Listening to Their Voices: Insights into EDD Alumna Perspectives of Their Doctoral Program and Dissertation Supports

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Abstract

Researchers who teach in two school private universities in Florida explored student perceptions of program and university supports for doctoral candidates for the Ed.D programs or both universities. Through survey responses, the researchers learned that students perceived their success through two sets of factors—those provided by the program or university and those that were more personal such as time management and communication.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Online education has expanded significantly over the past 30 years. The number of institutions providing online education and the depth of learning within these online courses has increased significantly as well (Boyd, 2013). Factors such as broader digital access, lower costs, and more flexibility have made the online offering particularly attractive for students at all levels of higher education. However, the online learning format can also present challenges, including the difficulty of creating a physical space where students and instructors can connect and engage in real-time discussions that foster critical dialogue (Rudick, 2016). The doctoral programs at the two universities chosen for this study are online programs. The researchers, who are actively engaged in teaching and chairing doctoral committees wondered about if students felt supported as they moved through the dissertation phase and if the students felt well prepared as they entered the dissertation phase.

This article describes a recent study that was conducted to learn more about how two small, liberal arts university online doctoral programs dissertation phases are structured and how they address the challenges that Rudick (2016) identified.

2. Literature Review

Fifolt and Breaux (2018) determined three specific challenges in doctoral programs through their thematic analysis of candidates' responses: enhancing peer-to-peer and student-to-faculty relationships, increasing professional development, and overcoming challenges related to being a student while also being an employed professional. Dinsmore and Wegner (2006) identified the cohort model as having the potential to minimize student isolation, foster a sense of community, and establish an effective setting for student learning. Peters et al. (2015) built on this research by identifying that developing a cohort-style collaborative community of learners supported doctoral candidates who would be able to transition from being cohort members to independent researchers upon completion of their doctoral programs.

This emphasis on communication and collaboration is evident in the community of inquiry framework. This framework is widely used in online learning research and focuses on students' educational experience using three types of presence (social, cognitive, and instructional) evidenced in online learning (Garrison et al., 2010). Communication and collaboration can occur in two different methods, auditory or print. Garrison et al. (2010) argued that asynchronous text-based communication was a "reflective, precise, and lean form" of dialogue, while synchronous oral communication could be described as "fast paced, spontaneous, and fleeting" (p. 6). Warr and Sampson (2020) on the other hand, claimed that the strengths of text-based communication outweighed the deficits that occurred because of a lack of non-verbal cues. Although online education is used in a variety of program levels in higher education, this study focuses only on the cognitive and instructional challenges and benefits throughout the dissertation phased as identified by graduates from online doctoral programs at two universities.

Doctoral graduates, having reached the pinnacle of academic achievement, "understand what is known and discover what is yet unknown" (Shulman, 2008: p. 9) and are expected to use that knowledge to provide leadership to overcome future challenges (Commission on the Future of Graduate Education in the United States, 2010). Doctoral programs in the United States continue to attract the best and brightest from within and outside of the United States and serve as models for other countries (Walker, 2008).

Despite their prominence and reputations, doctoral education programs are not without criticism. "Problems such as high attrition, lengthy time-to-degree, and inadequate professional preparation are some of the concerns that have been identified" (Anderson et al., 2013: p. 196). Doctoral education has been histori-

cally the least studied level of formal education; however, studies on doctoral education are beginning to change. A push for greater accountability in higher education has stimulated interest in assessing the effectiveness of doctoral education by measuring desired outcomes and identifying factors that promote those outcomes (Anderson et al., 2013). A developing body of literature and a number of initiatives on doctoral education have emerged over the past two decades illustrating the growing interest and increased attention to the preparation of the next generation of intellectual leaders (Anderson et al., 2013).

Doctoral candidates' persistence can be impacted by both personal and university/program issues (Lovitts, 2005). Institutions do not have control over candidates' personality and life circumstances; however, university personnel do control their interactions with doctoral candidates and the program's content. Thus, they have influence over important factors that are positively associated with candidates' persistence. Through providing timely, critical feedback and discussion about research plans, advisors assist candidates in feeling supported and developing a sense of community (Terrell et al., 2009). Doctoral candidates face many challenges, both personal and academic. This exploratory study is the first attempt to further analyze the issues that graduates faced during their doctoral programs of study in two small private liberal arts universities.

3. Setting

Two small, private liberal arts universities in the southeastern United States offer online doctoral programs in Education (EdD). The Doctor of Education (EdD) emerged at the beginning of the 20th century with its focus on preparing administrators for professional practice through skill-oriented coursework, in contrast to the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree which concentrates on training faculty and researchers for scholarship (Eddy & Rao, 2009). The EdD program has significantly differentiated itself from the more traditional PhD in academia (Shulman et al., 2006). Others have successfully argued that the EdD serves a distinctive role that leverages professional experiences with research for actionable change in instructional practices (Shulman et al., 2006).

4. Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study attempted to answer the question of what do graduates view as strengths and challenges of the online doctoral programs at these two small southern liberal arts university. To answer this question, candidates who graduated from the two online EdD programs were invited to participate through an email explaining the study and containing a link to the anonymous online survey. Seventy-two emails were sent to these graduates. Only graduates from the last three years were invited to participate in this 4-question open-ended survey since that time frame captured the most recent programmatic changes. Thirty-eight responses were received. Once responses were received, they were analyzed and combined into codes.

Since this study was exploratory, inductive coding was used. Data-driven or open coding was used to analyze the responses and to construct a coding scheme based on major categories that emerged from the data. Initial coding provided a general overview of the data, and then line-by-line coding provided more detailed findings (Yi, 2018). The identified codes were merged into categories, and the categories were combined into themes that reflected either the personal or program considerations as discussed in the literature.

5. Data

The narrative responses to the four questions were combined to form a word cloud. This visual illustrates the most frequent responses. As is evident from the word cloud, discussions about the role and function of the chair and the committee members, the writing process, course work, the literature review, and time management were frequently identified (see Figure 1).

The first question in the survey asked graduates to identify recommendations they would give to future students. The codes were merged into 8 themes and these themes were divided into two categories, personal and program skills. The most frequent personal skills future students were recommended to develop were effective communication and time management skills. The importance of communication was summed up well by the comment "Stay in constant communication with your professors and committee chair. They are an endless source of assistance and encouragement". Another response summed up the importance of time management by stating "Time management is paramount for success".

The recommendations for skills that students needed to develop during the program were relatively evenly distributed. A knowledge of the available professional and content-based resources, the ability to analyze the current literature


Figure 1. Word Cloud.

on their research topic, and the importance of their research topic and questions. One participant combined importance of the role of the research question and the topic in the comment, "Plan out your dissertation topic in the first or second course and begin your research then" (see Figure 2).

The second question in the survey asked participants to identify which course or courses were the most helpful in preparing to write their dissertation. Although content-area courses were important, overwhelmingly graduates indicated that the qualitative (18 times) course and other related courses (such as writing and action research, 17 times) were the most important.

The third question asked graduates to what portion of the process was most difficult. The themes were divided into three main categories of personal, university and research as illustrated in the three tables of Figure 3.

After the codes were analyzed, they were divided into 7 categories. These categories were organized into three broad themes: personal issues, university/committee issues, and research related issues. Difficulties dealing with university or committee policies were the most frequent concern (5 times) and difficulties
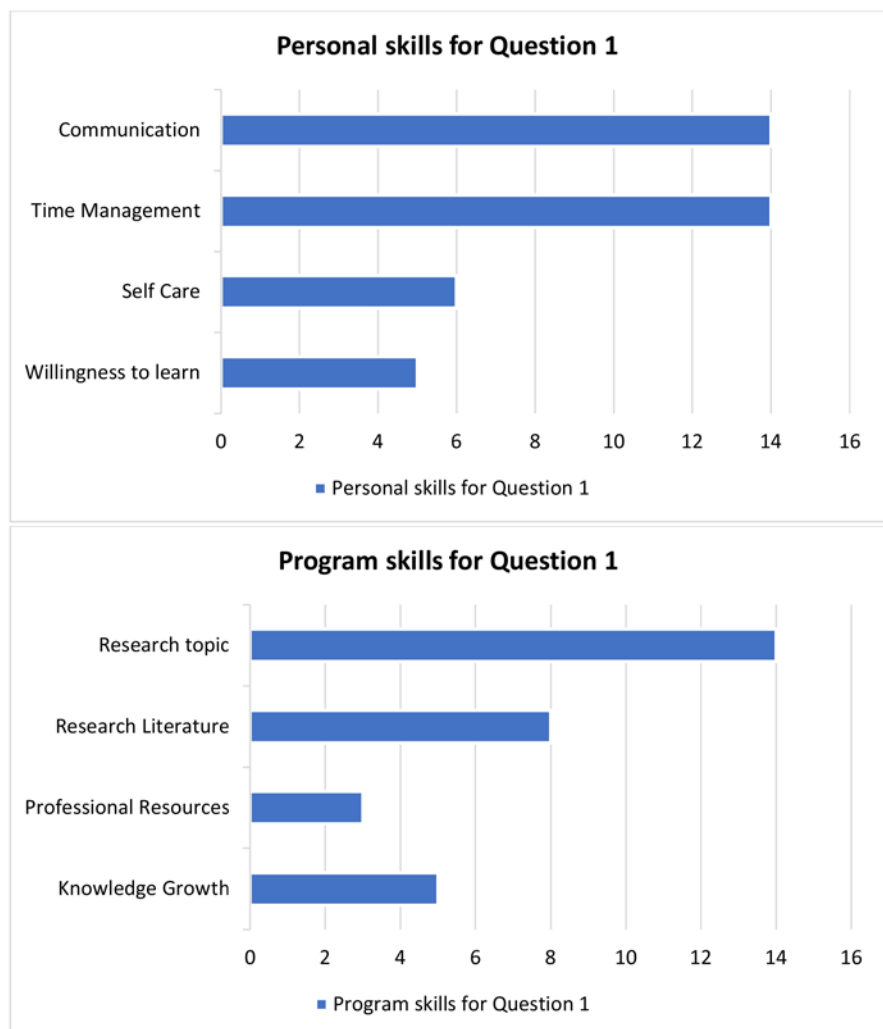
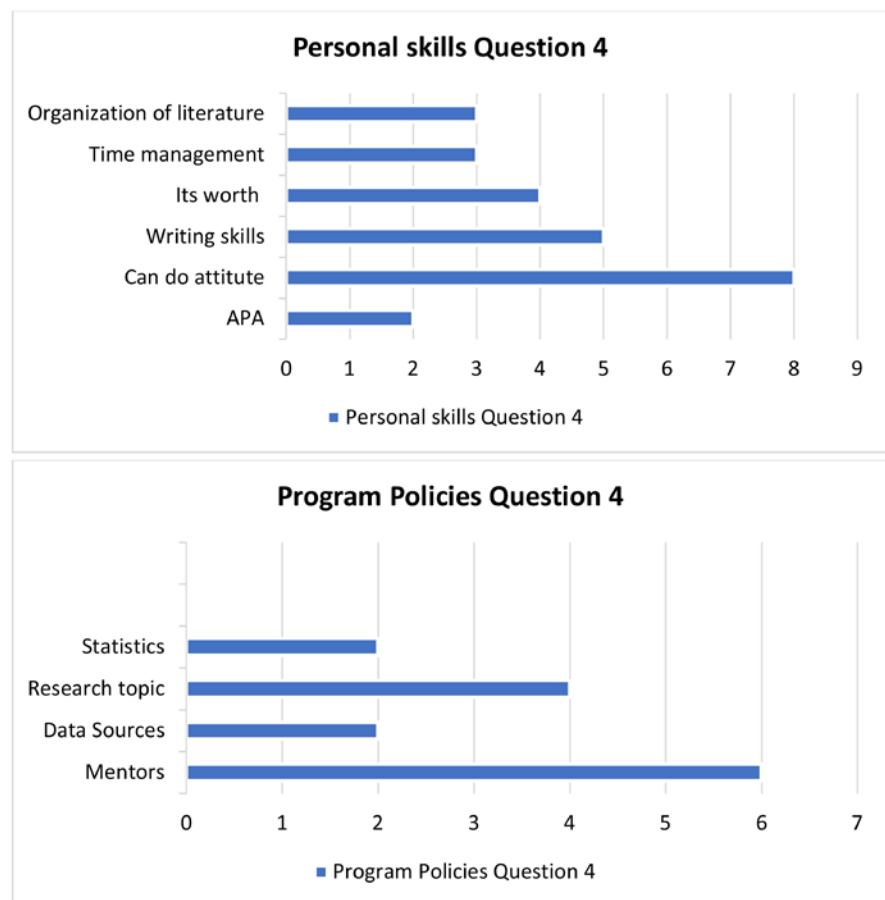**Figure 2.** Frequency of Themes for Question 1.
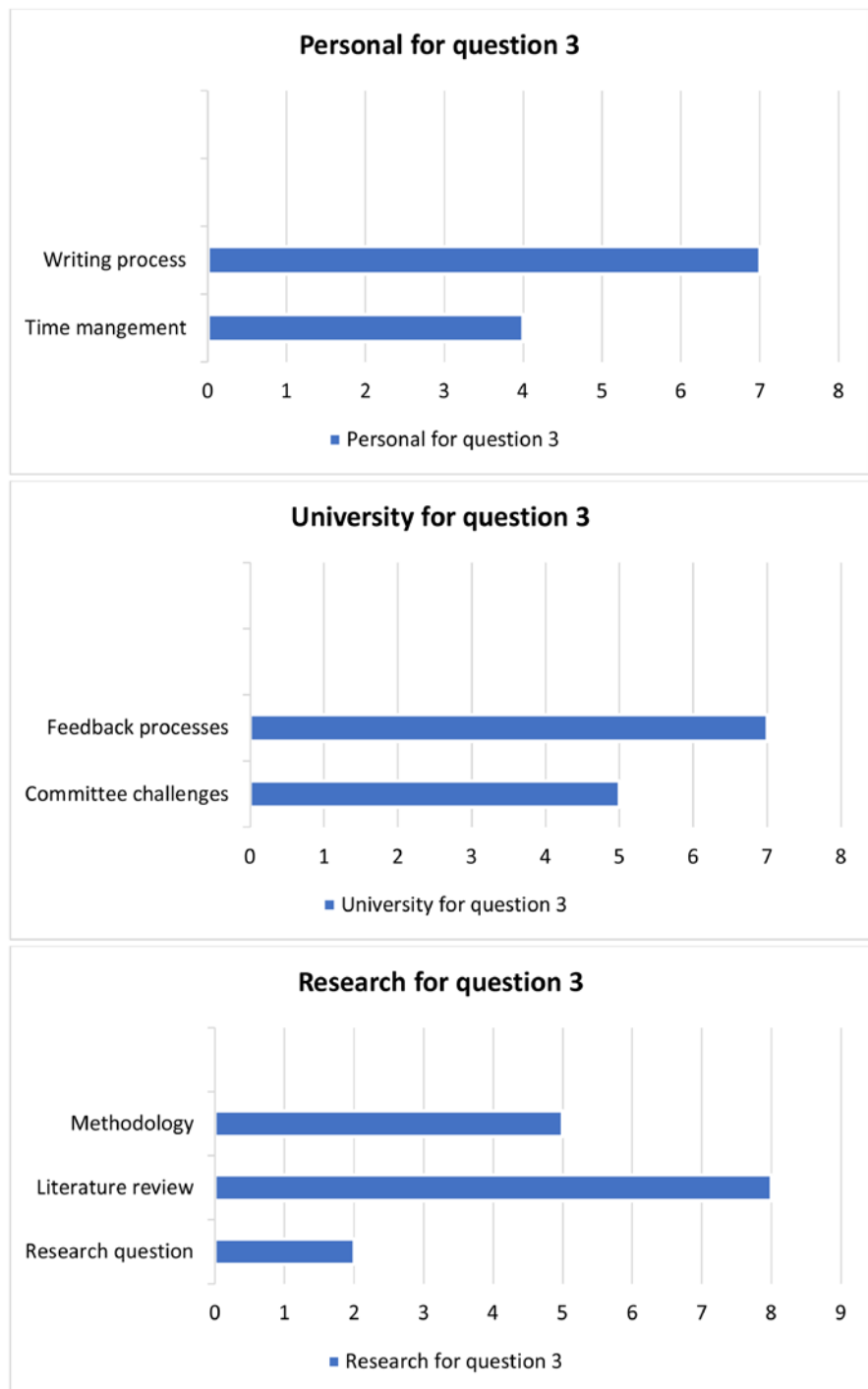
Figure 3. Frequency of Themes for Question 3.

with the feedback process with identified as a significant concern (7 times). One respondent stated it this way, "It was the constant back and forth needing more information or taking information out that really became a little difficult". Another said, "Working with a committee I did not know who were more concerned about my writing style not matching theirs than what I was writing about" made this process difficult.

The most frequent response theme was concerns related to the actual research process (15 times). These responses were relatively even spread with respondents identifying different areas of individual concern. Some responses indicated difficulty developing the research question (3 times), others indicated difficulty writing the literature review (8 times) and developing an appropriate methodology (5 times).

Participants indicated that the most frequent personal issues were time management (4 times) and skill in the writing process (7 times). This issue was consistent with the observations from question one. One individual summed up the difficulty in this way, "The main difficulty was time management. The process itself while challenging, was not difficult because of the support provided." (see Figure 3).

The last question asked respondents what they wish they had known before starting the doctoral program. These response codes were combined into 11 categories with 6 in the personal skills theme and 5 in the program policies theme. The most frequent personal skills individuals indicated were the importance their attitude had on their progress (8 times) and writing skills (5 times). The most frequent program information that graduates wished they had known was how to navigate the guidance and involvement of the chairs, members and other mentors (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Frequency of Themes for Question 4.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

These results provide helpful insight to the search for ways to better support doctoral candidates. As has been revealed, the supports in place for doctoral students contribute to their success in completing their program. On the program side, the faculty and directors can examine the research and statistics courses offered. These need to be reviewed for both content and placement within the program. Additionally, a more extensive analysis of the individual survey responses may influence the content and format of program residencies to positively impact the development of cohort connections and relationships with mentors. Close examination of the content of feedback and the timeliness of feedback should be conducted. Many students provided a common sentiment of feeling like they would lose momentum while waiting for chair and committee feedback. One student suggested that, "…it's really important that we break the dissertation process down into milestones. Instead chapter 1, chapter 2, chapter 3, we break it down into approval of topic, approval of bibliography, approval of resources prior to the defense. I've talked with peers who have gone through other doctoral programs, and I believe that we can break ours into more milestones or steps so that there's a clearer process of writing a dissertation during the grading period".

On the personal skills side, this information can be shared with future doctoral candidates so that they are better informed about the personal skill set that is most conducive to successful completion. Some alumni have extended an offer to talk to aspiring doctoral students during residency programs and/or to mentor current doctoral students for an additional level of support. This additional level of support can be coordinated through program administrators and faculty.

The researchers of this study see a natural next step by conducting a follow-up study after program improvements and adjustments have been made to see if the changes elicit more positive responses. Additionally, this study could be replicated by other universities who offer online doctoral degrees. Regardless, perhaps the most important lesson is that the voices of the students offer much insight.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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