




Examining Student Mentorship Experiences in an Online Doctoral Program

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Abstract

As more students elect to complete their doctoral studies online, faculty need to identify and implement mentorship approaches that are conducive to student understanding of the dissertation process. Faculty to mentee relationships are a prominent aspect of student retention and success in doctoral programs. Due to advances in technology, dissertation chairs have access to tools that allow for real-time feedback and support. Therefore, this study examined student dissertation and faculty mentorship experiences. Participants expressed satisfaction in their doctoral studies and dissertation process. However, students shared challenges associated with balancing multiple commitments, feeling lower levels of writing self-confidence, and understanding the dissertation process and expectations. These findings provide additional support on the importance of developing and maintaining positive online doctoral experiences.

Keywords: *online education, mentorship, doctoral students, dissertation, educational technology*

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Introduction

Online education has increased in popularity over the last several decades. The advent of the internet and communication technologies have afforded students the opportunity to complete their entire programs of study in a virtual format. Allen et al. (2016) reported that approximately 5.8 million students earned their degrees entirely online in fall 2014. The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) further reported that in fall 2019 over 7 million students were enrolled in distance education programs, with the majority of learners completing undergraduate coursework (approximately 6 million students) in comparison to

postbaccalaureate programs (approximately 1.3 million students). Although online student growth has continued in an upward trend, faculty are not always adequately trained to mentor doctoral students in this learning modality. Indeed, Kumar and Johnson (2019) shared that faculty who teach and mentor online students typically have limited experience in these learning environments. Kumar and Coe (2017) also expressed the importance of identifying the unique challenges experienced by online learners and the strategies that are implemented to overcome them. Because doctoral student attrition rates for many programs of study is 50% (Young et al., 2019), understanding how to best support students in their dissertation research is vital for program completion.

Makhamreh and Stockley (2019) posited that time-to-completion rate is a significant source of stress for doctoral students. They specifically noted that students in doctoral programs often take close to a decade to complete their degrees, which prevents students from advancing their careers and creates significant financial burdens, thus leaving students feeling overwhelmed, fatigued, and at risk of dropping out. However, the student-to-supervisor relationship is perceived in their research as a contributing factor to student completion time. The impact of pursuing a doctoral degree has demonstrated significant influence on a student's mental health. For example, Liu et al. (2019) found in their study of 325 doctoral students that 23.7% of participants showed signs of depression and 20% demonstrated signs of anxiety. They explained that doctoral students are often plagued with (a) feeling a sense of stress, worry, and urgency concerning writing and publishing papers; (b) receiving financial support; (c) managing relations with faculty; and (d) planning for future employment. Further, during this time in adulthood, students may also choose to marry or raise children, which adds to additional stress and anxiety during their doctoral program (Cannon et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019).

Online Doctoral Mentorship

Doctoral faculty are referred to as advisors, supervisors, and mentors as they guide students through the research process. Researchers have found that the faculty-to-dissertation student relationship is vital to degree completion, and that it encompasses professional and psychosocial development and academic growth (Creighton et al., 2010; Hayes & Koro-Ljungberg, 2011; Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). Because approximately half of students who enroll in doctoral programs do not complete their degrees (Gardner, 2008; Sverdluk et al., 2018), mentorship experiences can be utilized to promote valuable learning experiences for student retention and satisfaction. Mentoring has been described in a multitude of ways. In fact, Brown et al. (2020) proclaimed that there is not a single definition of mentoring. However, researchers share that mentoring supports readiness, self-efficacy, and progress (Brown et al., 2020)—and allows for faculty to impart their knowledge and skills (Kumar & Johnson, 2019).

Bice et al. (2019) explain that students desire faculty mentors who (a) discuss professional development plans; (b) provide support in writing, communication, and presentation skills; (c) possess real-world expertise in the field; (d) promote academic discourse; (e) are authentic; and (f) are generous with providing time to their mentees. Nevertheless, Kumar and Johnson (2019) stress the need for further research to identify effective strategies and approaches for mentoring online learners. Particularly, due to the rapid and continual growth of online degree programs, more emphasis has been placed on the effectiveness of virtual mentoring approaches.

Mentorship Through Remote and Distance Learning

While traditional mentorship programs are strongly supported by research, dissertation mentoring for on-ground students often looks very different than how faculty guide online students through the dissertation process (Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). Particularly, online mentoring differs from face-to-face approaches due to factors of time and distance (Kumar & Coe, 2017). For example, Kumar and Johnson (2019) postulated

that on-ground faculty provide learners research instruction and opportunities to observe how their mentor conducts studies. Although online learners could receive similar experiences, faculty need to be intentional in how they offer students additional research experiences and flexible in their approach to integrating students into their research activities. Further, faculty need to implement scaffolding to guide students through the research process and consider how to structure learning into practical chunks of information through online mentorship approaches. By implementing effective mentorship approaches, faculty can make students feel supported in their research and confident in their abilities to complete their studies. Students who receive positive mentorship experiences may also be more likely to persevere when faced with challenges in degree completion. Still, Ensher et al. (2003) indicates that online mentoring can result in miscommunications, technical issues, and difficulties in relationship building.

The Benefits of a Positive Student–Supervisor Relationship

Research suggests that a positive student–supervisor or mentor–mentee relationship is effective in student degree completion, as well as mental health throughout their program of study (Liu et al., 2019; Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). Specifically, Liu et al. (2019) posited that mentoring relationships were key in mediating the association between student depression/anxiety and their research self-efficacy. Moreover, students who reported authentic mentorship experiences reported higher levels of motivation and satisfaction (Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). However, Makhamreh and Stockley (2019) cautioned that students who reported “below average/toxic mentorships” were more stressed out and depleted.

Research also indicates that positive mentorship relationships may be a vital factor in providing support to students who feel marginalized or underrepresented in their specific fields in higher education, such as women, mothers, and students of color (Brown & Grothaus, 2019; Cannon et al., 2020; Gooden et al., 2020; Wladkowski & Mirick, 2019). Mentorship relationships provide not only student support throughout their programs but also guidance and pathways to future faculty roles should the student desire a career in academia. Further, Fulton et al. (2018) express the support for mentorship programs to develop instructional skills and teaching expertise in higher education.

For faculty mentor relationships to be effective, students must feel supported by their mentor as a means to develop positive internal dialogue and motivation (Jameson & Torres, 2019). Makhamreh and Stockley (2019) stated that “authentic mentors allow their students to contribute to the process of supervision, and it is evident that the students who functioned with the perfect balance of support and autonomy were motivated and satisfied” (p. 14). Research indicates that students often prefer for mentorship relationships to be informal and less rigid (Brown & Grothaus, 2019). Additionally, Fulton et al. (2018) found that student enthusiasm for their subject matter plays a determining role in the effectiveness of their mentorship outcomes. Wladkowski and Mirick’s (2019) research further supports the value of role modeling, guidance, and psychosocial support in positive mentorship relationships in doctoral education, noting specifically the value of mentorship in increasing feelings of preparedness, self-esteem, and rates of program completion for doctoral students who experience pregnancy or become parents during their doctoral program.

International research also provides support for the vital role of doctoral mentorship in program completion (Freeman & Kochan, 2019; Fulton et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019, 2020). In fact, the Liu et al. (2020) study in China portrays a family-like approach to doctoral mentorship in their educational technology programs, remarking that it is common for doctoral faculty to treat doctoral students as “their own children” or “family members” by, for example, hosting the students for weekend activities or evening dinners with their own families. According to Liu et al. (2020), this holistic approach to mentoring:

enables mentors to model both academic and non-academic situations. The shining attributes and characteristics such as being earnest and caring, sense of responsibility, diligence and persistence that

great professionals have, influence their mentees profoundly and pervasively, and make their mentoring last beyond graduation as a life-long relationship for research collaboration, professional promotion, and career aspiration. (p. 3)

Additionally, Liu et al. (2020) proclaim the mutual benefits to doctoral mentorship, commenting that while the mentorship relationship is created to primarily develop doctoral students as professionals in their field, faculty can also benefit from this relationship. Doctoral systems provide the opportunity for students to collaborate with and enhance faculty teaching, research, and professional services, which can in turn increase the number of publications and scholarly productions, as well as updated and enriched courses. Freeman and Kochan (2019) further note the mutual benefits of their own cross-cultural mentor–mentee relationship, explaining: “[W]e encourage others to pursue relationships that will enable them to understand those who differ from themselves, and through such relationships, broaden the core of caring within them to enrich all those involved” (p. 16). Additionally, Fulton et al. (2018) posit that it is possible to successfully align doctoral student mentorship programs “with program goals related to emergent curriculum priorities within an online learning context” (p. 109), a significant idea for smaller doctoral programs who strive to both develop program goals while also cultivating an effective student mentorship framework. To promote student satisfaction in online settings, faculty need to determine how to utilize technology to promote research skills and develop relationships that are favorable to academic success.

Educational Technologies

Online mentors can employ a diverse range of technological resources to better support students as they progress through their programs of studies. Kumar et al. (2013) found that “successful online mentoring includes the flexible and effective use of multiple technologies” in order to “structure a dissertation experience that facilitates doctoral students’ learning, growth, and autonomy” (p. 9). Emerging technologies help to leverage student learning and enhance instructional practices. By incorporating diverse technologies into dissertation mentorship approaches, faculty are in a better position to support students in real time through platforms that offer options for time management and to track goal task completion. Pollard and Kumar (2021) find that online mentoring results in challenges associated with receiving written feedback. To mitigate these types of frustrations, mentors can provide students online feedback opportunities in which they provide students edits and suggestions on their dissertations through cloud-based platforms. The use of cloud-based platforms can mitigate student frustrations in locating document drafts and identifying their mentor’s feedback. These platforms can also prevent concerns attributed to ineffective feedback approaches for on-ground doctoral students. Within on-ground programs, faculty may provide handwritten feedback. Researchers found electronic feedback is preferred by students for reasons that include accessibility, timeliness, and legibility (Chang et al., 2012; EIShaer et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2019).

These types of electronic technologies allow for faculty to have immediate access to revised documents and for students to easily identify the most recent feedback provided by their mentor. Additional technologies that can be powerful in promoting dissertation progress and program satisfaction include screensharing platforms, task management programs, and personalized learning experiences. Though when mentoring students online, mentors must be willing to step outside of their comfort zones to adapt and learn new technologies that improve communication and reduce transactional distance (Elmore, 2021).

Technologies can also offer faculty-to-student interactions that are more personable and promote continual dissertation progress. Online platforms, such as Zoom and GoToMeeting, allow faculty to share their screens in order to guide students in their document revisions and record directed feedback on how to modify dissertation components. For example, Varieur et al. (2021) received participant feedback on their perceptions of virtual conferencing platforms. In their study, participants proclaimed that electronic platforms, such as Zoom, provided valuable connections to their mentors that resulted in developing stronger

relationships, building trust, and enhancing feels of approachability. As a result, faculty should offer multiple communication options that include videoconferencing, email, and telephone, as well as provide flexibility in meeting times that range from day to evening hours and weekends.

Support Systems

Students who are completing the dissertation process need to feel that their mentors are dedicated to their success in their research endeavors and program completion. Research indicates that relationship building components for faculty mentors include (a) an organic environment and personal transformation (Rasheem et al., 2018); (b) trust that results from feedback, consistency, and the development of personal connections (Rademaker et al., 2016); (c) an understanding of social, academic, and emotional life balances and provide reassurance (McConnell et al., 2019); and (d) availability of support services, such as institutional support services (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

Breitenbach et al. (2019) also shared that family, friends, and coworker levels of support to dissertation students can significantly impact doctoral program retention. Peer support from classmates can further influence dissertation student progress and program satisfaction (Tompkins et al., 2016). Because support systems are identified as a crucial aspect of doctoral student retention, faculty should encourage their students to identify external (e.g., family members, friends, colleagues) and internal (e.g., program faculty, classmates) support systems that they can contact for further guidance and encouragement. These support systems can be particularly vital as students finalize their content coursework and embark on their dissertation research, which may be perceived as being a *lonely* and *isolating* process. Therefore, to better understanding doctoral students' experiences, this study investigates the following research questions: (1) How satisfied are online doctoral students in completing their dissertation requirements? and (2) Do online doctoral students feel adequately supported by their dissertation committees? Specifically, this study explored current methods that are working well with online mentorship, as well as potential areas of growth for future mentorship programs. This research was examined through the lens of dissertation research studies and doctoral mentorship relationships in online education.

Methods

This study focuses on gaining insight into online student reasons for enrolling in doctoral programs and their experiences of completing their doctoral program requirements. Specifically, this study examines (a) the influences of doctoral student mentorship experiences; (b) their levels of satisfaction in completing the dissertation requirements; and (c) their experiences with faculty mentorship relationships.

Participants received an email inviting them to complete an electronic survey focused on student experiences of their completing their online EdD program. Data collection for this study began in June 2020 and ended in August 2020.

Research Context

The research site for this study is a private, not-for-profit university that offers on-ground programs in six different locations and an entirely online campus. The focus of this study is an online doctorate program. Students in this program are predominately full-time working professionals. Most students enrolled in the online program reside in various states located across the United States. The demographics of the research program's general student population include the mean average age of 33.9 years and students identify as 81% female, 19% male, and less than 1% non-binary. The majority of students reported their race and ethnicity as 39.8% White/Caucasian, 24.4% Black/African American, and 16.3% Latino(a)/Hispanic.

Participants

The survey results for this study indicate that 19 students completed the online survey in its entirety. More than half (58%) of the students indicated they have been in the program for at least 3 years, while the rest (42%) have been in the program for approximately 2 years. There were no first-year students included in the sample. The average year of study for participants was 3.1 years, which is slightly longer than the 3-year program timeframe. When asked about their reasons for enrolling in an EdD program of study, students gave similar—and not surprising—reasons for enrolling in the doctoral degree program. Respondents shared that they enrolled in the doctoral program for the following reasons:

- to teach at the college and graduate level
- to receive a promotion in their current job or field
- to earn more money
- to enter the consulting market
- for the prestige that comes with possessing a doctorate degree

Data Collection and Analyses

The researchers developed survey items that contain both forced-choice and open-ended questions that focused on (a) student levels of program satisfaction; (b) sources of academic support; (c) experiences with their dissertation committee; (d) perceptions of their abilities to complete dissertation research; (e) strategies for overcoming self-doubt; and (f) feelings toward available online university resources (e.g., writing center, library). Survey items were piloted to program faculty members for feedback prior to sending them to current dissertation students in order to ensure that the main components of the mentorship relationship and dissertation process were being captured through the questionnaire.

Data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics—mainly frequencies and cross tabulations. There were a few open-ended items in the survey. Those items were analyzed using manual coding and categorizing. This process involved identifying and summarizing the central themes and patterns for each question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Examples of open-ended items included: When you started in the doctoral program, what did you hope to gain with a doctorate degree? Have you experienced any issues with your Dissertation Chair? Have you experienced any issues with your Dissertation Readers? Hypothetically, if you were to quit working on your dissertation, what would your reasons be?

Results

To determine doctoral student online mentorship experiences, Likert scale ratings and open-ended survey responses were analyzed. Survey results are provided in mean scores, frequency counts, and descriptive commentary. Results for each research question is presented in the following subsections.

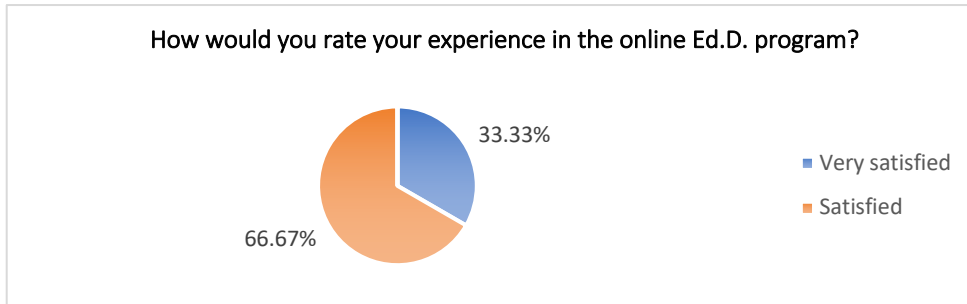
Research Question #1

Overall Experience in the Doctoral Program

Since the dissertation is one aspect of the degree program, it was important to also ask students how they felt about the overall degree program. The point was to gauge if, overall, students were satisfied or dissatisfied with the overall program. Also, it was important to gain additional insights into the significant sources of support for students. Pursuing an online doctoral degree can be isolating and challenging. Having support can play a crucial role in student success. Effective mentoring occurs within a context, and that context should include available sources of support. Students overwhelmingly reported that they were either satisfied (67%) or very

satisfied (33%) with the doctoral program thus far (see Figure 1). When asked about significant sources of support that they experienced while in the program, all participants selected their peers in the program, followed by program faculty (58%), partner/spouse (47%), and family and friends (37%) (see Table 1).

Figure 1. Overall Satisfaction With The Doctoral Program



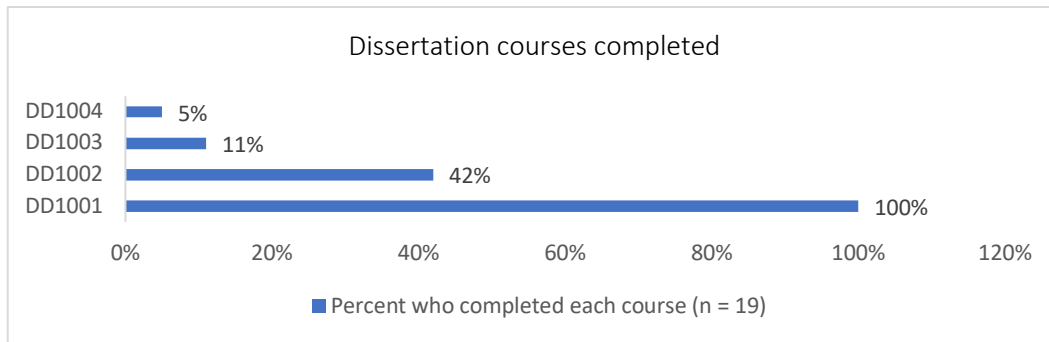
Note: Rating scores on satisfaction with the online EdD doctoral program thus far. Ratings were based on Strongly Satisfied to Strongly Dissatisfied ($n = 19$).

Table 1. Significant Sources of Support for Students

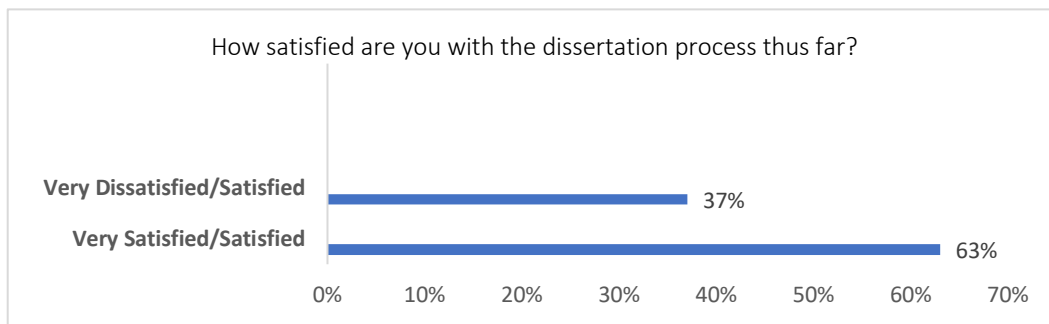
Significant Source of Support	Frequency	Percent
Peers (in the doctoral program)	19	100%
Program Faculty	11	58%
Spouse/Partner	9	47%
Family	7	37%
Friend(s)	7	37%
Professional Colleagues	7	37%
Other (please specify)	2	11%

Experience With Overall Dissertation Process

The online EdD program contains four required dissertation courses, and these courses must be completed in order. All respondents completed the first dissertation course (Dissertation Development I) and 42% completed the second dissertation course (Dissertation Development II). Only one student completed all four of the required dissertation courses (See Figure 2). Students (63%) reported they were either very satisfied (21%) or satisfied (42%) with the overall dissertation process thus far (see Figure 3). All respondents expressed satisfaction (58% very satisfied; 42% satisfied) with their Dissertation Readers. A large majority (63%) expressed having an effective relationship with their Dissertation Chair. However, 37% felt that their relationship was ineffective.

Figure 2. *Dissertation Courses Successfully Completed*

Note: Respondents were asked to report the dissertation courses they successfully completed. The percentages represent how many students completed each of the four courses: Dissertation Development 1 (DD1001), Dissertation Development II (DD1002), Dissertation Development III (DD1003), and Dissertation Development IV (DD1004).

Figure 3. *Overall Satisfaction With Dissertation Process Thus Far*

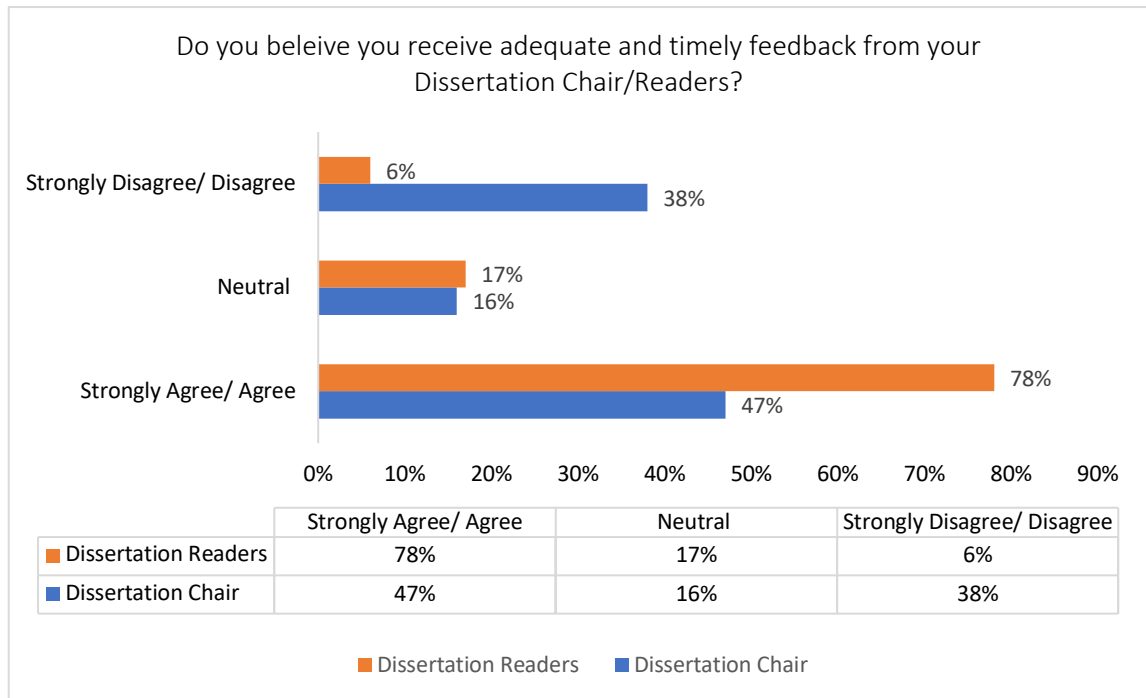
Note: Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the dissertation process thus far. Ratings were based on Very Satisfied to Very Dissatisfied scale (n = 19).

Research Question #2

Feedback From Dissertation Chair and Readers

Adequate and timely feedback from the Dissertation Chair and Readers can impact how students experience the dissertation process. When asked to reflect on their experience with feedback, 78% of participants reported receiving adequate and timely feedback from Dissertation Readers, compared to 47% who reported receiving adequate and timely feedback from their Dissertation Chair (see Figure 4). Close to 38% of participants reported that they do not believe they receive adequate and timely feedback from their Dissertation Chair, compared to 6% who felt the same about feedback from their Dissertation Readers. More than half of participants (61%) felt that they were getting timely feedback from the Dissertation Committee overall that helps them to improve their dissertation. However, 39% of participants believed they were not getting timely feedback from their Dissertation Committees.

Figure 4. Ratings on Feedback From Dissertation Chair/Readers



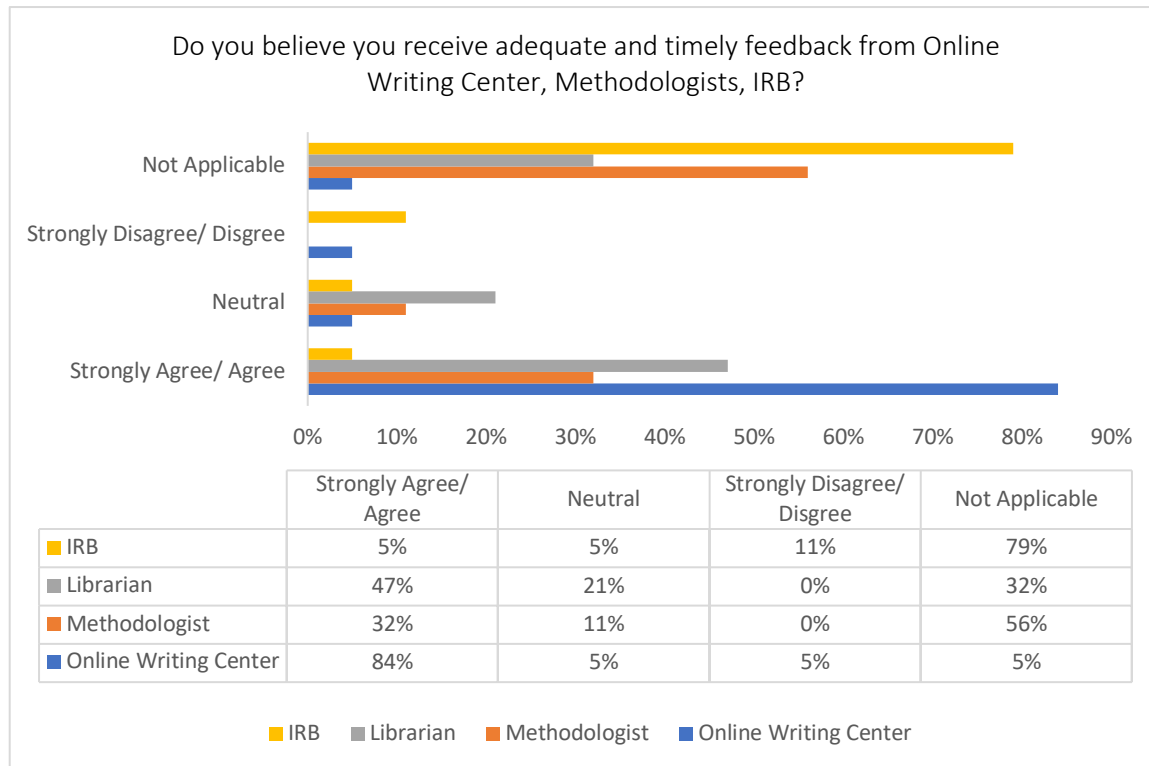
Note: Respondents were asked to rate if they received adequate and timely feedback from their Dissertation Chair and Readers. Ratings were based on Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree scale ($n=19$).

Feedback From the School Support Services

Students were asked to share their experience working with and receiving feedback from support services provided by the university: Online Writing Center, Methodologists, Librarian, and Institutional Review Board (IRB). A majority of participants (84%) found the feedback from the Online Writing Center to be timely and helpful, compared to 16% of respondents who selected either neutral (5.3%), disagree (5.3%) or not applicable (5.3%) (see Figure 5). The Online Writing Center provides individualized help to students for effective writing and proper use of APA style. When asked about feedback received from the Methodologists, 69% of participants reported either "not applicable" (56%) or "neutral" (11%). In contrast, only 32% of students reported having a positive experience with feedback from the Methodologists. The Methodologists are typically consulted at various phases of the dissertation process when students are writing their Method section, preparing for the Institutional Review Board (IRB), analyzing data, and interpreting findings. In future studies, it will be important to explore why more than half, 67%, of the respondents reported "neutral" or "not applicable" when asked: "Do you believe you receive timely feedback from the Methodologists that helps you to improve your dissertation?" When asked if they believe they have received timely feedback from the IRB, 90% responded with "not applicable" (79%) or "strongly disagree" (11%). It will be important to continue to reach out to students to investigate how they can be provided with support when working on their IRB application.

Less than half of participants (47%) reported that they received timely feedback from the Librarian who helps them improve their dissertation, while 53% of students responded with either "neutral" (21%) or "not applicable" (32%). Given that most students reported that they completed at least two of the required core dissertation courses, it will be important to explore why nearly half of the respondents reported neutral or not applicable when asked: "Do you believe you receive timely feedback (from the librarian) that helps you to improve your dissertation?"

Figure 5. Ratings on Adequate and Timely Feedback From School Support Services



Note: Respondents were asked to rate if they receive adequate and timely feedback from School Support Services: Online Writing Center, Methodologist, Librarian, and Institutional Review Board. Ratings were based on Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree scale ($n = 19$).

Concerns and Issues Raised by Students

Concerns and issues raised by students about their Dissertation Chair included (a) lack of follow-up on progress by the Dissertation Chair; (b) ambiguous and inconsistent feedback; (c) lack of sufficient guidance on next steps in the dissertation process; and (d) disconnect after completing the first dissertation course. A significant number (79%) of students reported having experienced doubts or concerns at some point in the program about their ability to complete the dissertation. The most common factors for why students had doubts about completing the dissertation include:

- Balancing the dissertation with personal lives and work commitments
- Lack of self-confidence on academic writing skills
- Unclear expectations of the dissertation process and outcomes
- Lack of support (academic support, personal support, and financial support)
- Ineffective working relationship with Dissertation Chair
- Lack of structured learning in between dissertation courses

Students were asked: "Hypothetically, if you were to quit working on your dissertation, what would your reason be?" In response, students listed reasons that include: (a) a lack of time to focus on the dissertation; (b) not enough support from Dissertation Chair; (c) a lack of support and frustration with the process; and (d) financial reasons.

Overcoming Concerns and Lessons Learned

Students cited “support from peers in the program” as one of the reasons they continued to persevere when they had doubts about completing their dissertation. Particularly, cohort connections provided student support in helping them overcome doubts and concerns toward degree completion. For example, one student expressed: “My cohort partners are the reason that I continue [in my degree requirements].” Students also felt support from the Dissertation Chair was helpful. Comments related to the value of “regular check-ins” and “encouragement from the Dissertation Chair” were cited in student responses as being valuable in dissertation progress and completion. Support from the department faculty and leadership were also reasons cited for overcoming self-doubt. When asked about lessons learned thus far in the doctoral program, students shared the following: (a) managing time effectively; (b) being proactive in terms of reaching out to the Dissertation Chair/Readers; (c) self-discipline; (d) connecting with support groups on social media; and (d) learning how to critically read and consume scientific literature. Time management was one of the most cited lessons learned. A few participants also mentioned finances (e.g., that the doctoral degree can come at a significant financial burden).

Discussion

Although many participants expressed positive feelings toward their doctoral program experience, they indicate insecurities and challenges toward the dissertation process. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) share that many doctoral students feel confronted by the challenges in writing their dissertations. They also indicate that students often have difficulties trying to select a research topic and determining how to narrow the focus of their study. Similar to prior studies (Flynn et al., 2012; Ramírez-Adrados et al., 2020), participants in this study expressed uncertainties in the dissertation process. Although students did not specifically provide examples of challenges associated with determining their dissertation topic, program faculty shared that this is a common topic of discussion with students. Students also reported that peer support was integral to their dissertation progress and motivation in program completion. Durdella (2019) notes that peer support systems, during the dissertation process, offer opportunities for exchanging ideas, providing feedback on research design, and reviewing drafts of each other’s documents.

Duffy et al. (2018) also highlighted the importance of the Dissertation Chair and mentee relationship and the impact that a breakdown in this relationship may cause for students, which may be one reason that some participants in this current study indicated they felt a lack of support from their Dissertation Chair, possibly resulting from a breakdown in their mentorship relationship.

Participants in this study were assigned their Dissertation Chairs. Duffy et al. (2018) cautioned that “when university officials assign students to specific mentors, as often is the case in online graduate education in the United States, handling deteriorating relationships may be more complex” (p. 58). Although universities may use this approach due to its convenience or necessity in ensuring equitable faculty workloads, allowing students autonomy in selecting their Dissertation Chair may promote more positive Dissertation Chair to student relationships.

Participants in this research were full-time working professionals who experienced competing responsibilities due to navigating their time among their caregiver roles, employment obligations, and academic coursework. Managing multiple responsibilities may hinder student progress and impact their levels of stress. Because stress negatively impacts dissertation writers and impedes their emotional well-being and productivity (Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019), Dissertation Chairs and university supports should consider offering resources focused on coping strategies. Specifically, providing students with stress reduction techniques can further positively impact student experience when interacting with their Dissertation Chair.

Future Research

Further research should strive to look at which innovative technology tools can be used to develop online mentorship experiences. Additionally, researchers could investigate how members of marginalized communities in academia can be best supported through mentorship relationships, as well as the importance of recognizing the differences that exist in cross-cultural relationships and the value in these relationships (Brown & Grothaus, 2019; Cannon et al., 2020; Freeman & Kochan, 2019; Gooden et al., 2020; Wladkowski & Mirick, 2019). Studies focused on dissertation mentor empathy and strategies for supporting and repairing mentorship relationships are also valuable in understanding how to retain students and ensure their doctoral program completion (Duffy et al., 2018).

Implications

Online enrollment will most likely continue to increase due to current events (e.g., COVID) and the accessibility and benefits these programs offer working professionals. However, approximately half of doctoral students do not earn their degrees (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). To better support online learners—particularly dissertation students—faculty must place emphasis on how to promote effective and positive virtual mentorship experiences. To promote positive faculty-to-student relationships, Deshpande (2017) proposed that faculty should provide timely feedback, promote peer-to-peer interactions, and be mindful of cultural considerations. Essentially, faculty need to be cognizant of the purpose of their communications with students and which tools may be most effective in supporting their academic and research endeavors. As a result of these interactions, students and faculty can develop shared goals and a continued commitment to degree completion.

Concluding Thoughts

Online students often experience challenges in completing their degrees, but emerging and innovative technologies help provide faculty the unique opportunity to develop learning environments that are conducive to effective mentorship, scaffolding, and relationship building—all crucial components that positively impact doctoral student program satisfaction and completion. Similarly, Kumar and Johnson (2019) emphasize the importance of online mentoring to provide support in dissertation development, structure, and scaffolds in research education. Particularly, a plethora of online tools and technological resources exist that promote collaborative opportunities and facilitate online relationship building. Providing students opportunities to connect with their mentor is essential in the development of relationships that promote scaffolding and guidance.

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