

ONLINE DOCTORAL PERSISTENCE: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISSERTATION SUCCESS FACTORS

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Abstract

This phenomenological study sought to identify success factors for online EdD doctoral students that may improve student satisfaction, retention, and successful dissertation completion. This study explored students' experiences and perceptions of factors that contribute to the successful completion of a dissertation in an online professional doctoral degree program in the United States. Study participants included a purposeful sample of 11 students who previously completed online EdD degree programs representing two public and six private universities. Overall, findings suggest there are factors contributing to the successful completion of an online EdD program, such as relationships with the dissertation chair and fellow students, support systems, time management, and a balance between school and life events. By recognizing the challenges online EdD students face and identifying best practices that can help students overcome such challenges, online doctoral program administrators can foster learning environments that promote positive student-faculty and student-student relationships aimed at helping doctoral students overcome common obstacles faced during the dissertation phase.

Keywords: educational leadership, distance education, doctoral dissertation, EdD, online learning, professional practice doctorate, online student attrition, online student perceptions

Online learning has increased in popularity, continued to grow, and is now commonplace in higher education (Burrus et al., 2019; NCES, 2024; Palvia et al., 2018; Shard et al., 2024), due in part to the increased use of emerging technology (Mehta et al., 2017), the Covid Pandemic (Garrett et al., 2022) and its usefulness and perceived ease of use (Shard et al., 2024). Programs now being offered fully online include doctoral programs where students are not required to come to campus. However, attrition rates among doctoral students in both face-to-face and online have remained a concern (Berry, 2017; Breitenbach, 2019; Fiore et al., 2019; Lake et al., 2018; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021; Young et al., 2019). In fact, Craft et al. (2016) approximated that almost half of all enrolled doctoral students in American programs do not finish their degree while Baltes and Brown (2018) observed 40% of online doctoral students did not complete the dissertation or capstone project.

Because doctoral programs have been offered online for just a little more than two decades and the continued concern for student attrition, more research is needed to support online doctoral students in professional doctoral programs, e.g., Doctor of Education (EdD) (Ames et al., 2018). In addition, according to Deshpande (2016) and Akojie et al. (2019), further research is needed to examine obstacles to degree completion online professional doctoral students face. Similarly, Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014b) noted a gap in qualitative research related to doctoral persistence. To address these calls for research, this study was designed to explore students' experiences and perceptions of factors that contribute to the successful completion of a dissertation in an online EdD program in the United States. Recommendations are made to assist online doctoral program administrators with supporting student and faculty dissertation chair success through the online dissertation process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online learning in higher education continues to increase (Moloney & Oakley, 2019; NCES, 2024; Olesova, 2023). In fact, Allen and Seaman (2016, 2017) recognized the significance of this in the face of an overall decline in higher education enrollment over the past few years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, data indicated nearly 30% of higher education students were taking at least one distance education course (Allen & Seaman, 2017). After the COVID-19 pandemic, more students than ever enrolled online with the growth continuing still. The NCES Trends Report (2024) showed in Fall 2024, 53.8% of all college students were taking online classes. Overall, more than 7 million college students completed all of their coursework through distance education in the fall of 2024 (NCES, 2024).

Student Attrition

Attrition rates among doctoral students are concerning (Ames et al., 2018; Berry, 2017; Craft et al., 2016; Deshpande, 2016; Nuuyoma & Sing, 2025; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014a; Santicola, 2013). Factors influencing attrition include financial burden, family obligations, feelings of isolation, personality, and motivational factors (Santicola, 2013). Additionally, Berry (2017) and Melián et al. (2023) recognized online doctoral students were at a high risk of attrition as a result of not having social connections with both fellow students and faculty, while Dzubinski and Sanchez (2022) found doctoral students valued the socialization process into higher education. Research conducted by Su and Waugh (2018) concluded with a recommendation to ensure prospective students are given realistic expectations of the time commitment and level of effort necessary to succeed in an online program.

Challenges to Online Learning

According to Clinefelter and Aslanian (2015), online programs reflect a diverse student population as well as learning preferences, which are at times contradictory. A review of the literature identified many challenges as factors that can contribute to online students' success or failure such as feelings of isolation (Ames et al., 2018; Berry, 2017; Brill et al., 2014; Erichsen et al., 2014), competing priorities (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Brill et al., 2014; Su & Waugh, 2018; Thompson et al., 2013), and social presence (Berry, 2017; Lambert & Fisher, 2013; Tekiner Tolu, 2013). Furthermore, Thompson et al. (2013) determined students' self-regulation was a major factor in whether or not they succeeded, while Lambert and Fisher (2013) suggested

further research to determine whether technical skill proficiency impacts collaboration, communication, and an overall sense of community in distance education courses.

Factors Influencing Success and Persistence

Research has also shown factors that may influence online students' success include grit (Cross, 2014; Kebritchi et al., 2023), student engagement (Benedetti, 2015; Berry, 2017; Britt, 2015; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Thompson et al., 2013; Underdown & Martin, 2016), fostering a sense of community (Berry, 2017, 2019; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021), differences in student learning styles (Benedetti, 2015), commitment and discipline (Santicola, 2013), mentoring (Bartlett & Bartlett II, 2021; Black, 2017; Brill et al., 2014, Mullen, 2021), and students' perceived sense of connectedness (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014a). Research by Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) concluded one of the greatest factors influencing degree completion was financial aid and more specifically research assistantships.

Similarly, many factors contribute to student attrition or persistence in distance education. Kauffman (2015) described the successful online student as possessing characteristics such as self-motivation and self-regulation, and also noted variances in learning styles recognizing not every student is well equipped for online learning. After conducting a thorough review of the literature, the following were identified as contributors to student success in online learning: instructional design (Mehta et al., 2017), student engagement (Benedetti, 2015; Berry, 2017; Britt, 2015; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Thompson et al., 2013; Underdown & Martin, 2016), building a sense of community (Berry, 2017, 2019; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021), adapting a cohort model (Berry, 2017; Provident et al., 2015; Santicola, 2013), connectedness (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014a), student grit (Cross, 2014; Kebritchi et al., 2023), self-regulation (Gomez, 2013; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; Thompson et al., 2013), supervision and collaboration (Augustsson & Jaldemark, 2014; Brill et al., 2014), and authentic learning experiences (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Britt, 2015; Holzweiss et al., 2014).

Measures of Student Success

Earning a doctoral degree is an immense achievement, as a doctoral degree is the highest postgraduate academic degree culminating in original research and a dissertation defense; however, it is difficult to predict who will succeed in a doctoral program. While Cross (2014) used student GPA as a predictor of success, Gomez (2013) indicated student GPA from their Master's program had no bearing on their ability to persevere in a doctoral program. Research conducted by Gomez (2013) identified another potential method of predicting student success and concluded a concept referred to as Modeling the Way was the best predictor of perseverance and successful online doctoral leadership program completion. Once all required coursework has been completed, the final culminating step for a doctoral student is writing and defending a dissertation, the final measure of success for doctoral students, which merits investigation of factors impacting completion. This study explored students' experiences and perceptions of factors that contribute to the successful completion of a dissertation in an online professional doctoral degree program in the United States.

METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study focused on online EdD doctoral students' experiences with

dissertation completion. Creswell (2013) described a phenomenological study as one that, “describes the common meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 76), while van Manen (2016) reiterated the main purpose was to, “explore examples and varieties of lived experiences, especially in the form of anecdotes, narratives, stories, and other lived experience accounts” (pp. 312-313). A phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the phenomenon students experienced and perceptions of factors that contribute to the successful completion of a dissertation in an online professional doctoral degree program.

Through one-on-one interviews, participants shared insights into their experiences, including thoughts, feelings, lived experiences, and perceptions of the dissertation process. Participants described their successes and challenges, as well as specific factors that helped or hindered completing their final dissertation. The complexities of factors presenting challenges and influencing success could only be evaluated through individuals who had encountered them.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify success factors for online EdD doctoral students that may lead to improved student satisfaction, retention, and successful dissertation completion. The following questions guided the study:

RQ 1: What factors do students believe contribute to the successful completion of an online doctoral degree?

RQ 2: What common challenges do online doctoral students face with dissertations?

RQ 3: How do students perceive the value of the student and chair/advisor relationship?

RQ 4: What practices of the dissertation chair/advisor do students believe were most helpful?

RQ 5: How do students believe student-faculty interactions affect dissertation completion in online doctoral programs?

Setting

The setting for this study included eight universities (two public and six private) located throughout the United States. The population for this study targeted online doctoral degree students who completed online professional practice doctoral (EdD) programs throughout the United States. For the study, one-on-one interviews were conducted via WebEx online video conferencing software with individual participants who previously completed various online EdD degree programs. All research participants were assigned pseudonyms and the findings and emerging themes are discussed using those pseudonyms.

Participants

The study utilized a purposeful sample of 11 students who previously completed online EdD degree programs. Inclusion criteria were (a) 18 years of age or older, and (b) completion of an online EdD degree program in the United States. Purposeful sampling allowed the intentional selection of participants who had experienced and could provide a detailed understanding of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). The goal of purposeful sampling was to gain examples of experientially rich descriptions of the central phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). Additional participants were invited based on snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013).

Study participants included one male and 10 females who completed online EdD programs at

eight different universities around the United States, both public and private universities. Study participants ranged in age from 28-70 years old at the time of graduation. Seven participants were married and four were single, and five participants had minor children at home during their doctoral program.

Data Collection and Treatment of the Data

Data collection methods followed Creswell's (2013) recommendations for phenomenological studies, which included utilizing interview protocols containing questions designed to seek detailed descriptions of experiences, to reflect on meaning and perspectives, and to identify common themes (Moustakas, 1994). All interviews were recorded using WebEx online web conferencing software to preserve the discussions, allowing reference back to the recordings frequently during the transcription process and as data were analyzed. Data were collected using interview protocols. Participants were asked open-ended questions during interviews, prompting participants to describe their experiences with an online doctoral degree program, their dissertation chair, and factors contributing to the success of dissertation completion.

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to analyze narrative descriptions of personal experiences, develop a list of significant statements, group the statements into themes, and provide a written description of the findings. Data analysis followed recommended protocols by Creswell (2013) to identify the essence of what participants experienced (textural description) and how they experienced it (structural description). Significant statements and emerging themes (clusters of meaning) were documented to describe what the participants experienced.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Analysis of the data collected from the 11 participants revealed three overarching themes: (1) the dissertation chair relationship, (2) structural and community factors, and (3) navigating the dissertation.

Theme One: Dissertation Chair Relationship

Research question one centered on the dissertation student and chair relationship. Analysis of the data revealed all study participants valued the relationship they developed with their chair. Although some participants had been assigned more than one chair during their doctoral program, it became evident finding the right match was instrumental to study participants' success. The three subthemes that emerged were gratitude and appreciation, they make or break you, and a lasting bond. Study participants described their chair as their champion, their cheerleader, and even their Oracle. Many of the study participants reflected positively on the relationship with their dissertation chair and in some cases attributed their overall success to that relationship.

Several research participants expressed gratitude toward the value of the relationship with their dissertation chair and the critical role the chair played in their success. One participant noted, "I owe a debt of gratitude for the guidance that he provided because it was instrumental to my success." Another described the relational stakes directly: "That relationship piece that your adviser gives you really makes or breaks your experience in a doctoral program." For some, the bond formed with their chair carried deep emotional weight: "I just started crying because of the impact that he had on my success and helped me to make sure that he believed in me therefore, I

knew I could achieve my goal in life.”

In terms of facilitating dissertation completion identified by research question three, study participants described their appreciation of their respective chairs for keeping them on track, managing expectations, and providing guidance and resources. Many participants described how helpful their chair was in managing expectations of their study, timelines, and the technical aspects of the dissertation such as formatting and overall study design. One participant captured the importance of managing scope: “Making sure that we understood that this was a part of the process to get you finished, not that we are trying to cure cancer with this.” Another described the value of timely follow-up: “Constant follow-ups that he had with us via email and making sure that we’re following the dates. That’s what helped me to be successful.” Chairs also provided helpful guidance on the work itself: “Guidance in constructing my dissertation because there were times when I took a first stab at composing a section and I was way off base.” Beyond the technical, moral support also emerged as a valued practice: “Sometimes he would reach out, you know, through email, whatever, or text, just to say, hey, how’s everything going.”

Research participants expressed both positive and negative impacts faculty interactions had on their degree completion. Timeliness and responsiveness were seen as both positive and negative. Some participants reflected frustration with the amount of time it took for responses from their chair, while others indicated their chair was readily available and provided timely, constructive feedback. One participant reflected, “I definitely think we could have had a greater level of interaction. I think it could be much greater, I think it would have improved my work, and it would have lessened her work, had we interacted a little more.” Some participants who did not receive timely feedback felt their chairs had too many dissertation students assigned to them. One participant offered a vivid contrast, comparing an effective chair to a familiar cultural reference: “I’ve compared him to the Oracle, the one that told Neo what he needed to hear, not always what he wanted to hear, but what he needed to hear in order to succeed. My chair was my Oracle.”

Theme Two: Structural and Community Factors

Research question four examined students’ perceptions of factors contributing to the successful completion of an online doctoral degree. The research revealed four emerging themes: program structure, support systems, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and commitment and determination.

Program structure emerged as a significant contributing factor. As one participant reflected, “The flexibility of being able to take the classes when I had time for them was tremendous, made all the difference in the world. That flexibility is just, I don’t think I could have dealt with it if I’d have gone through a brick-and-mortar school.” Several participants recognized their cohort members as a key component to their success: “My fellow classmates were absolutely fantastic. We were able, like, emotional support, through that process.”

Several intrinsic motivating factors emerged throughout the interviews, including passion and the desire to achieve a personal goal. As one participant shared, “Intrinsic motivation really kind of helped me when I was feeling like, is this ever going to end?” Some participants also described external factors such as promotion potential and the financial impact of not finishing on time.

Personal characteristics such as tenacity, self-discipline, persistence, dedication, and commitment emerged as success factors contributing to the successful completion of an online doctoral program. One participant captured this directly: “It actually takes a great deal of discipline to be able to complete an online program because you’re pretty much left to your own devices.”

Theme Three: Navigating the Dissertation

Research question two examined practices of the dissertation chair students perceived to be most helpful to their success. Many participants described how helpful their chair was in terms of managing expectations like the scope of their study, timelines, and the technical aspects of the dissertation such as formatting and overall study design. In terms of facilitating the completion of the dissertation, study participants described their appreciation of their respective chairs for keeping them on track, managing expectations, and providing moral support.

Research question five explored common challenges online doctoral students faced with dissertation completion. Six subthemes were identified: challenges with dissertation chair and committee members, managing the scope, the mechanics of the dissertation, feelings of isolation, time management, and balancing life. Findings from research question one indicated the relationship with a dissertation chair has the ability to help or hinder a student’s success. When there are challenges with the chair or committee members, this leads to frustration and in some cases impacts the student’s ability to complete their dissertation. More than half of the study participants discussed the challenge of having to switch chairs during their doctoral programs. One participant noted, “My chair was an issue because she wasn’t giving me good feedback, and she wasn’t giving me timely feedback.”

Managing the scope and format of the dissertation presented another obstacle: “Trying to figure out the exact topic that was interesting enough, but also narrow enough, to where I know I could get finished.” The mechanics of the dissertation itself also posed challenges: “You can look at a thousand other dissertations and still not know how you want to produce your own.” Another participant remarked how their chair helped as they struggled with, “narrowing the scope as I was writing, and not trying to save the world, as my chair would say.”

As in the dissertation advisor relation, feelings of isolation also emerged as a significant challenge, particularly as students transitioned from coursework to the dissertation phase. As one participant described, “When I started writing a dissertation, again it was kind of like you’re on a lone island because I had finished the coursework and I didn’t communicate with my classmates.”

Time management and balancing life emerged as interconnected challenges. One participant described the constant negotiation: “The challenge was, how do you balance full-time work, the class that you’re in at the moment, and still finding time to write your dissertation.” Another reflected on the personal cost: “Anyone beyond my immediate family did not get any of my time for that year because I simply didn’t have the resource of time to give.”

Study participants expressed both positive and negative impacts faculty had on their degree completion. Again, as in the dissertation advisor relationship, responsiveness was seen as both

positive and negative impacts. Some participants reflected frustration with the amount of time it took for responses from their chair, while others indicated their chair was readily available and provided timely, constructive feedback. Some of the participants who did not receive timely feedback felt their chairs had too many dissertation students assigned to them.

DISCUSSION

The three themes that emerged from this study, the dissertation chair relationship, structural and community factors, and navigating the dissertation, are not isolated factors but interdependent forces that collectively shape doctoral student success. When the chair relationship falters, feelings of isolation intensify; when program structure fails to build community, students are left without the scaffolding needed to manage competing life demands. Understanding these connections, rather than treating each factor independently, is essential for designing programs that genuinely support doctoral completion.

Theme One: The Dissertation Chair Relationship as a Foundation for Success

Research has shown supervision and collaboration contribute to student success in online learning (Augustsson & Jaldemark, 2014; Brill et al., 2014). Similarly, research has indicated mentoring is important in online learning (Black, 2017; Brill et al., 2014) and is critical to the success of doctoral students (Brill et al., 2014; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2015; Melián et al., 2023; Mullen, 2021). In addition, the relationship between the student and their dissertation chair/advisor is noted throughout the literature as an influence on completing the doctoral degree (Craft et al., 2016; Melián et al., 2023). Although Erichsen et al. (2014) noted challenges exist with supervising online doctoral students, they recognized most participants found value in receiving encouragement and support from their chair. According to findings by Akojie et al. (2019), Craft et al. (2016), Friesen et al. (2022) and Lively et al. (2021), relationships between students and their dissertation chair are a critical element in completing a doctoral degree.

Because of the more unstructured nature of the dissertation process in comparison to previous coursework, participants described their chairs as instrumental in helping them stay on track while navigating the dissertation process, and in helping them manage expectations. Additionally, chairs provided helpful guidance and resources to the doctoral students and offered moral support. Similarly, research by Erichsen et al. (2014) found helpful practices identified by their study participants included:

Timely, effective, and proactive communication on the part of the supervisor; outlining the process and a timeline with accountability measures; clarification of roles in the supervision relationship; critical questioning and probing; clear, substantive, and timely feedback; goal setting; providing encouragement, praise, and support; and providing examples and clear guidelines for the research process (p. 331).

Although students reported satisfaction with supervision, Erichsen et al. (2014) and Fiore et al. (2019) concluded there was room for additional improvement considering many students also reported feelings of isolation. More recently, Rost and Krahenbuhl (2023) found “helping shift online graduate students towards a sense of belonging is something that can make a notable difference in their experience and in their ultimate success” (p. 47).

Considering research by Clinefelter and Aslanian (2015) reported, nearly 30% of online students were concerned with their ability to remain focused and motivated. Many researchers identified student engagement as one of the main success factors for online students (Benedetti, 2015; Berry, 2017; Britt, 2015; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Thompson et al., 2013; Underdown & Martin, 2016), while Berry (2017) suggested there is a connection between student engagement and a sense of community. Additionally, Lowery et al. (2018) found mentor-to-mentee communications can foster a sense of connectedness. It must be noted, according to the CPED (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate)(n.d.), mentoring and advising is one of the key elements of program design for the professional doctorate in education, however mentoring and advising should be guided by principles of equity and justice, mutual respect, dynamic learning, flexibility, intellectual space, supportive and safe learning environments, cohort and individual attention, rigorous practices, and integration.

Theme Two: Structural and Community Factors

Research has shown doctoral students experienced feelings of anxiety and depression as well as feeling alone and disconnected (Berry, 2017). Several of the participants in this study recognized their cohort members as a key component to their success, which was recognized as factors influencing success in studies by Berry (2017) and Santicola (2013). Research findings suggest feeling connected with fellow students and the instructor is one of the key elements of creating a successful learning atmosphere. In the present study, several participants reflected on the importance of support from cohort members as being important to their success. This finding coincides with research that found cohort models foster a sense of community (Berry, 2017, 2019; Kumar et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014b) and can contribute to the success of doctoral students (Brill et al., 2014).

In addition, Berry (2017) recognized online doctoral students to be at a high risk of attrition as a result of not having social connections with both fellow students and faculty, while Lambert and Fisher (2013) contended building a sense of community in online education could improve student retention and engagement. Managing roles and expectations of both the doctoral student and the advisor can help foster relationships potentially leading to positive impacts on the overall doctoral experience (Craft et al., 2016; Lively et al., 2021).

Regarding intrinsic motivations noted by participants, Kauffman (2015) described the successful online student as possessing characteristics such as self-motivation and self-regulation. Similarly, Thompson et al. (2013) determined students' self-regulation was a major factor in whether or not they succeeded. These characteristics are similar to what Duckworth et al. (2007) described as grit, or "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087). Furthermore, according to McClendon et al. (2017), "gritty learners persevere in spite of obstacles, determined to succeed no matter the hurdle" (p. 12).

Theme Three: Navigating the Dissertation

Completion of a dissertation is a challenging yet rewarding endeavor (Burkard et al., 2014; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2015). Craft et al. (2016) identified constraints with allowing students to either select or change chairs as needed and found there was more emphasis on holding doctoral students accountable than holding the faculty advisors accountable. Research

shows encouraging students to select dissertation topics that hold their interest and provide intrinsic value to them, which in turn would promote self-regulated learning (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2015).

Feelings of isolation were among the most consistently reported challenges, particularly as students transitioned from coursework to the dissertation phase (Ames et al., 2018; Berry, 2017; Brill et al., 2014; Erichsen et al., 2014). In addition, managing competing priorities (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Brill et al., 2014; Su & Waugh, 2018; Thompson et al., 2013), and social presence (Berry, 2017; Lambert & Fisher, 2013; Tekiner Tolu, 2013) present obstacles for dissertation completion. In fact, a systematic review of the online doctoral experience found that isolation, juggling work and family roles, and financial pressures are the main challenges facing online doctoral students, and that pursuing a doctorate online is more isolating than in face-to-face programs, with students encountering additional challenges around supervision and study-life balance (Melián et al., 2023).

The mechanics of writing the dissertation with guidance from the advisor was also noted. This is supported by the literature as a systematic review of doctoral dissertation writing covering 2000–2024 identified supervisor-student communication and research skill development as central concerns across institutions, suggesting that struggles with scope and mechanics are not individual problems but reflect the need for more structured disciplinary writing support built into program design (Dardour & Bouyahya, 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS

By recognizing challenges online EdD students face and identifying best practices that can help students overcome such challenges, program administrators can effectively foster learning environments that promote positive student-faculty and student-student relationships aimed at helping doctoral students overcome common obstacles faced during the dissertation phase. For many, this begins with the dissertation chair and the critical role they play in a student's success. Online doctoral program administrators must strive to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships and take care to ensure chairs have adequate time and are committed to helping students succeed through the dissertation process.

While much of the research focuses on the relationship between the dissertation chair and the doctoral student, program administration and resources can also support student success by providing resources, training, and guidelines for success. For example, creating clear processes for selecting/matching and/or changing dissertation chairs/advisors are recommended (Roumell & Bolliger, 2017). The literature also suggests developing guidelines that outline clear expectations for both the doctoral students and chairs to adhere to during the dissertation phase, including timely feedback (Burrington et al., 2022; Craft et al., 2016; Erichsen et al., 2014; Lively et al., 2021) and frequent communication (Akojie et al., 2019; Burrington et al., 2022; Byrnes et al., 2019). In addition, Russell (2021) suggested templates for dissertation writing and data collection should be provided.

Additional recommendation center on the dissertation faculty advisor. Many researchers suggest providing models and best practices for mentoring online doctoral students, exploring

opportunities for co-mentoring and student alumni mentors (Byrnes et al., 2019; Melián et al., 2023; Pollard & Kumar, 2021; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017), and providing faculty advisor training (Frazer et al. 2017; Pollard & Kumar, 2021; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017). Program administrators should ensure faculty taking on the role of dissertation chair have adequate time and resources to mentor their doctoral students effectively (Erichsen et al., 2014). In addition, providing scheduled opportunities for student engagement with faculty and fellow students can create and foster a sense of community (Britt et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014b).

Finally, providing multiple methods or communication channel (Crosta et al., 2018) and encouraging students to use social media channels like WhatsApp or GroupMe to facilitate students connecting to peers can help with feelings of isolation (Akojie et al., 2019; Crosta et al., 2018). Assisting students with managing expectations and creating a positive dissertation experience can potentially decrease student attrition and foster rewarding, lasting relationships between doctoral students and their chair/advisor while supporting overall student success.

Recommendations for Future Research

More research is needed in the area specific to online doctoral students and success during the dissertation phase. While this study focused specifically on online students' perceptions of dissertation success factors, there is an opportunity for additional research to look more closely at the process of assigning students with a dissertation chair. Since the relationship between the online doctoral student and chair was found to have both positive and negative impacts on dissertation completion, how to facilitate a relationship that is productive and rewarding for both student and chair warrants further investigation. Additional research should be conducted in the area of managing communication and expectations during the dissertation process, exploring effective strategies used by online faculty advisors to support doctoral students with dissertations, and further investigating best practices for helping doctoral students overcome common obstacles faced during the dissertation phase. Future research should explore how programs structure communication and expectations throughout the dissertation phase. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms will further equip institutions to reduce attrition, support doctoral completion, and strengthen the overall integrity of online doctoral education.

CONCLUSION

This study centered the voices of EdD students who successfully navigated one of the most demanding phases of doctoral education, and in doing so, revealed consistent findings that: completion is rarely the product of individual effort alone. Rather, it emerges from an ecosystem of relational, structural, and personal factors that must work in concert. The dissertation chair is not merely an academic supervisor but often a cornerstone keeping students connected to the program during its most isolating phase. Program structure and community, particularly the cohort model, serve as the connection that sustains motivation when intrinsic drive wavers. While students must bring considerable self-discipline and resilience, they cannot be expected to compensate for institutional gaps in support.

These findings carry a direct charge for program administrators: intentional design is not optional. Matching students with well-prepared, adequately resourced chairs, building structured

opportunities for peer connection, and establishing clear expectations for communication throughout the dissertation phase are not just enhancements, they are foundational. Online doctoral programs that treat these elements as secondary risk losing students not because they lacked ability, but because the environment failed them. Closing that gap is both an institutional responsibility and an imperative.

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