold differing perspectives regarding their dissertation experience. To that end, future research may examine recent graduates of CES doctoral programs. A longitudinal study that explores the perspective of current students and the same sample later as alumni may capture nuances not accounted for in existing counselor education literature.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. For context, please briefly describe how you self-identify and your background. This information will be aggregated; individual participant responses will not be associated with any quotes in subsequent manuscripts.
   Gender:
   Sexual/Affective Orientation:
   Race and Ethnicity:
   Years as a Faculty Member in a Counselor Education Program:
   Years as a Faculty Member in a <u>Doctoral</u> Counselor Education Program:
   Number of Doctoral Counselor Education Programs You Have Worked In:
   National Regions of Doctoral Counselor Education Programs You've Worked In:

2. How might you define a "high-quality" doctoral program?

3. What do you believe to be the most important components? The least important?

4. How have you helped students to successfully navigate the dissertation process?

5. Which strategies has your program used to recruit underrepresented students from diverse backgrounds? How successful were those?

6. Which strategies has your program used to support and retain underrepresented students from diverse backgrounds? How successful were those?

7. What guidance might you provide to faculty who want to start a new doctoral program in counseling with regards to working with administrators and gaining buy-in?

8. What guidance might you provide to faculty who want to sustain an existing doctoral program in counseling with regards to working with administrators and gaining ongoing support?

9. Last question. What other pieces of information would you like to share about running a successful, high-quality doctoral program?

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