Chapter 18
Supporting Scholar–Practitioners toward Doctoral Degree Attainment: Intentional Strategies for Dissertation Completion

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the role of practitioner as scholar; overviews doctoral completion statistics and Time To Degree (TTD); reviews the literature on barriers and facilitating factors to dissertation completion with particular focus on part-time students who work full-time; and outlines ongoing departmental strategies for improving doctoral completion rates and reducing the time to degree. The aim of this chapter is to serve as a resource for doctoral students, faculty dissertation advisors, and program directors who wish to strengthen programs and practices to achieve the common goal of timely dissertation completion leading to the earned doctoral degree.

SUPPORTING SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONERS TOWARD DOCTORAL DEGREE ATTAINMENT: INTENTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR DISSERTATION COMPLETION

Scholar-practitioners in educational leadership doctoral programs are easy to identify. Nevertheless, they may be difficult to motivate to persist toward graduation. McClintock (2004) noted that these candidates possess scholarly practice grounded in theory and research that is informed by experimental knowledge, and driven by personal values, commitment, and ethical conduct. We found that these students are committed to making a difference in educational enterprise through their personal blending of theory, research,

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and praxis. The most effective scholar-practitioners regularly reflect on their practice and are able to holistically visualize their work in relation to broader organizational, community, political, and cultural contexts. Additionally, our experience indicates that students who base their scholarship identity on praxis will often forego completing advanced degrees because of the demands of their professional activities.

Doctoral programs in the social sciences struggle with relatively low graduation rates and long durations to degree. Statistics from the Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project (2008) on doctoral students entering in 1992–1994 at 24 institutions indicate the 10-year completion rate of 55% for the social sciences. Similarly, the Analysis of Baseline Program Data reports completion rates 10 years after students begin their doctoral program remains as low as 65% and 55.9% in the field of social sciences (Grasso, Barry, & Valentine, 2007). In another study, Most (2008) found that only 30% of Social Science doctoral students completed their degree within nine years. While these PhD statistics inform this chapter, little is known about the completion rates of Doctor of Education (EdD) students. The completion rate for EdD students varies depending on the institution and program. Bair and Haworth (2004) estimated the completion rate for professional doctoral programs between 40-60%. There are real costs to high attrition rates and lengthy time to degree for graduate students, faculty advisors, doctoral programs, and higher education institutions (Most, 2008). These costs include time, effort, opportunity costs, emotional and financial investments, and other resources (Ehrenberg, Zuckerman, Groen, & Brucker, 2010). Doctoral non-completion also greatly impacts individuals. Students invest financially, intellectually, and emotionally into their doctoral studies. Non-completion can lead to debt and limited career potential (Golde & Dore, 2001). Consequently, each doctoral student “represents a substantial investment in terms of time, intellectual resources, and public and private dollars” (Grasso et al., 2007, p. 6). Given the low completion rates and the important role that doctoral candidates play in research education, leadership, policy, and professional practice, more should be done to acknowledge and address the nature of doctoral attrition and completion (Blair & Haworth, 2004).

High drop-out rates, low completion rates, and excessively long times to degree are indicators of an ineffective program (Most, 2008). To mitigate the wide-spread problem of non-completion, many graduate schools and departments have implemented programs geared toward improving graduation rates. These programs may include mentoring programs, comprehensive orientations, writing workshops and targeted recruitment. While these programs are a step in the right direction, some argue that they may be “piecemeal in nature” and only focus on one aspect of doctoral education (Grasso et al., 2007).

Little is known about effective completion strategies of part-time doctoral students who also work full-time. Given their multiple demands from work, home, and school, it is not surprising that without the structure and deadlines of a classroom, completing a program and in particular the dissertation is challenging for these students. The primary question we address in this narrative is, How does faculty support the dissertation needs of part-time doctoral students who are full-time, working professionals in an effort to complete their degrees in a timely manner? Our students’ career aspirations involve advancement to senior-leadership positions within educational settings and they are less interested in serving as researchers or scholars. Despite becoming competent researchers throughout their doctoral studies, these leaders maintain passion in their praxis. In this chapter, we propose to offer viable strategies we have advanced to influence scholar-practitioners toward success as both researchers and practitioners. This chapter is outlined to examine the role of practitioner as scholar; overview doctoral completion statistics and time to degree (TTD); review the literature on barriers and facilitating factors to dissertation completion with particular focus on part-time students who work full-time; and outline ongoing departmental strategies for improving doctoral completion rates and reducing the time to degree. The
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