Chapter 3
Transformation of the Dissertation: From an End-of-Program Destination to a Program-Embedded Process

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ABSTRACT

To increase success and graduation rates, research shows that doctoral programs must adapt to changes in how instruction is managed and delivered, and must include options that recognize and facilitate discipline mastery without compromising their integrity or the quality of their degrees. This chapter explains a new path to doctoral degree completion, one that minimizes arbitrary time-frames and emphasizes discipline mastery through rigorous coursework and graduate-level research. The authors recommend a new model for successful completion of the dissertation within the Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) through evidence-based practice. This model implements structured mentoring and the transformation of dissertation research from an end-of-program destination to a program-embedded process. This chapter will provide a discussion of four evidence-based strategies for improved success for doctoral students following this type of pathway to dissertation completion.

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INTRODUCTION

An old adage, “the best dissertation is a done dissertation”, inspires many doctoral students to continue writing despite the many challenges faced during the dissertation process. Yet, research shows that more than 40% of students who complete their coursework in a U.S. doctoral program fail to complete their degree (Litalien, 2015). Because of this low completion rate, discussions and debates related to doctoral education redesign are occurring at universities across the U.S (Buss, Zambo, Zambo, Perry, & Williams, 2015; Kennedy, Altman, & Pizano, 2018; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The authors of this chapter argue for the implementation of a new path to doctoral degree completion, one that minimizes arbitrary time-frames and emphasizes discipline mastery through rigorous coursework and graduate-level research. This chapter will provide a conceptual framework and discussion of strategies for improving the likelihood of success for doctoral students’ dissertation completion. This online model for doctoral education implements structured mentoring and the transformation of dissertation research from an end-of-program destination to a program-embedded process.

BACKGROUND

Before exploring the new model of dissertation completion, the authors will examine the research related to doctoral attrition.

The low completion rate impacts students, institutions, and society as a whole (Grasso, Berry, & Valentine, 2009). To the students, failure to complete creates social, emotional, financial, and academic hardships. For the institution, low completion impacts time and resources which are not being utilized efficiently (Grasso et al., 2009). The investment of human capital and resources in the student is very expensive for the institution. When students fail to graduate, this investment is lost. Pauley, Cunningham and Toth (1999) explain there are costs the institution can never recover in admissions, recruiting, and advising. This low completion rate can put offering the doctoral program and the faculty at risk (Grasso et al. 2009). In addition to these individual and institution losses, society loses the possibility of solutions to community problems and the potential future research the doctoral graduate would have contributed (Grasso et al. 2009).

Research has found many reasons students fail to complete their doctoral studies, but overwhelmingly the dissertation is cited as a major obstacle (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Students fail to complete their dissertations for many
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