

# Getting To Finished: Strategies To Ensure Completion Of The Doctoral Dissertation

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper reports the results of focus group conversations with thirty-four doctoral students enrolled in an educational leadership program. Doctoral students were asked to provide suggestions and strategies used to complete the doctoral dissertation. The results of these conversations reinforce the value of the collaborative cohort and the proactive interdependence students experienced as a result of working together. These findings highlight the need to examine how doctoral students experience the university context particularly as it relates to the dissertation phase of study.*

**Keywords:** Educational leadership, Dissertation, Doctoral students, Doctoral student retention

## INTRODUCTION

Doctoral granting institutions over the years continue to explore why doctoral students don't finish their doctoral programs. The search for this answer continues. Hines (2008) asserts that the dissertation is one of the most pivotal components of doctoral programs in educational administration. Yet, this is the obstacle that doctoral students have difficulty overcoming. While doctoral students often complete all of the coursework for the educational leadership program, Barnett (2004) indicates that many doctoral students do not complete their dissertations. Instead, they depart the doctoral experience with "All But Dissertation" (ABD) status. There is a pressing need to identify and examine any strategies that could affect students' completion of the dissertation phase of study.

Lovitts (2009) has shown that students are not prepared to make the transition from student to independent scholar. Socialization may be what keeps students going until they finish the process. Lovitts states "...atomism and pluralistic ignorance appear to be key factors in attrition. They separate students from each other and from faculty." She continues by saying these things prevent a students from obtain moral support within a program. Therefore, a program that encourages students to unite and assimilate must encourages retention (Lovitts, 2001).

In the first years of the doctoral program students start to deal with isolation. If throughout the program students feel some sense of support and understanding, they have a better success rate. From admission to the program, with an orientation semester, throughout the years of taking courses, the university should offer various social settings for students to talk about study topics and common issues (Ali & Kohun, 2008). They contend those students that start has group and stay with a group of students on the same track complete program and have less feeling of isolation. Thus, for the past three years, a doctoral cohort preparation program has distilled several possible best practices from doctoral student who not only finished the dissertation, but in some instances finished their programs early and modeled these practices for other doctoral students in the pipeline. Research into doctoral attrition usually focuses on the reasons why doctoral students don't finish. The doctoral cohort in educational leadership took the opposite view. We were interested in identifying the practices and strategies used by students who did finish their programs, write their dissertations and participate in graduation. It was discovered that successful doctoral students appeared to share a common set of experiences that kept them on time and on task.

## **THE COLLABORATIVE COHORT**

Mullen (2005) posits that doctoral students by their very nature are social creatures who experience an organic union with others. This union is forged with other students in the program, the dissertation chair, and dissertation committee and program faculty. Researchers have documented that students working in cooperation generally tend to produce higher achievement than students working alone (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). This organic cooperation provides the framework for the continuum of success that student's experience. Students who completed the dissertation on schedule forged intuitive relationships with each other and maintained regular communications with the dissertation chair. Mullen (2005) further asserts that the ability of doctoral students to function interdependently facilitates positive relationships, critical skill development and resulting academic success. Mullen (2008) summarizes the work of Johnson and Johnson (1998) regarding how cohort members benefit from promotive interaction:

Johnson and Johnson (1998) refer to "promotive interaction" as that which "occurs as individuals encourage and facilitate each other's efforts to reach [a] group's goals" (p. 6). Johnson and Johnson specify the importance of

1. Giving and receiving help and assistance (both task-related and personal)
2. Exchanging resources and information
3. Giving and receiving feedback on task-work and teamwork behaviors
4. Challenging each other's reasoning
5. Advocating increased efforts to achieve
6. Mutually influencing each other's reasoning and behavior
7. Engaging in the interpersonal and small group skills needed for effective teamwork
8. Processing how effectively group members are working together and how the group's effectiveness can be continuously improved. (pp. 6–7)

This promotive interaction enables all cohort members to practice leadership skills while remaining accountable to the group. In addition, the cohort embraces the basic concepts of cohort learning. To be effective, the expectation of cohort functioning must be clear to all involved. The educational leadership cohort is governed by ten clearly expressed principles (Holmes, 2008):

## **TEN PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATIVE COHORT LEARNING**

The essential components of this collaborative learning cohort approach are reflected in the following principles:

1. Cohort engagement occurs when the cohort is an intentional and deliberate assemblage of learners with a specific and common purpose.

*There are no "accidental" learners in the cohort. Membership in the cohort is purposeful and members set out to share a common set of learning experiences. Only those persons who share the stated goals of the cohort agree to participate in this planned and purposeful learning experience.*

2. Central to the effectiveness of the cohort is the idea of "expressed expectations".

*Expectations under girding the cohort must be clearly stated and understood by all who participate. These expectations must be expressed often and must be expressed clearly. Expressed expectations become the guiding rules for the behavior and productivity of cohort participants. With rules clearly known, the cohort becomes a community of self-regulating learners.*

3. Significant attention must be given to the creation of "community" within the cohort and among cohort members.

*The idea of community connotes a collection of people who agree to share common interests, traditions and purposes. The community has ownership of the quality of life in this shared place. So it is with the cohort. The cohort community must be self-governing in its adherence to agreed upon goals and objectives. Life in the cohort is good for all when all contribute to the common good.*

4. Clearly identified benchmarks of performance must guide the work process and product.

*Optimal performance is achieved when standards and benchmarks are known. These standards and benchmarks represent clear measures of the work and what has been accomplished. Students themselves can assess individual performance against the benchmarks that guide the process. Students can then make more informed decisions about where they are in the process and what they have to do to achieve peak performance.*

5. Cohorts must enable individual responsibility and accountability to the group as a whole.

*Cohort communities believe in the axiom, "Reach back to help someone!" As students progress through the dissertation process, goals are accomplished. Individual responsibility in completion of those goals prepares each student to be able to assist the candidates in the pipeline. The spiraling effect of this seamless transition provides all students with the community privilege of receiving suggestions and assistance from those ahead in the accomplishment of benchmarks and extending a helping hand to those behind.*

6. Effective cohorts must have structure, so that participants understand how they are to work.

*Establishing expectations and timelines provides basic structure to the cohort experience. Expectations include regular attendance and participation in all classes, timely completion of assignments, regular communication with the chair and committee members, positive attitudes, and graceful acceptance of suggestions, and helpful critiques for fellow students. In addition, timelines and class time are essential in providing a structure to the process.*

7. Cohorts are most engaged when a discipline of learning is evident with the clear purpose of accomplishing "the work".

*Collaboration encourages inspiration, commitment, determination, and quality in cohort members. Participants focus on accomplishing the task. In addition, a drive for quality is evident. Answering to self, the instructor, and fellow students inspires cohort students to attend to the goal.*

8. Cohorts foster using the strengths and intellectual gifts of the individual to help fulfill the purposes of the learning community.

*Each participant in a cohort contributes to the benefit of the group in individual ways. Some students provide the organizational strength needed to communicate cohesiveness to all. Others contribute a sense of humor and positive attitude. Students with Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, research or SPSS abilities are invaluable to others. Participants with strong writing skills readily share those talents. Proofreading is also a valuable skill shared within the group. All the skills contributed from Cohort members establish the consistent collaboration within the group.*

9. Cohorts require individual and collective commitment and high task engagement.

*Engagement encourages individuals to excel academically. Participants eagerly accept the rigor of group challenges, knowing that all will collaborate to reach high standards. As each one contributes individual commitment, the cohort excels.*

10. Cohorts must put into place the “enabling conditions” to help each learner accomplish his or her best work.

*“Students learn what they live!” This true maxim is pertinent to Cohort productivity. The instructor of a cohort models exceptional leadership qualities by establishing conditions that enable each student to embrace rigor and excellence. The cohort provides a place where each student’s learning style can be addressed through the activities that are inherent in this collaborative learning paradigm.*

### **SELF-REGULATED LEARNING**

The model of preparation developed for students in this educational leadership cohort emerges from the theoretical perspective of self-regulated learning. Zimmerman and Schunk (2001) studied self-regulated learning and academic achievement and discovered that there is a high correlation between students who are self-regulating and students who are high achieving. In the self-regulating academic environment, students are taught to focus on the goal to be achieved and to develop the cognitive strategies and control mechanisms to achieve the desired goals. Montalvo and Torres (2004) further suggests that with adequate training in the dimensions of high performance, all students can improve their degree of control over their learning and academic performance. The core theme in this theoretical perspective is that students control their own learning. The educational leadership cohort provides the training and professional learning constructs that prepare students with the requisite skills to persist through to dissertation completion. From the work of Montalvo and Torres (2004), the cohort framed the following operational characteristics as essential for dissertation completion:

1. Activate students’ capacity and resolve to accomplish agreed upon goals and objectives
2. Model for students how to use their cognitive processes to plan control over the work, time and effort, and motivation
3. Explore the motivational beliefs and commitments that connect the student to the work
4. Structure time and effort to be used on all tasks associated with dissertation completion
5. Employ a system of positive role models and cohort leaders to help students visualize completion of the goal
6. Create an academic climate and professional learning community that functions around structured organization of the work, high task engagement, elimination of internal and external distractions, continuous information retrieval and delivery of maximum individual effort
7. Use cohort leaders as agents of change in transforming all cohort members into active, generative scholars

Students in the cohort are able to be self-regulating learners in this structured environment because the expressed expectations have been made clear and are articulated often. Students know what the benchmarks of progress are and are exposed to a study discipline that, if followed, will enable each member to reach each benchmark. It is this structured approach that has enabled students to stay on point with dissertation progress. Even the students who occasionally slack off are still cognizant of what must be done in order to progress forward and are able to gauge their success or lack thereof.

Self-regulated learners in the cohort embrace several core values:

1. Self-regulated learning requires strategic, personal management of self, time and priorities.
2. Self-regulated learning requires an explicit visualization of the goal to be attained and the *will* to attain it.
3. Self-regulated learning requires a structured and disciplined approach to writing tasks.
4. Self-regulated learning requires continuous assessment of skills, motivation, ability levels and work product.
5. Self-regulated learning requires a singular focus on the area of inquiry and continuous scanning of the research literature for updated treatises on the topic.
6. Self-regulated learning requires accepting responsibility for one’s own work and doing one’s own work.

## **USE OF THE MORE CAPABLE OTHERS**

All students in the educational leadership doctoral cohort are certified teaching practitioners. They are trained in instructional pedagogy and understand the facilitator's role in learning. The cohort is built on group learning among students at all stages of the dissertation process. The more advanced students serve as cohort leaders along with the teaching assistant assigned to the course. As described by Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink (2002), using a team-based transformational model makes group work the primary method of support, performance, and achievement. In this group process, doctoral students who are preparing to lead schools, have multiple opportunities to practice leadership skills including organizational planning, effective learning skills, task assessment, and group communications. Mullen (2008) concludes that in the educational leadership field, where school projects, programs, and processes depend on cooperative teamwork, it only makes sense to practice this skill within small groups.

Cohort leaders are proactive in making sure that cohort operational tasks are achieved:

1. Cohort leaders develop the cohort roster, which details information on each cohort member (correct spelling of name, all contact information, list of committee members, and dissertation topic). This roster is disseminated to all cohort members at the beginning of each semester or whenever a new member is added.
2. Students provide cohort leaders with a copy of the prospectus that was developed in the Writing for Research Class. This is the first entry into the student's dissertation file.
3. The first work session reviews the dissertation development timeline and benchmarks. Students are provided a planning calendar to chart their work on the dissertation. They are encouraged to make an entry every day.
4. The cohort leaders develop a meeting schedule that outlines cohort meetings that are to occur once a month. At each meeting, cohort members report out to the group what they have accomplished during the month.
5. Students are directed to make copies of all documents that are essential to the dissertation and save the documents in various places electronically. Many students use *Dropbox* to save their work files. Consequently, we never have a student who loses their work because of a lost flashdrive or computer crash.
6. The cohort protocol is to copy the dissertation chair on all correspondence related to the dissertation. This enables the dissertation chair to act proactively should a problem occur within the process.
7. Cohort leaders develop the working seminar topics for the semester that may be useful to cohort members. Attendance at the seminars is completely voluntary. Past working seminar topics have included workshops (given by cohort leaders) on the following topics: *How to Use SPSS 17.0*, *Qualitative Studies and Rich, Thick Descriptions*, *Aligning the Theoretical Framework with Study Variables*, *How to Write Good Research Questions*, *How to Write Study Findings and Conclusions*.
8. Cohort leaders also help cohort members prepare for defenses of the proposal and final dissertation.
9. Students prepare a semester report of progress at the end of each semester and file it with the dissertation chair.
10. Students are encouraged to attend all university proposal defenses. When cohort members are scheduled to defend their work, cohort leaders and other cohort members are always in attendance for moral support and to provide assistance with any preparations needed.
11. Cohort leaders assure that all post-defense matters are attended to in a timely manner including providing the requisite paperwork to the appropriate parties.

## **ADVICE FROM THE FIELD ON THE DISSERTATION PROCESS –DR. ANGELA SEAY**

1. “When we are foolish we want to conquer the world. When we are wise we want to conquer ourselves.”
2. Understanding who we are as individuals will allow us to make decisions about career paths and life in general.
3. Getting to the finish line of dissertation with research- based practices that have proven to work. In completing the dissertation, the following advice was followed:
4. Treat the ideas of completing dissertation as a second career. Complete or contribute something everyday. For example, research, read supporting articles and relevant dissertations, generate an outline, timeline or sort articles according to categories of research. Bolker (1998) states writing something relative to

- dissertation at least fifteen minutes everyday is a process that is beneficial to getting finished.
5. Surround yourself with individuals who desire to attain the same goal. Someone who is willing to dedicate the time that is required to complete dissertation. According to Krumboltz (2002) Peer learning is a magnified component of research that is not utilized enough.
  6. Work collaboratively with individuals and always contribute to the group. To whom much is given, much is required.
  7. Students should select committee members who are familiar with the process of the institution of attendance.
  8. Maintain regular communication with dissertation chair and committee members. The people who are designated to serve on your committee have earned doctorate degrees. Chances are, each individual is extremely familiar with the process and time that is required to complete the dissertation. Vosvick (1999) found that 10 of 11 dissertation students indicated top ratings for rapport established with mentor. Spillet & Moisiejewicz (2004) state that the dissertation chair plays an intricate part in the success of completing the dissertation. Students who establish a positive rapport with the dissertation chair can take advantage of the challenges to learn as well as support.
  9. Commit to completing the work. Seek assistance and guidance versus direct answers to questions that can be answered by dedicating appropriate time and effort to attain.
  10. Remain positive at all times. When individuals think positive, each usually generates positive outcomes.
  11. Understand the importance of making the transition from general everyday writing to scholarly writing. Earning a doctorate requires quality on a scholarly level.
  12. Find an editor. When writing, sometimes developing a quality scholarly product does not transpire after the first, second, or even the third draft. Good writers write and rewrite several times. Caffarella & Barnett (2000) found that students transformed from reluctant learners seek assistance with writing and embrace critiques. Students should acknowledge each critique as a growing process and became scholarly writers.
  13. Utilize time wisely; if someone is available to assist with content material, preparations, or processes, take advantage of the opportunity.
  14. Make a mental transition from your current position/societal status to a doctoral candidate. As change agents in society, school systems, or other businesses, leaders remain in a leadership mode. When each becomes a doctoral candidate, the current position/status/title has limited merit. Become a student and return to the position/status after returning to that setting.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the objective of these focus group conversations was to distill strategies that were useful in propelling doctoral students to completion of the dissertation. The doctoral students in the cohort are ninety-five percent African American and ninety-eight percent female. Their experience leads us to believe that with effective mentoring and training in self-regulated learning, all doctoral students can increase persistence behaviors during the dissertation phase of doctoral study. Montalvo & Torres (2004) concluded that students who pursue and adopt identifiable learning goals use deeper cognitive strategies on the way to academic achievement. This is manifested by greater efforts in accomplishing academic tasks and avoiding external distractions. These students are able to sustain their momentum toward dissertation completion and are able to self-monitor until the dissertation is completed.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

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