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Lorraine J. Guth [1]
Kimberly J. Desmond [2]

[1,2] Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Department of Counseling and Human
Development

Author Note

Lorraine J. Guth, Department of Counseling and Human Development, Indiana University of
Pennsylvania. Kimberly J. Desmond, Department of Counseling and Human Development,
Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed
to Lorraine J. Guth, Department of Counseling and Human Development, Indiana University of
Pennsylvania, 206 Stouffer Hall, 1175 Maple Street, Indiana, PA 15705 (e-mail: lguth@iup.edu).
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Lorraine J. Guth [1]
Kimberly J. Desmond [2]

[1,2] Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Department of Counseling and Human Development

Abstract

Attrition for doctoral students is high and frequently occurs during the dissertation process. Dissertation chairs have the opportunity to facilitate the research process, combat students leaving the program, and even mentor new professionals. This article offers ten strategies for the counselor education dissertation chair to successfully facilitate the dissertation research process with doctoral students. A case study is included that applies the strategies to common doctoral student experiences during the dissertation process.

Keywords: dissertation chair, counselor education, doctoral students, mentoring, research process

Navigating the Dissertation Process: Ten Strategies for Counselor Educators

Doctoral students often struggle with completing the dissertation. In fact, a significant percentage (40-50%) of doctoral students in North America do not complete their degrees, with many departing from their programs right before writing the dissertation (Major, 2023). While this challenge occurs across all fields of doctoral study, doctoral students in counselor education face a unique set of pressures, such as balancing clinical training, research, and teaching responsibilities. Doctoral students in counselor education are often juggling these demands on top of full-time work, family, and caregiving responsibilities, among other personal and professional stressors (McBain, 2019). Taken together, these factors may hinder students' progress toward dissertation completion.

Despite these known challenges, research examining factors that support successful dissertation and degree completion in counselor education remains limited (Ghoston, et al., 2020; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protinvank & Foss, 2009). This article addresses this need by exploring insights and providing guidance through ten essential strategies aimed at supporting counselor educators and doctoral students in effectively navigating the dissertation journey. Drawing from a variety of academic sources, we developed these strategies using evidence-based recommendations to support students in their dissertation endeavors. These strategies cover various aspects of the dissertation

process, including mentor selection and research management. By integrating resources from the counseling professional literature, comprehensive and well-supported guidance is offered to counselor educators and doctoral students entering the dissertation experience. In the next section, we provide an overview of the specific strategies which is then followed by a case example that illustrates how the tips can be meaningfully applied.

The Dissertation Process in Counselor Education

Ten Strategies for the Dissertation Chair

Step 1: Discuss Expectations of the Dissertation Journey Before Agreeing to Chair the Dissertation

As counselors, we engage in a process of informed consent before ever beginning the counseling process with clients. Ensuring that expectations are clear and agreeable to both parties is necessary for effective clinical work. This is also true for the dissertation process. Setting expectations can be an informal conversation over coffee or a documented signed agreement of expectations. Osborn and Davis (1996) described a supervision contract outlining the responsibilities of both supervisor and supervisee. Dissertation chairs could develop a contract outlining expectations for communication, feedback, and responsibilities.

Because expectations can often be assumed, it is necessary to overtly discuss expectations and goals for the dissertation process. Many difficult conversations can be avoided later if the chair clearly communicates practices such as working on the dissertation during summer or semester breaks, process for providing feedback, and what to do if the norms need to be altered. Allowing space to discuss the process of collaborating on a research project can support the successful completion of the dissertation.

Step 2: Attend to Content and Process of Interactions During the Dissertation Journey

Group workers have long documented the importance of understanding the content and process in groups (Choudhuri & McCarthy, 2023; Hulse-Killacky, Killacky, & Donigan, 2001). These concepts can also be applicable when working with students during the dissertation process. Counselor educators need to be aware of the content of what is being shared in meetings as well as the process of interactions that take place. This process observation may include but is not limited to attention to verbal communication such as who speaks and who is quiet; nonverbal signals such as facial expressions and eye contact; and roles that are adopted or assigned in the interactions (Conole, 1978). The dissertation chair can determine if there is a need to utilize an outside process observer to monitor the process of interactions, especially during dissertation committee meetings, or if the use of process comments is sufficient.

For example, during a meeting, the dissertation chair asked the doctoral student how things have progressed with writing the first chapter of the dissertation. The students responded, "Fine" while tears streamed down her face. The dissertation chair is aware in the moment that the "vibe" in the office was off, and something is happening with the student. The dissertation chair has the choice to either ignore the process and continue with the discussion of chapter 1 that was not completed, or take some time to reflect and address the process of interactions. The dissertation chair chose option 2 and said, "I am aware that when there was an invitation to share progress with your chapter, you had tears in your eyes." This process comment allowed for meaningful discussion

about a challenging personal situation that had affected the student's ability to complete the intended chapter. The dissertation chair was able to process the feelings in the moment and reminded the student of the support services available at the university, if needed. The acknowledgement of the process conveyed that the dissertation chair cared and led to meaningful interactions about the work needed remaining on chapter 1. This is an example of using a process comment while balancing the content and process during meetings.

Step 3: Utilize Reflective Listening when Giving and Receiving Feedback

Effective communication skills are key to a successful dissertation journey between the dissertation chair and doctoral student. Ghoston, et al. (2020) overviewed existing literature and noted there are three essential components of chairperson-student interactions in the dissertation process that include: transparent and supportive feedback, collaborative interactions, and established communication expectations. Swank and McCarthy (2015) provided a thorough overview of feedback types and preferences along with the ethical/accreditation standards related to feedback. The authors also examined the use of the Counselor Feedback Training Model (CFTM) to teach counseling students how to give and receive feedback. It was found that students' self-efficacy and openness to feedback improved following participation in the CFTM (Swank & McCarthy, 2015). When communicating with doctoral students, Hilliard (2013) recommended that feedback be: honest, delivered in a constructive and timely manner, ideally in written form, nonjudgemental, supportive, and descriptive. These effective communication skills are essential and the foundation that helps to support the delivery of feedback in this manner. The dissertation chair can also utilize key basic listening skills when communicating with

doctoral students that include paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, summarizing, and using open-ended question responses when providing feedback (Cormier, 2016).

Step 4: Establish a Timeline for Dissertation, Mode of Delivery of Meetings, Frequency of Meetings, and Timeline for Feedback

Effective time management from the chairperson and doctoral student is a key ingredient to the successful completion of the dissertation. Clear expectations need to be outlined at the initial phase of the dissertation journey from all parties involved in the process. Flamez et al. (2017) note the importance of the dissertation chairperson being available for regular face-to-face or electronic meetings with the doctoral student. Neale-McFall and Ward (2015) examined factors that contributed to counselor education doctoral students' satisfaction with their dissertation chairperson. The researchers found that one key component of chairperson behaviors that predicted overall satisfaction with one's chairperson included a workstyle providing appropriate structure, holding students accountable, offering effective feedback, and discussing expectations prior to the working relationship. Some other things to collaboratively discuss include establishing a realistic timeline for the dissertation, determining the frequency of meetings and expectations for both parties during the meetings, discussing the mode of delivery of the meetings such as face-to-face or synchronous zoom, and agreeing to the timeline for review of written materials/feedback. It is recommended that these norms be established at the start of the dissertation journey before agreeing to chair the dissertation, so the doctoral student determines if these expectations match their needs.

Step 5: Create an environment where collaboration, courageous conversations, and openness to feedback is promoted.

Similarly to how counselors develop a safe space for the client to explore complex issues, the dissertation chair creates a collaborative space where honest discussions and feedback can occur. DeCino et al. (2023) explained it is important to build, "purposeful relationships with students during the dissertation to monitor work, address issues impeding progress, and build honesty and trust during the dissertation process" (p.7). Through the development of trust the dissertation chair can have difficult conversations with the student offering constructive feedback, guidance, and identifying supports that may be necessary. Keeping in mind that the ultimate goal for both the chair and doctoral student is the completion of the dissertation, creating a safe space can allow for differing opinions and the creation of successful outcomes.

Knox et al. (2011) explained it is essential to communicate to students the acceptable standards of dissertation writing and to not assume it is inherently understood or part of what they learned in their coursework. They further suggested that dissertation standards can often lack consistency and may not be clearly conveyed to students through their doctoral studies. Offering students a resource such as the book by Flamez et al. (2017) titled, *A Counselor's Guide to the Dissertation Process: Where to Start and How to Finish* can be valuable as students navigate the dissertation research process. Universities have policies and procedures in place for the dissertation process, but further clarifying program specific expectations through a manual can also be beneficial.

Step 6: Foster Mentoring

While mentoring is not inherent in the dissertation process between chair and doctoral student, it can develop over time and support dissertation completion and timely graduation. Mentoring as defined by the American Counseling Association (2012) is "someone with experience and expertise in the counseling field who is willing to share knowledge and offer advice to foster professional development" (American Counseling Association, 2012, p. 68). Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) cited the lack of faculty support as a reason doctoral students leave counselor education programs. Mentoring is one way dissertation chairpersons can provide support and foster timely graduation. Boswell, et al. (2017) explained that mentoring helps set the norms of wellness and self-care within counseling programs. This is applicable to both the chair and doctoral student. They further suggested that both mentors and mentees can benefit from a mentoring relationship. The student can benefit by receiving guidance and advice related to career goals and the mentor may feel a sense of satisfaction contributing to the next generation of counselor educators. Overall, in their study of Counselor Education doctoral students, Protinvank and Foss (2009) found that the mentoring experience was a beneficial experience for persistence in doctoral studies.

Mentoring may take different forms. Some programs have developed formal mentoring programs where students are matched with faculty based on common research interests. There is a defined mentoring program outlining frequency of meetings, content, and process. Another form is informal mentoring, which allows the relationship between faculty member and doctoral student to organically develop over time. Schlosser et al. (2011) explained, "Not only are the most talented students most likely to be mentored, outstanding mentoring relationships seem most prone to develop through informal student–faculty interaction" (p.13).

Step 7: Maintain Transparency Among/Between Committee Members and Utilize Group Work Skills to Promote Unity

The quality of the relationship between the dissertation chair and doctoral student is a key ingredient to dissertation completion and satisfaction (Van Rooij, et al., 2021). Dissertation chairs serve as a source of emotional and professional support (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Major 2023). It is essential for dissertation chairs to recognize their own strengths and limitations and effectively work with other colleagues on the committee who can add their expertise to the dissertation (Hillard, 2013).

The role of the dissertation chair needs to be clearly defined at the beginning of the process, so all committee members understand expectations (Hillard, 2013) and communicate openly. Dissertation committees are considered a small group, so it is essential for dissertation chairs to utilize basic and advanced group skills. Basic group skills include active listening, reflection, summarizing, linking, supporting, tone setting, use of eyes, use of voice, and multicultural understanding (Jacobs, et al., 2022). Advanced group skills include establishing/holding/shifting the focus, cutting off, drawing out, and using rounds/dyads/exercises (Jacobs, et al., 2022). For example, in a dissertation committee meeting the chair can set the tone at the beginning and utilize cutting off or drawing out skills to get the input of the doctoral student and committee members. Setting the norm for discussions to be open and transparent will help to promote healthy group interactions.

Committee chairs are encouraged to also utilize skills to facilitate courageous conversations and enhance community building (Guth, et al., 2019). This can include acknowledging that culture and power are always present; developing multicultural and social justice competencies, creating brave affirming, and humanizing spaces; engaging in intentional unity building; cultivating cultural humility; and practicing mindful and reflexive group facilitation. These skills can be used to build unity among the intersecting identities of all involved in the dissertation process.

Step 8: Encourage Students to Attend to Their Own Wellness

There is a focus on optimizing wellness in clients as well as in counselors who provide services (Myers, 2005). For counselors and counselors in training to be effective, they must attend to their own wellness. The American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics states that counselors must "engage in self-care activities to maintain and promote their emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being to best meet their professional responsibilities" (American Counseling Association, 2014, p. 8).

As students engage in the dissertation process, they often face additional pressures and stressors that can impact optimal wellness (Flamez, et al., 2017). Burkholder (2012) stated "Counselor educators should also not minimize the impact that personal issues have on the ability of students to persist and encourage students to properly address personal issues" (p. 19). Flamez, et al. (2017) offered strategies for graduate counseling students during the dissertation that include (a) understanding the graduate training experience from a holistic perspective, (b) developing an individualized wellness plan, (c) evaluating the progress on the dissertation, and (d) providing rewards when showing progress on the tasks. For instance, when developing a personal wellness plan, doctoral students can focus on priority and time management, stress management, socialization, and physical wellness goals (Flamez, et al., 2017). During dissertation meetings, the chair needs to emphasize the importance of doctoral student wellness and

could recommend that each doctoral student create a wellness plan that can be integrated into the process.

Step 9: Promote the use of Writing Center, Research Support, and Other Available Supportive Services

Accessing university services can be one of the most beneficial ways to support the dissertation process. Academic settings typically have a writing center that offers tutoring, editing, and workshops services (Hughes et al., 2022). These services support students in additional ways and allow the dissertation chair to attend to dissertation content and research development while the writing center assists with grammar, APA formatting, and university procedures. Graduate students often overlook this valuable service regarding it as a support solely for undergraduate students or for remedial writing.

Support for research design and process is also often available through the university (Bolin, 2022). Faculty may find it beneficial to have research consultative services available to direct the doctoral student. At many universities, there is faculty support for research design and analysis (Preston et al., 2020). These services may also be available to doctoral students engaging in their dissertation research and the dissertation committee chair can provide these resources as additional supports to doctoral students.

Finally, support for the dissertation process could also take the form of counseling services. Many universities have an on-campus counseling center, and it is recommended that these services are widely advertised to doctoral students (Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019). The demands of the dissertation process while also managing day-to-day responsibilities can become overwhelming. Adding additional support can increase dissertation completion and graduate rates.

Step 10: Enjoy the Journey

With awareness that less than 5% of the population of the United States have a doctoral degree (America Counts Staff, 2019), there is an inherent privilege in pursuing an advanced degree. It can be easy to become overwhelmed by the intricacies of the dissertation process, the stress of the feedback, and abiding by university policies. As dissertation chairs, it is our responsibility to remind students to celebrate the milestones, be mindful of their wellness, and to share in successes.

It is also the responsibility of dissertation chairs to celebrate their role in mentoring students through the process. Remembering the feeling of watching a student graduate to be called "Dr." for the first time is a helpful reminder to enjoy the journey as dissertation chair. Knowing how to engage in self-care for the dissertation chair is essential modeling and serves as a benefit to both the chair and student.

Case Study: Putting the Tips into Practice

Carol (she/her) completed the coursework and passed the comprehensive exams in her doctoral program in Counselor Education and Supervision. She has several areas of scholarly interest and has been undecided about the topic she wants to pursue for her dissertation. She also has a full-time job as a counselor, teaches an undergraduate psychology course at a local community college, and cares for her aging father. Carol feels overwhelmed and unsure of what steps she needs to take to successfully complete the dissertation process. She schedules a meeting with Dr. Smith (she/her) to explore the possibility of having her chair the dissertation. During the meeting, Carol expresses that she shares common scholarly interests with Dr. Smith and states that she has enjoyed being a student in several of Dr. Smith's classes. Dr. Smith begins the meeting by discussing the expectations that

they both have regarding the dissertation process (Step 1). Dr. Smith states that she offers support and encouragement during the dissertation process, expects that students take initiative to actively engage in the writing of the dissertation chapters, and asks that they collaboratively submit an article for publication after the dissertation is completed. Dr. Smith shares that she is available to meet with students as they formulate ideas/write the chapters, provides timely feedback, and can answer questions about the research study. Carol reports that this is the type of dissertation chair she would like and invites Dr. Smith to be her chair. Dr. Smith agrees and together they work to narrow the dissertation topic to fill a gap in the existing literature. They collaboratively create a preliminary timeline for when the research topic approval form, IRB documents, dissertation proposal, and chapters will be drafted (Step 4) to meet Carol's anticipated graduation date in 12 months. They also create the norm that there will be approximately a two-week timeframe for the chair to review materials and offer feedback. They agree to meet when Carol has a draft of her research topic approval form. Carol also discusses who she would like to have as dissertation committee members and the expertise they would bring to the committee. Carol agrees to ask two other faculty members to be on the committee before the next meeting.

Three months pass, and Dr. Smith gets an email from Carol stating that she is so busy with work and caring for her father that she has no time to work on the dissertation. They schedule a meeting to discuss next steps. Dr. Smith offers honest feedback (Step 5) and expresses concerns about Carol's wellness. Dr. Smith uses reflective listening and empathy as they discuss the stress and anxiety Carol is experiencing (Step 3). Dr. Smith also observes that Carol currently has a lot on her plate and does not have the time to devote to the dissertation unless something changes

(Step 5). Dr. Smith asks Carol what she needs to attend to her own wellness (Step 8). Carol decides to get counseling, reduce the hours she works in her job, decline the opportunity to teach a class during the next semester, and asks her family to help more with the caregiving of her father.

As Carol focuses on her own wellness, dissertation completion becomes more of a priority. Carol moves into the dissertation writing, and together with her chair, revises the timeline and anticipated date of graduation (Step 4). Carol writes drafts of the initial research topic approval form and IRB application. She meets with Dr. Smith each month and finds a writing rhythm and routine that aligns with her schedule. When reviewing the first drafts of these documents, Dr. Smith notices that Carol is experiencing some difficulty with writing a coherent rationale for the study and struggles with correct APA formatting. Dr. Smith refers her to the writing center for additional support (Step 9) and Carol also decides to hire an editor/writing coach. After getting helpful feedback from Dr. Smith and the committee members, the research topic approval form and IRB protocol receive approval.

Things progress well, and Carol completes the first two chapters. She then begins working on chapter 3 (methodology). Carol seeks the guidance of one of her committee members and there is significant difference in opinion about the most appropriate methodology for her proposed study. Carol leaves the meeting feeling very defeated and confused. Later that week, Dr. Smith meets with Carol to discuss the progress in writing chapter 3 (Step 4). Carol states things have been going well as she stares down at the floor. In response, Dr. Smith makes a process comment that she is aware that Carol is staring at the floor (Step 2). Carol shares she is feeling misunderstood after her meeting with the committee member. Dr. Smith, knowing it is

important to address issues directly, schedules a meeting with Carol and all committee members. Dr. Smith facilitates a productive discussion about the study methodology using group facilitation skills such as linking, reflection of feeling, process comments, and holding the focus (Step 7). Dr. Smith promotes unity in the group, so all perspectives and differences of opinion are heard and processed. As a result of this conversation, Carol realizes that the committee member provided the feedback to strengthen the research study and considers, with openness, how she might integrate this feedback into her proposal. The committee members and chair offer support and schedule the proposal defense. Carol successfully passes the proposal defense and transitions into the data collection phase.

Dr. Smith meets with Carol each month during the data collection phase and recommends that Carol meet with the university's research support lab for help with completing data analysis (Step 9). Over time, Dr. Smith serves as a mentor to Carol (Step 6) which fosters a positive dissertation process. Eight months later, Carol successfully defends her dissertation. Although the dissertation process comes with bumps and obstacles, it is a proud moment when Carol graduates. They are reminded of the Ursula Le Guin quote, "It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters, in the end." Carol and Dr. Smith reflect on how meaningful the dissertation journey has been for both of them (Step 10).

Conclusion

The ten strategies for counselor educators to successfully navigate the dissertation process are based on published literature and collective experiences chairing dissertations in the CES profession. The recommendations shared in this article highlight the importance of mentorship, research management, effective communication,

good group facilitation skills, optimal student wellness, and knowledge of relevant resources. As counselor educators employ these strategies, it hoped that the facilitation of the dissertation journey is enhanced which ultimately leads to doctoral student satisfaction and the successful completion of the dissertation.

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