

Advising Online Dissertation Students

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Pre-Discussion Paper

"Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined."

Henry David Thoreau (American essayist, poet and philosopher, 1817-1862)

A Dissertation Learner:

"The dissertation process was grueling; it was mind-blowing, back-breaking, and anxiety driven. The dissertation process takes student dedication and a fair amount of intelligence to complete the dissertation, but most importantly what is needed is a focused, understanding, and dedicated mentor to pull you up the dissertation mountain. My dissertation mentor was the main dissertation student contact during my entire academic career and one who understands the dissertation process and aware that completing the dissertation is like climbing a mountain. My mentor was my dissertation mountain climbing guide, and when I stumbled or had aches and pains my mentor dragged me to get to the top."

Dr. Janon S. Berry, Doctor of Management in Organizational Leadership, University of Phoenix Online

Introduction

Blum and Muirhead (2005) have strived to address vital issues associated with mentoring online doctoral students in their e-book *Conquering the mountain: Framework for successful chair advising of online dissertation students*. The purpose of this book is to give online distance education faculty who are dissertation advisors an explicit framework for enabling distance education doctoral student to complete a dissertation without ever coming face-to-face. Online doctoral programs are growing rapidly and distance educators and administrators are seeking relevant educational paradigms and instructional strategies for their degree programs. The authors share their experiences working with doctoral students in a virtual environment and the paper will highlight a small portion of the insights on mentoring strategies from the e-book.

The doctoral dissertation is one of the most intense academic experiences that individuals encounter in their lives. One of the tragic interpersonal moments in the academic community is when individuals share that they were not able to complete their dissertation. The initial ABD – All But Dissertation that signifies this academic state is a reminder of the difficult journey to earn the coveted doctoral degree. Curran-Downey (1998) related “being in graduate school and making it all the way through the classes, the exams and the defense of the dissertation is ---take your pick--- marathon, wasteland, jungle, rat race” (para 6). The high attrition rate for students in American doctoral programs is a dark aspect of doctoral education that continues to plague the higher education community. It reflects a degree of failure at the institutional level to assist talented individuals in what is often considered the ultimate academic challenge and represents a tremendous waste of human resources that often undermines career plans.

The entire dissertation process for many doctoral students appears similar to a mountain looming in the distance, inescapable, magnificent, but impossible to scale. Online doctoral students face additional challenges overcoming the barriers of distance education (Blum, 1999). Helms and Raiszadeh (2002) found that working in a distance education virtual medium requires more explicit objective setting than face-to-face teams. Dissertation chairs do not have an online explicit list to follow to help distance education students succeed at writing a dissertation despite argument that “ professors can learn advising skills by following some systematic advising

processes” (Davis, 2004, para 2) ; previous attempts at successfully mentoring dissertation students are typically trail-and-error learned from past failures and successes (Davis).

Create a Timeline to Climb Mountain Milestones

Successful online doctoral advisors help learners establish as timeline to make milestones clear and doable for the learners. Many advisors use Excel to work with the student to create a timeline, working backwards with the date the student wants to graduate, dissertation due dates, proposal due dates, milestones of the problem, purpose, research questions, and hypotheses creation. The timeline should include Chapter 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 revisions, edits, and final dates of completion, and factor in revisions of student drafts, chair edits, committee suggestions, and formal approval time by the University. The timeline clearly shows the dissertation student that the mountain is climbable in small steps, one step at a time in a timeframe that meets deadlines and accounts for student work or family commitments is factored into the milestones, as well as any advisor vacations or times when he or she is unavailable. An example of a timeline Blum created with a student for a dissertation proposal is below. Chairs are called *mentors* at some universities.

Mentor and Mentee Contract and Dissertation Timeline Template			
Instructions:			
1. Revision turn around time is based on experience			
2. Enter in the start date of First Dissertation Class and this generates milestones.			
3 Enter all planned conferences and vacations for mentor and mentee.			
4. Mentor reviews and factors in more time based on experience.			
4. Both parties sign the contract and keep a copy.			
5. Timeline revisions required new signatures.			
6. Enter in Dates of Dissertation Online Classes			
8. Have mentees print this out and put next to computer.			
Milestone	Due date of first Drafts or step accomplished	Mentor and Mentee agreed to five day turnaround has five days; 1 day in classes	Comments
Date starting First dissertation-related individual course.	9-Jan-05		
Editor confirmed and notified of the time frame. Send this chart to editor	10-Jan-05	15-Jan-05	
Problem statement to mentor	9-Jan-05	10-Jan-05	
Edited, suggestions made, returned	10-Jan-05	15-Jan-05	
Revisions Made	11-Jan-05	13-Jan-05	
Edited, returned	18-Jan-05	19-Jan-05	
Revisions Made	21-Jan-05	22-Jan-05	
Approved, or cycle above; the problem DRIVES the entire study so it must be perfect.	23-Jan-05	24-Jan-05	
Milestone	Due Date	Mentor/Mentee Date	Comments
Purpose Statement draft to mentor	19-Jan-05	21-Jan-05	
Edited, suggestions made, returned	22-Jan-05	23-Jan-05	
Revisions Made	24-Jan-05	25-Jan-05	
Edited, returned	30-Jan-05	31-Jan-05	
Revisions Made	1-Feb-05	6-Feb-05	
Approved, or cycle above;	11-Feb-05	12-Feb-05	
Research Questions/hypothesis questions	25-Jan-05	26-Jan-05	
Edited, suggestions made, returned	27-Jan-05	28-Jan-05	
Revisions made,	29-Jan-05	30-Jan-05	
Committee selected	30-Jan-05	30-Jan-05	
Problem, purpose, questions to committee for suggestions	30-Jan-05	4-Feb-05	
Chapter 1 Draft to Mentor	4-Feb-05	9-Feb-05	

Edited, suggestions made, returned	11-Feb-05	9-Feb-05	
Revisions made,	11-Feb-05	16-Feb-05	
Approved, or cycle above;	18-Feb-05	20-Feb-05	
Send to Editor; return to Mentor	20-Feb-05	25-Feb-05	
Approved by mentor or more changes.	27-Feb-05	1-Mar-05	
Send Chapter 1 to Committee	1-Mar-05	6-Mar-05	
Chapter 2 Draft	4-Feb-05	6-Feb-05	
Chapter 2 Revised	8-Feb-05	30-Mar-05	
First Dissertation Class Ends -- grade issued	30-Mar-05		
Milestone	Date	Date	Comments
Chapter 1 committee suggestions incorporated	30-Mar-05	4-Apr-05	
Revisions made; send to mentor with chart of changes, the request, the change itself, and the page number of Chapter 1	9-Apr-05	14-Apr-05	
Approved by mentor or cycle above.	14-Apr-05	19-Apr-05	
Chapter 2 Revised	19-Apr-05	24-Apr-05	
Chapter 2 approved by Mentor	29-Apr-05	4-May-05	
Chapter 3 to Mentor	3-Jun-05	8-Jun-05	
Same cycle, editor to receive all three chapters before sending to committee after mentor approves content; mentor receives one more time after editor before sending out.	18-Jun-05	23-Jun-05	
Committee receives mentor approved, edited Proposal with chart of changes; all three chapters.	3-Jul-05	8-Jul-05	
Changes requested, revised with chart.	18-Jul-05	23-Jul-05	
Year 3 Residency Complete	28-Jul-05	4-Aug-05	
Milestone	Date	Date	Comments
Mentee on Vacation	4-Aug-05	9-Aug-05	
Committee receives final copy for signatures.	3-Sep-05	8-Sep-05	
Requested changes if any, made and back to committee to sign	23-Sep-05	28-Sep-05	
Mentor on Vacation	28-Sep-05	3-Oct-05	
ARB/IRB receives proposal	13-Oct-05	27-Oct-05	
Changes requested, only these changes are made, resend; or approved.	11-Nov-05	26-Nov-05	
ARB and IRB approve proposal	10-Dec-05		
One on One Dissertation Class -- Chapter 4	24-Jan-06	25-Mar-06	
One on One Dissertation Class -- Chapter 5	26-Mar-06	25-May-06	
Edits of Entire Dissertation	24-Apr-06		
Dissertation to Grammar and APA Editor	26-Apr-06		
Orals	28-Apr-06		
Committee last edits done	30-Apr-06		
Committee Signatures obtained on hard-copy	30-Apr-06		
Deadline to Upload to Dean	16-May-06		
Milestone	Date	Date	Comments
Dean's requested changes made and re-sent	30-May-06		
Committee hard-copy new signature obtained -- if needed	30-May-06		
Deadline for Dean's Signature	6/1/2005		
Graduation	7/30/2006		
By signing the below, I agree to the timeline and this contract.			
and my schedule must be revised with new signatures and dates.			
Mentee Signature		Mentor Signature	Date
<i>Sign Here</i>		<i>Sign Here</i>	Date Signed

Name of mentee		Name of Mentor	
Mentee Contact Information		Mentor Contact Information	
Address:		Address:	
City, State, Zip		City, State, Zip	
Home Phone		Home Phone	
Cell:		Cell:	

Finally, chairs who are most successful at reducing online dissertation student fear simply pick up the phone and walk the student through the initial processes, mapping out what needs to be done and when. Advisor follow-through with encouraging emails keeps provide positive feedback that builds confidence and lowers unnecessary anxiety. One of the author's of this article chair at Walden University used to send out postcards simply saying hello to the dissertation student, and this practice always reduced levels of anxiety, especially the postcard stating the mentor was alive and well after a Costa Rica rafting trip (the mentor was older than 60 at the time).

The Literature Review Process

Tremendous expansion of electronic information resources has exponentially increased research opportunities. This fact makes it important that students are properly prepared to use the new technologies. Hart (1998, p. 5) has identified two basic types of skills required for researchers:

1. **Core skills and abilities** - while the differences make subject disciplines distinctive, there exists a common core of skills and attitudes which all researchers should possess and should be able to apply in different situations with different topics and problems.
2. **Ability to integrate theory and method** - research for all disciplines involves an understanding of the interrelationship between theory, method and research design, practical skills and particular methods, the knowledge base of the subject and methodological foundations (Hart, 1998, p. 5).

Reviews vary greatly in the scope and depth of material examined. The selection of study topic is a key factor and students should avoid selecting topics that transcend the requirements of their degree programs. A primary reason for studying the literature is to demonstrate familiarity with research in the field and establish credibility for the individual's current investigation. The literature review should reflectively build upon the work conducted by other researchers who are part of a larger intellectual community (Neuman, 1997).

The dissertation committee expects students to produce literature reviews that uphold high academic standards. Neuman (1997, p. 89) described four major literature review objectives:

1. **To demonstrate a familiarity with a body of knowledge and establish credibility**
A review tells a reader that the researcher knows the research in an area and knows the major issues. A good review increases the reader's confidence in the researcher's professional competence, ability, and background.
2. **To show the path of prior research and how a current project is linked to it**
A review outlines the direction of research on a question and shows the development of knowledge. A good review places a research project in a context and demonstrates its relevance by making connections to a body of knowledge.
3. **To integrate and summarize what is known in an area**
A review pulls together and synthesizes different results. A good review points out areas where prior studies agree, where they disagree, and where major questions remain. It collects what is known up to a point in time and indicates the direction for future research.
4. **To learn from others and stimulate new ideas**
A review tells what others have found so that a researcher can benefit from the efforts of others. A good review identifies blind alleys and suggests hypotheses for replication. It divulges procedures, techniques, and research designs worth copying so that a researcher can better focus hypotheses and gain new insights.

The literature review helps the student to understand the historical context of their subject while focusing on current research efforts (Hart, 1998). Literature reviews offers opportunities for students for learning how to identify areas of concern and it increases their awareness of any neglected issues.

Give Dissertation Students Direct Advice That Works

Marilyn Simon has assisted hundreds of online doctoral students in a successful completion of the doctoral dissertation. Simon shares some helpful hints that chairs should share with dissertation learners to climb the dissertation mountain: (Muirhead, Robinson & Simon 2005, pp. 15-16)

- **Develop a thick skin.** Dissertation students are striving for perfection; a lofty and extraordinary aspiration. Dissertations require a great deal of work. This is likely the first time a dissertation student is conducting a doctoral dissertation so you need to understand the process, and understand the advice of the dissertation chair; it likely that dissertation students will do more re-writes than the student can count. Dissertation student must develop the attitude that each critique is good advice, and each feedback received will move the student closer to the top of the dissertation mountain.
- **Keep in constant contact with the mentor or chair .** Dissertation students should develop a working rhythm with the chair and send component parts of major sections of the dissertation proposal work as it becomes available.
- **Manage time wisely.** The key point in time management is recognizing the finite nature of time as a resource; this is both good news and bad news. The bad news, of course, is that time is limited. Time moves at the same rate and there is no way to manipulate the passage of time. The good news is that time is a constant. Time is known and, hence, its stability provides a basis for predicting future outcomes. Good time management includes program planning whereby resources (people, time) are effectively managed. Effective time management includes making time for loved ones and time to de-stress. Daily work is made easier when a model provides a continuing guide for action, various levels of accountability and responsibility, and when essential tasks and sequences of tasks are specified along with a timeline for completion
- **Develop a dissertation student support system .** Commiserate with someone who is going through the same process, trying to climb an equally high dissertation mountain. Make sure to include family and close friends in planning and share dissertation difficulties with them. If the dissertation student does not have current friends who would understand, find new friends that have been there or are at the same part of the dissertation mountain.
- **Consult experts as needed in the dissertation process.** For example if plans include hiring a dissertation editor ensure the editor has experience working with doctoral-level scholarship. Ask other students who have recently completed a dissertation or the chair for referrals. If you plans include a statistician make certain that the statistician can explain every step of the process to because the dissertation student is are responsible for every component of the dissertation and must explain and defend all tests and measurements used in the dissertation.

Teach Students to Slow Down

The mountain of fear of the dissertation process is a huge barrier for doctoral students. The mountain of the dissertation can cause an otherwise highly intelligent student who has earned full credit for all doctoral classes to run. Sometimes the student runs the other direction and quits the doctoral program becoming *an all but dissertation* for the rest of the student's life. Another student reaction to the dissertation mountain is to attempt to complete the entire dissertation at a full-fledged run up the mountain. Similar to attempting to run up an entire mountain, attempting to write an entire dissertation in a short time frame results in failure.

Writing the proposal is the first step to succeeding at scaling the dissertation mountain, previous chapters in this book addressed how to write chapters 1, 2, and 3. The success subsequent chapter depends on the clarity and content of previous chapters, and the learner should work on each section at a time. For example, chapter 3 includes some of the exact statements found in chapter 1; so the development of chapter 1 is the first step. Chapter 4 will have many of the literature findings as supporting citations found in chapter 2. Writing successful proposals takes time and reflection. Students try to write the entire proposal quickly and tend to get frustrated when the proposal is not approved in a short time frame and no clear 1-10 plan of what to do next. The plan depends on the problem, access to data, and the design, and good chairs work hard to slow the students down to reflect on the steps needed for success.

Editing and Reflecting – Resting at Switchbacks

Similar to the manner a hiker rests while climbing, a dissertation learner should rest for short time periods when writing and editing the dissertation in order to reflect and make changes to increase clarity for the reader. The

key is to rest for short time periods, because if the learner rests for a long time period, similar to cramps the hiker may experience when starting back up the mountain after too long of a rest, the dissertation student has trouble starting the dissertation climb again. Resting for short time periods and starting again refreshed often results in the student finding errors in content, grammar, formatting, and APA; errors in any error causes a rejected proposal. Non-stop writing causes student burnout, ABD's, and an inability to see writing errors.

Using Committee Feedback – Talk to Climbers Coming Down the Mountain

By the time the chair has edited the proposal and has deemed that, the proposal meets the university's checklist of proposal requirements; the average chair has the entire document memorized and finds it difficult to see any additional errors to edit. When the proposal is the stage where the mentor cannot find any more errors, the committee suggestions are invaluable. Similar to the climber who is trying to make his or her way up the mountain, gathering information from climbers who have already been to the top helps the learner keep going, gives time for reflection, and valuable inputs to make the dissertation better with more chances for success.

Chairs should help learners find good committee members that possess the skills needed to succeed the dissertation mountain climb. For example, if the chair has strong qualitative skills but does not have a great deal of leadership background, and the learner is working on a qualitative leadership subject dissertation, asking a committee member to join the committee with strong leadership knowledge would round out the skills needed for learner success. Another committee member with both leadership and qualitative experience would add considerable value to the team. Learners often select committee members based on nothing but exposure to meeting the faculty member in a class; directing students about how to select committee members results in the creation of a better team with skills needed by the learner to succeed. Teaching the learner about the reasons why committee selection is critical can overcome the selection of a team that does not have the skills needed by the learner.

A good committee member will check the content, design, APA, and transitions in the proposal. A committee member who returns the proposal with nothing more than a "good job" or "excellent work" has not helped the learner improve the dissertation nor has the committee member worked as a team to help the learner succeed. Some chairs recommend the student find new committee members at this early stage to avoid problems with failure to provide good suggestions with the final dissertation.

A good practice is to have a meeting on the phone or using emails and tell the committee what to expect from the learner; the chair should inform the committee what to expect from the learner and at what points in time. For example, the chair in this article sends an email to the selected committee members, informing the committee feedback is needed when the chair approves the problem, purpose, and research questions/hypotheses as ready for committee suggestions, chapter 1 is ready for comments and editing, chapter 1, 2, & 3 and a change chart incorporating all committee suggestions into chapter 1 and 3, and one more time for a final signature with additional committee suggestions on the entire dissertation proposal with a change chart reminding the committee of each suggestion. The final dissertation is sent to the committee for one more round of suggestions, and re-sent after revisions for final committee signatures and to schedule the learner's Dissertation Orals.

Publishing

Students who have conquered the mountain and completed their dissertation are initially exhausted. It is a natural response to a rigorous academic journey. The process of writing for academic publication is a unique professional challenge that requires being dedicated to creating professional writing goals. Individuals who have completed their dissertation would like to publish but are not quite sure how to get started. Chairs can offer advice on how to develop a practical writing plan that will increase student opportunities for academic publication.

Students who have just completed their dissertation have a tendency to neglect writing articles from their research project. Sadly, the dissertation and related notes are stored in files and boxes but not used for publication purposes. Chamberlin (1999) relates "... many others--relieved that the tome is finally behind them--let theirs collect dust on their desks or pack their notes and files into storage. One reason, say faculty, is that many recent graduates dread transforming their dissertations into journal articles" (para 3). It is wise to seek advice from people who have publishing experience such dissertation faculty members. Converting dissertation research into a journal article requires being selective about the material being used, having a writing plan to

revise the information into a relevant format and highlight the most important findings. The article must be clear and readable which means avoiding a quick cut and past job which could undermine the potential for publication (Chamberlin, 1999).

Conclusion

The mountain metaphor highlights the enormous task of writing a successful doctoral dissertation. Students gain valuable experience climbing the dissertation mountain and overcoming a diversity of obstacles that can derail the most dedicated individuals. Chairs play a vital role in guiding and assisting online students to effectively complete their dissertation projects to become skilled researchers.

Online universities must provide the best support system for their doctoral dissertation students. The University of Phoenix and Walden University require faculty members to successfully complete training before becoming mentors. The primary goal of the training is to help prepare individuals to be effective instructors who will have the skills, knowledge and confidence to independently guide their students. Mentor training programs or workshops should:

- be an intentional, structured process
- be a nurturing process
- be an insightful and reflective process
- be a supportive process (SchoolNet, SA, 2000, para 1).

Discussion Questions

1. Why has there been a persistently high attrition rates in today's doctoral programs?
2. What type of quality controls should be in place in online doctoral programs that will help students to produce scholarly and relevant dissertations?
3. What advice would you give doctoral students in selecting a mentor?

[This list of questions should not be considered an exclusive list of topics for this discussion.]

Post-Discussion Summary

The discussion did raise some questions about the nature of differences between the traditional and online doctorate programs. A central question focus on whether there existed any substantial differences in the quality of mentoring advice and student preparation. Muhammad Betz stated "I debate with myself the value of the one in comparison to the other. I wonder if I have biases towards online doctorates (which all include residency requirements). It is my conclusion that online and traditional programs are indeed different, but that the differences don't necessarily indicate an authentic qualitative difference."

Student article publications and presenting research papers at conferences can be considered one indicator of a quality program. Online and traditional doctoral students both publish and present their work at conferences. The University of Phoenix and other online institutions have students who are involved in these academic endeavors. Therefore, the publication argument does not provide any significant difference between the two educational models. There were concerns about online doctoral faculty working other jobs might have a negative impact on their mentoring duties. Again, traditional university teachers have outside jobs, business ventures and consulting work which could be similarly viewed in a negative perspective. Students want mentors who have real world experience and expertise which helps them create scholarly dissertations that make a positive difference in a diversity of academic fields.

Today's online institutions are distinctive for having training programs which provide materials and guidance to equip mentors with specialized knowledge and insights into effective mentoring practices. It should be noted that none of the discussion participants mentioned any training programs for mentors at traditional universities. Perhaps, this reflects a tendency to affirm academic independence but it could be detrimental to the students who fail to receive adequate and timely guidance from their mentors. There is a degree of complacency among higher education leaders over the loss of many of their doctoral students who never graduate. Leaders can rationalize flaws in the dissertation process by believing that only the best learners have survived. Sadly, the absence of accountability has left too many people with nothing to show for their years of hard work except large university loans, negative memories and broken dreams.

Donna Russell raised the question "How do you initiate and sustain these interpersonal relationships in your online programs?" This is a vital question involving personalization of online academic relationships. The authors have mentored dissertation students online and they use a variety of ways to encourage positive interactions with their students. For instance, email notes can be used to share research resources and check to see how students are progressing. The notes are designed to provide both practical advice and encouragement as students seek to conquer the dissertation mountain. Friedon Wild observed that "the important aspects of the doctorate (high quality research) can be done virtually anywhere, and it's only the workplace situation that partially makes a difference."

Further research is needed into administrative and instructional strategies to provide the best guidance to doctoral students and investigate ways to help lower attrition rates. Student exit interviews would be a valuable tool to identify specific reasons for students departing from their degree programs. Michael Lawrence-Slater highlighted the importance of obtaining accurate data to develop informed perspectives on student dissertation work. The authors acknowledge that both online and traditional universities struggle in how to effectively offer the best preparation for students. Mentoring dissertation projects requires patience and wisdom when working with individuals who vary in their knowledge and research skills.

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