Dissertation across the curriculum approach
for decreasing time to earn an EdD

Kelly S. Hall
Texas A & M University – Kingsville

Don J. Jones
Texas A & M University – Kingsville

ABSTRACT

A dissertation across the curriculum approach is introduced. Elements of the approach are presented with a rationale for each practice element. Results of the dissertation across the curriculum approach are promising. Programs which have implemented elements graduate students in less than the 6 years median time taken by the average education doctoral graduate nationally. Elements represent both course- and program-level practices. Practices are presented somewhat sequentially in the order they would most likely occur during a typical education doctorate program. Intended is for the readers to glean and implement practices to improve the doctoral program with which they are affiliated.

Keywords: dissertation research, education doctorate, dissertation program improvement, dissertation chair

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this paper focuses on practices which hold promise to decrease the time for students earning doctoral degrees in education. Time to degree attainment, attrition, use of personal resources, and debt to earnings ratio are all reasons to decrease the time to earn an education doctoral degree.

In the U.S., earning a doctoral degree in education takes a median of 6 years, about the same as for other degrees (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2020a). Generally concluded is that one-half of students who start their doctoral degrees never finish (Lovitts, 2001). Education doctorates take longer to complete than other degrees at 15 years from the start of the bachelor's (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2020b).

Unlike other fields, education doctoral degree attainers are much more likely to use their own resources to fund their degrees: 45% compared to 9% of attainers in other fields. African American attainers are twice as likely to use their own resources than Caucasian Americans: 41% of African Americans use their own resources compared to 20% of Caucasians and 31% of Alaskan Native or American Indians (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2020c).

Resources used do not translate into earnings compared to other fields. Among educational doctorate attainers with debt, at $70,000, their annual expected salary is at parity with their amount of debt. In contrast, a doctoral attainer in business administration and

management with a median debt of $55,000 is expected to earn $122,500 in annual salary (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2020d)

Resources are among the complex set of challenges faced by education doctoral learners. Along with funding, time, culture of the department, quality of advising, personal issues, and research and writing have all been cited as challenges of earning a doctorate (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Maddox, 2017). This paper presents practices authors have found to mitigate challenges faced by education doctoral learners. Practices have been implemented by authors in roles as director, coordinator, and faculty of educational leadership doctoral programs in several settings over the past dozen years.

A dissertation across the curriculum approach is introduced. Elements of the approach are presented with a rationale for each practice element. Results of the dissertation across the curriculum approach are promising. Programs which have implemented elements graduate students in less than the 6 years median time taken by the average education doctoral graduate nationally. Elements represent both course- and program-level practices. Practices are presented somewhat sequentially in the order they would most likely occur during a typical education doctorate program. Intended is for the readers to glean and implement practices to improve the doctoral program with which they are affiliated.

ADMISSIONS INTERVIEW

During the admissions interview ask potential students if they have an educational problem they observe and how they might implement change to help address that problem. Problems articulated during the admissions interview often turn into topics of dissertations.

ORIENTATION

The Council of Graduate Standards (2010) recommends holding an orientation for students entering new graduate programs. During orientation expectations for graduation can be restated with details not included during the admissions process. Expectations can be created such as the adherence to APA formatting and style standards including ethical writing standards. Setting the stage for students to practice APA style and ethical writing staves plagiarism and develops professionalism.

EARLY SEQUENCING OF INITIAL RESEARCH CLASS

Frontloading the acquisition of secondary research skills and primary research design decision-making sets the stage for research to become a primary focus throughout the doctoral journey. Learning how to navigate the library, critically analyze existing research, decide on ethical research design elements can be covered. I have students find and evaluate dissertations based on the program's rubric elements related to evidence-based problems, aligned purposes and research questions, literature review synthesis, and research methods. Research design, data collection and analysis procedures are discerned and discussed in regard to appropriateness, ethics, and efficiency.

Ethics is covered by having students complete Collaborative Initiative Training Initiative (CITI) modules required of the institution's Institutional Review Board. Certification in CITI is a credential which doctoral students can earn in their very first research class and feel like they have accomplished something toward completing their dissertation research. Certification along with consideration of a topic and how they might approach researching the topic provides an early disposition toward confidence in earning the doctorate.

INTEGRATION OF DISSERTATION ELEMENTS INTO ALL COURSES

Program faculty can consider the best way to integrate dissertation elements into their learning outcomes and assignments. The dissertation rubric can serve as a guide to ensure elements of the dissertation are practiced across the program curriculum.

Learning how to synthesize and summarize is a skill required for the dissertation which is probably already integrated into every class. Making the synthesis learning outcome obviously tied to the dissertation will motivate students to learn the skill. Using the library for literature searches and building on the literature review started in an initial research class. Levy and Ellis (2006) instruct about how to use a systems approach to complete a literature review.

Requiring and grading APA elements can be integrated into every course. Students will be prepared to focus on organizing and writing the dissertation when the time comes and not be distracted or frustrated by APA requirements.

Learning about a variety of conceptual models or theoretical frameworks can be taught in almost every content (non-research) course. Knowles's andragogy posits that adult learners are more engaged when they realize that what they are learning will be applied in the future. Therefore, applying theory for assignment in classes as is done in the dissertation makes sense.

Interviews, focus groups, observations, and content/document analysis can all be practiced in assignments completed outside of research courses. As can descriptions of research settings and roles of the researcher. Practicing research skills and writing skills contained within the dissertation will make the task easier when it becomes real.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CLASS(ES)

As with the initial research class, applying and not just learning about dissertation research skills is useful for the future dissertating student. A new little book published by Billups (2021) has the word applications in the title along with words design and development. The program I teach in has found the book invaluable to teach qualitative research. The Billups resource guides students to develop qualitative tools. Combined with the six-step approach to

data analysis suggested by Braun and Clark 2006), qualitative research can come alive before the dissertation is embarked upon.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH/STATISTICS CLASS(ES)

Developing a quantitative mock chapter three has served my students well. As with the initial research course, a problem, purpose, and research questions are posed in quantitative terms. Students add to those sections a description of a quantitative design, operationalization of variables, selection of data analysis procedures (including effect size), and testing of associated statistical assumptions.

Students explain their statistical choices and practice applying procedures through presentations. So, students are not only learning about quantitative research decisions but are also getting over their trepidation working with software and presenting complicated statistical procedures. The approach of simultaneous mock chapter three development and student presentations of statistical procedures has, without a doubt, yielded a decrease in time to dissertation among students who choose a quantitative method or mix of methods.

PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT COURSE

Many education doctorate programs have a course focused on developing the dissertation proposal. I suggest requiring a dissertation manual to compliment the dissertation rubric as guides. Two such manuals, among others, are Krathwohl and Smith (2005) and Roberts (2010). The Roberts guide is succinct and has examples.

Additionally, I suggest the proposal development course include a process guide for approvals of the dissertation at the institutional level. Doctoral students must "jump through many hoops." These hoops can be easier to navigate with a process guide. A lack of dissertation structure and time management have been cited as barriers to finishing the dissertation (West et al., 2011).

Committee member roles can be taught in the proposal development course along with the nuances of communication with committee members and changes in committee membership. Ambiguous roles of committee members and unclear communication expectations have been cited as a challenge for doctoral student completion (West et al., 2011). The chair should be the primary mentor and advocate who provides substantial feedback and meets regularly with the dissertating student (Kamler & Thompson, 2014). Communication with committee members should go through the chair. Disagreements among committee members should be resolved among members and communicated to the student by the chair.

DISSERTATION WRITING INTENSIVES

For "legacy" students who are struggling to move forward, writing intensives such as boot camps work. Peers and faculty work together in various configurations to work on small sections of the dissertation. Kamler and Thompson (2014) advise to "treating research as writing and writing as research" in the abstract of their book *Helping Doctoral Students Write.* Writing intensives have been documented as effective in improving students' senses of belonging, accountability, and self-worth as writers capable of accomplishing the doctorate (Smit et al.,

2021). For these senses are those which motivate persistence among education doctorate learners and decrease their time to attain a doctorate degree.

SUMMARY

A rationale was posed for decreasing the time to attain an education doctoral degree. A dissertation across the curriculum approached was posed. Course- and program-level practices were presented based on authors' experiences improving doctoral programs over the past dozen years. Practices which can be easily to feasibly improved within the admission interview, early sequenced initial research course, core courses, qualitative and quantitative research courses, proposal development course, and in a writing intensive were posed. Intended is for the audience to glean and implement a practice to improve the doctoral program with which they are affiliated.

References

Ali, A. & Kuhon, F. (2007). Dealing with social isolation to minimize doctoral attribution: A four stage framework. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 2*, 33-49.

Billups, F. D. (2021). *Qualitative data collection tools: Design, development, and applications*. Sage.

Council of Graduate Schools (2010). *Ph.D. completion project: Policies and practices to promote student success. https://legacy.cgsnet.org/phd-completion-and-attrition-policies-and-practices-promote-student-success-0*

Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2014). *Helping doctoral students write* (2nd ed.) Routledge.

Levy, Y., & Ellis, T.J. (2006). A systems approach to conduct an effective literature review in support of information systems research. *Informing Science Journal, 9*. https://www.informingscience.org/Publications/479

Lovitts, B. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Knowles, M. (1984). *Andragogy in action*. Jossey-Bass.

Krathwohl, D. r. & Smith, N. (2005). *How to prepare a dissertation proposal: Suggestions for students in education and the social and behavioral sciences*. Syracuse University Press.

Maddox, S. (2017). *Did not finish: Doctoral attrition in higher education and student affairs* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Northern Colorado. https://digscholarship.unco.edu/dissertations/433/

National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. (2020a). Table 32: Median years to doctorate, by sex, citizenship status, ethnicity, race, and broad field of study: 2020. *Survey of Earned Doctorates*. https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/report/path-to-the-doctorate#time-to-degree

National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. (2020b). Table 32: Median years to doctorate, by major field of study: Selected years, 1970–2020. *Survey of Earned Doctorates*. https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/report/path-to-the-doctorate#time-to-degree

National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. (2020c). Table 35: Doctorate recipients' primary source of financial support, by broad field o study, sex, citizenship status, ethnicity, and race: 2020. *Survey of Earned Doctorates*. https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables

National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. (2020d). Figure 18: Median expected basic annual salary and median cumulative education-related debt for debt-holding doctorate recipients with definite employment commitments in the United States, by field

of study: 2020. *Survey of Earned Doctorates.*
https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/report/path-to-the-doctorate

Roberts, C. M. (2010). *The dissertation journey: A practical guide to planning, writing, and defending your dissertation* (2nd ed.). Corwin.

Smit, J., Jones, E., & Lesley, M. (2021, February 4). *Socialization of doctoral students into academic writing: Perceptions of a week-long online writing intensive* [Conference Presentation]. Southwest Education Research Association 44th Annual Meeting, Tyler, TX, United States. https://scholarworks.uttyler.edu/sera2021/conference/instruction/20/

West, L. S., Golkap, G., Pena, E. V., Fisher, L., & Gupton, J. (2011, June). Exploring effective support practices for doctoral students' degree completion. *College Student Journal, 45*(2), 310-323.