Writing Assessment: Reading Excerpt

READING EXCERPT

**Challenges to Completion**

Cassuto (2013) identified three different types of doctoral completers: (a) those who cannot complete because of time commitment, lack of research skills, personal challenges, and other outside factors; (b) those who can complete but choose not to, leaving the program for personal or professional reasons; and (c) those who successfully reach dissertation completion. How the personal and professional challenges impact those who do complete the dissertation became the focus of this study.

**Personal or Environmental Factors**

To successfully reach dissertation completion, the impact of outside factors such as managing work and family (Flynn, Chasek, Harper, Murphy, & Jorgensen, 2012) must be mitigated to ensure student progress. This is particularly true for practitioner scholars who negotiate both the professional and academic spheres. A frequent challenge to completion is the needs of families (Cassuto, 2013; Dominguez, 2006). Another relevant barrier to doctoral degree completion is lack of funding. Dissertating doctoral students may be conflicted with work concerns and money during this final stage in the doctoral process. Financial aid and fellowships for doctoral students are critical resources to ensure completion (Ehrenberg et al., 2009). Flynn et al. (2012) further explained that professional factors such as unemployment were barriers to dissertation completion.

According to Smallwood (2006), many of the issues related to non-completion may be attributed to admission selections. "Academic and affective factors that enter into the admissions process of doctoral students must be focused upon the student's ability to complete program requirements and ultimately be awarded the doctoral degree" (McCalley, 2015, p. 4). The immutability of these issues spans 3 decades, with doctoral degree candidates reporting similar barriers impacting completion (Bair & Haworth, 2004).

**Impostor Syndrome**

Clance and Imes (1978) studied high-achieving individuals and observed that high-performing professionals may often struggle with fears of being exposed as an impostor. The groups they identified included persons for whom success came quickly, first-generation professionals, people with high-achieving parents, members of minority groups, and students. Nelson (2011) described impostor syndrome as "the crippling feelings of self-doubt and anticipated failure that haunt people who attribute their success to luck or help from others rather than their own abilities" (p. 129). Sherman (2013) warned that this self-doubt could create a paralyzing fear of failure: "Impostor syndrome can create performance anxiety and lead to perfectionism, burnout, and depression" (p. 31). Hendrikson (2016) noted that impostor syndrome often appears "after an especially notable accomplishment, like admission to a prestigious university, public acclaim, winning an award, or earning a promotion" (p. 1).

Young (2011) clarified that those with impostor syndrome believe erroneously that they lack intelligence, skills, and competencies; consequently, they feel undeserving of success. Young further predicted that times of transition, new challenges, and high-stakes assignments could cause impostor feelings to surface, even in otherwise confident, high-performing adults. Cuddy (2016) opined that impostorism is nondiscriminatory and knows no limits, as she recalled a conversation she had with Pauline Clance: "One more thing, if I could do it all over again, I would call it the impostor experience, because it's not a syndrome or a complex or a mental illness. It's something almost everyone experiences" (p. 95). Cuddy further explained that rates of perfectionism, performance anxiety, and societal expectations may contribute to the impostor syndrome. Nonetheless, Cuddy reported that fear of failure was recognized across numerous studies in different disciplines as the root cause of performance paralysis in otherwise highly capable individuals.

**Writing Anxiety**

Candidates associated anxiety with producing doctoral level work, especially because "explicit instruction in areas such as 'thesis writing' and 'writing for publication' does not seem to be normal practice in higher education" (Ferguson, 2009, p. 286). Students can feel overwhelmed by feedback for revisions regardless of depth or breadth of the recommendations due to a lack of exposure to academic writing before program admission (Ondrusek, 2012; Thomas, Williams, & Case, 2014). When students can edit their work based upon the feedback of faculty or peers, students lacking research skills are likely to focus primarily on grammatical changes instead of strengthening their overall argument (Ondrusek, 2012).

Becoming a good writer requires a sense of vulnerability and discomfort inherent in the practice during multiple revisions. Additionally, O'Connor (2017) argued that when students face their intellectual inhibitions, it is not simply an issue of confidence in presenting ideas, but a compelling anxiety about the nature of formulating thoughts. Writing is a personal experience and receiving feedback requires a certain level of openness and willingness to take criticism (Ferguson, 2009; Liechty, Schull, & Liao, 2009). "We must recognize that the ability to write from a scholarly perspective is a skill that does not necessarily precede acceptance into a graduate program" (Ondrusek, 2012, p. 185). "Providing for supportive groups or peer review opportunities and providing prompt and meaningful feedback may foster writing efficacy in students" (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007, p. 817). O'Connor (2017) discussed how writing offers both an opportunity and a threat for students: "In the negotiation with the dissertation, there is a frustration in the inability we meet in ourselves, the lack of fluidity in expression and the sometimes torturous space between what we seek to express and what we actually express" (p. 3). Scholarly writing skills required in doctoral programs emphasize critical thinking, synthesis, and clarity of expression as essential for overall doctoral performance.

**Productivity**

The final barrier to successful doctoral completion relates to overall productivity. Because graduate students are, on average, older, they often balance expectations of family, friends, community or civic involvement, and careers. Therefore, finding dedicated dissertation time can prove to be a barrier (Ondrusek, 2012). In a study of a predominantly Black female cohort, Holmes, Robinson, and Seay (2010) found that training in self-regulated learning in conjunction with effective mentoring can assure success for all students in the dissertation phase of doctoral study.

Ehrenberg et al. (2009) argued that graduate students who have assistantships and are provided opportunities to engage in research have increased levels of overall productivity and progress more quickly than peers with other jobs. Dominguez (2006) explicated the barriers to graduation linked to productivity as an inability to plan, procrastination, perfectionism, lack of research skills, and trouble selecting a topic.

**Supports to Completion**

According to the Strategic Intervention for Doctoral Completion project, there are four conditions for optimal doctoral completion (Council of Graduate Schools, 2007). Condition 1 involves recruiting the right people for doctoral study and ensuring they clearly understand the rigors of doctoral education. Condition 2 logically involves admitting only those applicants who are the right candidates for doctoral study. Admissions committees are responsible for properly screening applicants and orienting them to the rigors and expectations of the program. In Condition 3, the study recommends promoting an environment in which students support each other's endeavors in a manner that prepares them for professional relationships that are collegial in nature. Last, Condition 4 emphasizes forming productive professional relationships between faculty and doctoral students so that doctoral students receive the support and mentorship necessary for completion.

**Cohort or Peer Support**

Beyond the family, cohorts or writing groups can provide support for doctoral students. External factors tied to success include "advisor motivation, family support, and supervisor/institutional considerations" (Dominguez, 2006, p. 23). According to Varney (2010), the use of the cohort model is a program design option that positively impacts completion rates. Krueger and Peek (2006) noted that interpersonal relationships during the program of study was important for developing of academic skills associated with writing, teaching, and publishing.

**Mentors in the Academe**

A faculty mentor can provide social and emotional guardianship in addition to the traditional academic support for the doctoral candidate during the dissertation. The dissertation chairperson has been found to be key to productivity as well as timely completion (Barnes, Williams, & Stassen, 2012; Burkard et al., 2014; Spillet & Moisiewicz, 2004). Garger (2011) identified four essential roles of dissertation chairpersons as advocate, manager, leader, and judge, claiming the savvy chairperson applies the role appropriate to the needs of the protégé in varying situations.

Bloom, Propst Cuevas, Hall, and Evans (2007) claimed that the relationship between the chairperson and the candidate is the essential component in determining degree completion and must be based upon genuine care. For this reason, an understanding of selection criteria will help to guide decision making early in the dissertation process. Neale-McFall and Ward (2015) recommended that chairperson selection not be taken lightly, as it may determine the productivity and ultimately whether the candidate completes a doctoral program. The factors identified by students in selecting a chairperson in earlier decades centered around similar research interests, a potential chairperson's reputation for publishing, and whether the chair was knowledgeable in methodology (Lovitts, 2001; Smart & Conant, 1990). Alternately, current candidates seek a chairperson who is willing to support and nurture over one who is highly credentialed with an impressive research background or reputation (Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). Chairperson selection based upon genuine care and accessibility will move a student toward success. Additionally, a candidate should consider whether the potential chairperson acts as a role model in professional and personal matters, provides individualized guidance, and proactively integrates students into the profession, all indicators of a successful dissertation mentor.

In a metasynthesis of 118 studies on doctoral attrition, Bair and Haworth (2004) found most frequently that degree completion was directly related to the amount and quality of contact between doctoral students and their chairperson. Collaborative relationships with committee or other faculty members have also been found to positively impact completion results (Dominguez, 2006; Neale- McFall & Ward, 2015). When doctoral candidates can connect with research and learn about publishing, they are more likely to feel connected to the community of the academy (Smallwood, 2006).

When candidates do not complete doctoral programs, along with psychological and economic losses, there are immeasurable voids in research both to the university and to the academe (Gilliam & Kritsonis, 2006; Grasso et al., 2009). After 40 years of research, and despite advancements in technology, pedagogy, and curriculum, the noncompletion rate may still be increasing (Miller, 2013). In this study, the researchers sought to understand the factors that thrust doctoral candidates to completion, whether quickly or on a delayed schedule.

*[Methodology and Major Findings sections have been omitted from this excerpt.]*

**Implications**

From the findings, multiple implications inform practice for students, faculty, chairpersons, and doctoral program directors. The associated implications for dissertation completion are not intended to be considered a generic template. Moreover, the findings from this study reinforce the notion that individual students' motivation, drive, and confidence levels determine the pace toward completion of the doctoral degree. Although common approaches to the dissertation span disciplines and institutions, doctoral students voiced the importance of their unique needs as they reflected on their dissertation completion. For students, self-awareness was essential and communicating their preferred learning style, writing preferences, and support systems were critical to their success.

**For Students**

Based on the findings, there are multiple implications to inform students as they approach the dissertation. First, students must understand, recognize, and address the insecurities related to impostor syndrome. Rather than allow imposter syndrome to impede their progress, students may increase productivity by creating partnerships with fellow students to serve as an accountability partner support the productivity of the writer (Ferguson, 2009). These partnerships may include setting timelines to which students are held accountable. If, for any reason, a student does not meet the deadline, reflection, discussion, and problem solving should be implemented. Ongoing communication with the chairperson is also essential. Regular, student-initiated contact with the chairperson is critical to student completion. Students must honestly communicate their challenges and insecurities with their chairperson and seek out their guidance and advice.

Next, self-awareness is critical at the dissertation phase. Students need to remain committed to the process by clearly understanding their motivations. Whether it be to make a family member proud or to move to the next professional level, their motivation to complete will keep them moving forward. Additionally, students need to know what works best for them. For example, they need to communicate what they need from their chairperson, know their productive writing times, understand the obstacles that may prevent them from making progress, and implement the rewards systems that keep them making progress.

Last, building writing and research skills throughout the coursework may improve a student's level of confidence at the dissertation phase. By seeking out research opportunities throughout the degree program, research knowledge and practice increases. Additionally, preparing related literature reviews familiarizes the student with the synthesis process and provides opportunity for feedback on writing.

**For Doctoral Program Directors, Faculty, and Chairpersons**

In the dissertation completion process, the role of the doctoral program director, faculty, and chairpersons cannot be underestimated. One way to support students in reaching their graduation goal is to build in internal characteristics tied to success to include "planning, personal disposition and communication" (Dominguez, 2006, p. 22). Overcoming impostor syndrome is essential to their completion. The role of faculty is vital. Faculty can help students enhance their dissertation-related skills and confidence by providing regular encouragement, offering constructive feedback, and incorporating meaningful assignments that relate to or inform the dissertation. These assignments can take the form of pilot studies, literature reviews, article critiques, and dissertation reviews. With the early identification of a dissertation topic, students may use course-related assignments to inform their understanding of the topic.

Additionally, the role of the chairperson is critical to a student's completion. Creating mutually agreed-upon goals and deadlines, with accountability measures are key (Ferguson, 2009). Similar to a classroom setting, by imposing deadlines with consequences, students are more likely produce. We strongly encourage regular communication between the chairperson and student. Gearity and Mertz (2012) offered guidance through an autoethnographical inquiry to inform practice on the student- chair relationship and effective mentoring in the dissertation journey. Understanding that imposter syndrome causes students to withdraw, chairpersons must regularly check in with students to offer encouragement, support, and guidance.

Departmentally, faculty and program directors cannot assume that because students completed their doctoral coursework, they are confident and prepared to write the dissertation. Departmental training in dissertation writing and research is recommended to aid students. This training can come in the form of workshops, additional coursework, or faculty consultations. We found that students often needed just-in-time dissertation information. They needed information and explanation of different components of the dissertation, when they were at that stage. We recommend using technology and the availability of virtual learning environments to provide students with dissertation-related resources including pre-recorded lectures.

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| The reading above is excerpted from the following article which follows the publishing guidelines of the 6th edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association:  Marshall, S. M., Klocko, B., & Davidson, J. (2017). Dissertation completion: No longer higher education's invisible problem.*Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 7*(1), 74-90. [https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2017.07.1.06Links to an external site.](https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2017.07.1.06) |

**To prepare:**

* Review the Marshall et. al. (2017) Reading Excerpt linked above.

**Prompt**: What challenges to completion do you anticipate you will encounter in your doctoral program? What strategies for successful completion do you anticipate will be the most useful for you, and how will you work toward implementing these strategies to meet your goals?

**The Assignment:**

Write a 2-page, double-spaced essay in response to the prompt above. To present your strongest writing skills, submit an essay that:

* Provides a focused and clear central idea that responds to all questions in the assignment prompt with developed ideas;
* Integrates relevant and accurate paraphrased and/or quoted and cited evidence from the Marshall et al. (2017) reading excerpt in support of the argument, accompanied by appropriate analysis - you may use your preferred citation style;
* Organizes ideas with logical structure, clear paragraphs, and transitional words/phrases;
* Uses grammar and mechanics to effectively communicate meaning to readers;
* Maintains academic integrity by demonstrating your original work and appropriately paraphrasing and citing relevant information from the Marshall et al. (2017) reading excerpt. Including outside sources beyond the Marshall et al. (2017) reading excerpt provided above is not required for this essay; if you use them, however, then you must cite any information you summarize, paraphrase, or quote in your preferred citation style.