Dissertation Committee Chairs' Current Practices to Support Doctoral Students in an Online Doctoral Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to explore dissertation chair experiences and current practices for meeting with and providing feedback to doctoral students pursuing a scholar-practitioner terminal degree in an online doctoral program. A qualitative methodology using an exploratory design was employed to interview 11 participants using semi-structured interviews. The findings included the importance of providing frequent feedback through various modes of communication, emphasizing a tailored approach to the students' needs. Timely, thorough feedback was supported, stressing effectiveness and relevancy, which was most commonly achieved through one-on-one communication. Additional considerations focused on trust building and caring behaviors; individualized coaching and guidance; and balancing institutional requirements and student needs.

Introduction and Background

The purpose of this research was to explore dissertation chair experiences and current practices for meeting with and providing feedback to doctoral students pursuing a scholar-practitioner terminal degree in an online doctoral program. For the purpose of this study, the term dissertation chair was chosen because it resonates with definitional components that include tasks such as mentoring, advising, and supervising in the context of the dissertation process. Although these terms are often used interchangeably in evidence-based literature, the authors chose the label dissertation chair since it denotes a role that is encompasses *being there* through and at the end of the dissertation journey.

Studies dating back to the 1970s have suggested the element of doctoral education that has the greatest impact on the outcome for the doctoral student is the relationship that develops with the dissertation chair (Heinrich, 1991, 1995; Heiss 1970; Spillett & Moisiewicz, 2004; and Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). Bair and Haworth (1999) report that completion rates for scholar-practitioner doctorates are in the same range as for Ph.D. completion rates – around 40% - 60% -- a *ballpark* that is consistent with a more recent report published by the Council of Graduate Schools (2008) that examined this phenomenon primarily with respect to more traditional doctorates such as the Ph.D. and the Ed.D. In another study focused on virtual (online) doctoral programs, Muirhead and Blum (2006) stressed that the high rate of attrition in doctoral programs remains a significant concern in higher education and it has been argued that most of the blame for this can be placed on the failure of universities to provide appropriate support to enable students to meet the many challenges of completing a doctoral degree. While Bair and Haworth (1999) mention support in the financial sense, student involvement in

professional activities, and student satisfaction with the program itself, in their meta-synthesis of 118 studies on doctoral student attrition and persistence, they concluded that the biggest factor in completing the doctorate rests on the quality of the relationship between the student and the dissertation chair.

This notion of quality support from faculty members who play an advising/mentoring/supervising role is the concept that rests at the heart of the present study. It is argued that appropriate support from people occupying these roles in an institution of higher learning is essential in any type of doctoral program (e.g., research degree, professional degree, scholar-practitioner degree) and regardless of mode or mechanism of learning delivery (e.g. in the physical classroom, in the virtual learning space), but Muirhead and Blum (2006) also assert that virtual learning environments necessitate a finessing of what this support looks like when people are working together at a distance. Thus, the question this study asked is: what are the current practices for meeting with and providing feedback to doctoral candidates pursuing a scholar-practitioner terminal degree in an online doctoral program?

The starting point for this study is related directly to a recently published study by Roberts, Tinari, and Bandlow (2019), who suggest the need for research to determine how often effective dissertation chairs are holding meetings with their doctoral students, how rapidly feedback is provided on the work their doctoral students are producing, and how feedback is delivered in a way that demonstrates caring for the student's success. The term *effective mentor* was defined in qualitative terms by Roberts et al. (2019), with some anecdotal metrics obtained through participant screening. Roberts et al. (2019) emphasized there are many hats worn by the mentors of doctoral students (e.g. teaching, advising, subject matter expertise, methods expertise), and Sugimoto (2012) suggested mentoring of doctoral students involves activities carried out by many individuals (the dissertation advisor, dissertation committee members, and fellow doctoral students). Furthermore, depending upon the university, support for doctoral students can also be provided by institutional resources, such as a writing center or service, residential sessions with faculty, as well as by non-teaching advising staff who partner with faculty to provide support services to students (Burrus, Fiore & Shaw, 2019). This study, however, focused solely on the activities doctoral students engage in with the dissertation chair who has been assigned to support doctoral student success through some or all of the processes specific to the dissertation journey. The justification for this focus is that regardless of the various skills and reputations brought into the experience of being part of a doctoral committee or non-teaching support staff, it is typically the dissertation chair upon whom the greatest burden is placed with respect to student outcome expectations, and typically it is the dissertation chair who carries the largest advising burden as well as a significant proportion of the decision-making authority at various stages of a student's dissertation process.

The dissertation chair is instrumental in the doctoral student's learning process as this evolves over time. Situated learning theory was introduced by Lave (1991) and Lave and Wenger (1991), suggesting that learning occurs within a specific context, through particular activities intended to promote learner growth and development, and inside of a culture (e.g., that of an institutional setting such as a doctoral program). As doctoral students situated within a specific learning context continue to engage in experiences designed to advance their knowledge, accompanied by achieving specific milestones related to their dissertation projects, situated learning theory posits that these learners move along a continuum of accumulated successes (Throne & Oddi, 2019). In this manner their confidence to persist develops; however, the skill of the dissertation chair in working with doctoral students must evolve as well to support the student's transformation as the dissertation process moves from its earliest stages, where the student is more of a novice researcher, to a successful final defense of the dissertation, where the student has evolved into a scholar-practitioner.

The authors of this study believe it is important to position ourselves in relation to this study topic in order to make our interests and motivations clear. The authors are adjunct faculty members at a university that offers fully online scholar-practitioner doctorate programs. At the time of this writing the authors currently function in the roles of dissertation chair and committee member. Our work has led to discussions about how to enhance student success in the dissertation journey.

Methods

Because this study sought the perspectives, impressions, and experiences of dissertation chairs in scholar-

practitioner doctoral programs on their current practices in working with doctoral candidates, the researchers chose a qualitative approach to the research. Study participants needed to have a minimum of 1 year of experience as a dissertation chair working in the online environment with students pursuing a scholar-practitioner terminal degree. Once Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, potential participants teaching in online practitioner doctorate programs were identified for participation in the study through social media. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from 11 study participants. The interview questions were designed to provide both the container that held concepts such as *meetings* and *feedback* as well as an opportunity through which those being interviewed could conversationally share their experiences and practices in working with their doctoral students. Participant information was de-identified and results were reported in aggregated form; however, in some cases participant sentiments are shared in the study findings either as nondescript quotations or as careful paraphrases so as not to compromise anyone's identity or institutional affiliations. The interviews were digitally recorded and then reflexively explored by the authors for the emergence of patterns in the data to enable the construction of themes for more extensive analysis by the researchers (Braun, & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). One of the three study authors conducted the interviews while the other two authors analyzed the data, and then all authors participated in various ways with drafting of findings and conclusions. The data were also revisited several times and massaged again retrospectively as part of synthesizing learnings that resulted from the fieldwork (interviewing), deskwork (analysis), and textwork (writing) components of the research process (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Participant Demographics and Baseline Characterizes

While acknowledging there are many locations from which support for student success must emanate (Muirhead & Blum, 2006), this study was designed to consider the doctoral student-mentor relationship from the perspective of 11 faculty members teaching in online scholar-practitioner doctoral programs who are currently serving in dissertation chair roles and who were interviewed for their perspectives on a variety of topics related to the doctoral mentor-mentee relationship.

The gender of participants was balanced, with 6 females and 5 males participating in interviews. The participants in this study were university faculty members for an average of 11 years, with the range being 2 to 21 years. In the role of dissertation chair, the years of service ranged from 1.5 to 16 years with the average being 5.5 years. Nine of the 11 participants indicated they were matched to students based on subject matter expertise somewhat consistently, with 7 participants responding that this occurs 50% (1 respondent), 75% (2 respondents) and 100% (4 respondents) of the time. Two participants indicated an expertise match seldom happens and two indicated it happens often or consistently but did not elaborate numerically. The expectations for regular contact between the faculty member and the student varied considerably, from a low of twice in an eight-week session (1 participant), once per week (5 participants) to a high of 4-5 times per week (2 participants), and with one participant indicating their current university does not specify a minimum requirement. One participant indicated the frequency of contact depends on where the student is in the dissertation process and one stated it is dependent upon student need.

All participants noted that a compliance checklist was used for the proposal or dissertation, although one participant stated that this was not an expectation with one of two employers. Even though dissertation chairs had students they supervised through various stages or portions of the dissertation process, at the time of the interviews several participants had students in various stages short of completion, and this made it difficult for them to specify a success rate. In addition, due to variations in institutional processes, some participants took their students to the proposal stage and handed them off to other dissertation chairs to complete the remaining chapters of the dissertation. In these cases, the participants did not always know whether the students were awarded a degree. Table 1 below summarizes key elements related to participant demographics and an explanatory narrative follows.

Participant Demographics and Baseline Characteristics

PID	Gender	Years as faculty	Years as chair	Expertise match	Contacts per week	Checklist compliant
P1	Male	15-16	5	often	1	Yes
P2	Male	5	3	50%	1-2	Yes
P3	Female	10.5	5-6	consistent	1	Yes
P4	Female	10	2	Not often	1	Yes
P5	Male	2	1.5	100%	No specific	Yes
P6	Male	21	16	seldom	Depends	Yes
P7	Female	10	8	75%	1-4	Yes/No
P8	Male	11	3	100%	3	Yes
P9	Female	15	8	100%	5	Yes
P10	Female	13	2	100%	2	Yes
P11	Female	11	6	75%	4-5	Yes

PID = Personal Identification

Results and Discussion

As noted in the introduction to this study, research dating to the 1970s (Heiss, 1970), continuing into the 1990s (Heinrich, 1991, 1995) and the early 2000s (Spillett & Moisiewicz, 2004; and Zhao, et al., 2007) has laid considerable blame for high rates of doctoral student attrition at the feet of universities that fail to provide enough of the right kind of support for these students, and there is general agreement that the dissertation chair-dissertation student relationship is the one element that can have the greatest impact on doctoral student completion. Much more recently, Roberts, et al. (2019) suggested that research is needed to determine the effectiveness of mentors (i.e., dissertation chairs) with respect to the meetings they hold with their mentees, the rapidity with which they provide substantive feedback, and the degree to which this feedback demonstrates that the dissertation chair cares about the student's success. This study attempts to respond to Roberts, et al.'s (2019) call by placing the emphasis on how dissertation chairs contribute to doctoral student success, with a focus on themes that emerged in the data related to weekly contact with doctoral students (its regularity and effectiveness), giving of feedback to doctoral students (its timeliness and relevance), and experiences of dissertation chairs engaging in trust building and caring behaviors with their advisees. Conclusions follow with considerations relative to what respondents reported are the high priority best practices, in their experience, for facilitating student success through the dissertation chair-doctoral student dyad.

Dissertation Chair-Dissertation Student Contact: Regularity and Modes

Frequency of feedback. All participants in this study agreed that one of the highest priorities in the dissertation chair-doctoral student relationship is regular communication, and two of the respondents said "constant communication" is what is necessary to keep students focused and on track. The participants differed somewhat in how they defined "frequent" or "constant." Most of the interview participants spoke of the importance of

having voice contact with their doctoral students at least once per week, but there were three outliers. One respondent indicated that she typically has voice contact with each of her students five days a week. A second participant indicated having told students he would talk to them any time of day or night, saying, "as long as I am awake I am willing to talk to them." On the other end of the continuum, a third respondent said at his university, it is expected that faculty make voice or audio/visual contact twice per eight-week session with each of their doctoral students. Dissertation chairs spoke of working with their students in different ways based on student needs and communication preferences. A sentiment expressed by several respondents was that they would meet with their students as often as each individual student has a need.

Feedback modes. The way feedback to students is facilitated is at least partially dependent upon tools made available for faculty members through their institution's website or learning platform. One commonality in responses was that the tools individual universities provide to faculty members for communicating with students or accepting their work electronically can at times be less than ideal. Thus, electronic modes of communication between dissertation chairs and their students facilitated through university online learning platforms were often supplemented by other Web-based or digital tools by the participants in this study. A few participants mentioned the use of online chat rooms associated with their institution's virtual campus, as well as electronic instant messenger systems accessible through the virtual classroom; however, most of the participants revealed a preference for working with their students using Web-based meeting spaces not associated with their institutional resources, with Zoom being the runaway favorite, followed by Skype and Webex. Three participants reported they use any Web-based meeting space that the student prefers.

Outside of the institutional learning platform environment and stand-alone Web-based applications, all participants discussed the use of other electronic/digital tools for providing feedback and enabling conversation. Regular email and voice-to-voice phone contact were mentioned by all participants, and many of them interacted on a regular basis with their students via cellphone. Texting was also used by several of the participants. Feedback embedded in the proposal or dissertation manuscript was provided to students on a regular basis by most participants, with the majority using margin comments to provide students with feedback and some incorporating track changes in manuscript drafts. Thus, the theme of the preference for individualized responses to student needs and practices mentioned in relation to feedback frequency was echoed in comments about feedback modalities as well. The consensus among the study participants was to do whatever works best for the student, as long as useful feedback can be provided.

Timeliness, Effectiveness, and Relevance of Feedback

Timeliness of feedback. Participants noted that during the dissertation process there are many occasions where time is at a premium and feedback must be given to students quickly and yet thoroughly. Many different approaches were mentioned by participants as tools used to expeditiously provide feedback. The use of some type of rubric was mentioned by several participants, which included official rubrics supplied by the institution, as well as instructor-created rubrics. Another common approach is to employ text highlighting, margin comments inserted in the manuscript, and/or track changes that draw a student's attention quickly to problem areas in a draft. Several participants also mentioned the use of Web-based meeting sites in which they can screen share a manuscript draft with a student and go through comments line-by-line so there is an opportunity for dialogue about necessary modifications. One thing that was reinforced by many of the participants is that it does not work for them to utilize a one-size-fits-all approach and expect it to work equally well with every student.

In the dissertation journey, particularly in many practitioner doctorate contexts, timeframes for making revisions and corrections of a research proposal and later of the full dissertation manuscript are often short. In this process dissertation chairs fulfill a vital role that requires them to be highly available to their students, conscientious with respect to the timely return of reviewed manuscript chapters, and willing to manage committee members who are also participating in this process. As the research project moves forward, the chair also ensures it clears the institutional review hurdle and at appropriate points is shared with other committee members for their input. Typically, the dissertation chair oversees revisions and corrections of the complete dissertation manuscript, leads the dissertation defense, and ensures post-defense modifications are completed to the committee's satisfaction. The participants in this study indicated that throughout this process one of their highest priorities in working with

their doctoral students is simply to be available to them and to work with them frequently. This generalized availability also extends to other aspects of feedback such as content (what is said) and style (how it is said), and is associated with the need for feedback to be effective and relevant.

Effectiveness and relevance of feedback.

Participants frequently offered the observation that to be effective, feedback related to the dissertation process needs to be tailored to each student's needs, and therefore the emphasis on one-on-one communication designed for each specific individual is required to promote doctoral student success. Effective feedback is also relevant feedback; however, relevance is not confined solely to the dissertation process. For all participants, this extended to having conversations with students that go beyond the dissertation itself to matters related to how well they are coping emotionally with the dissertation process, and the degree to which it has taken over their lives. One participant remarked that if a dissertation chair is in tune with a student she will sense when there are times that the student does not want to "talk about the research" and just needs to feel a connection to the dissertation chair. The ability of the chair to offer a certain degree of coaching and guidance to the doctoral student at a more personal level also affects whether the communication between the members of the dyad will be effective.

Participants in this study pointed to the notion of effectiveness when discussing the importance of trust in the dissertation chair-doctoral student dyad. If there is no trust present in the student's assessment of the dissertation chair's competency or level of care, it is perhaps less likely the feedback will be heard in a way that makes it actionable by the student. Thus, the effectiveness of the relationship is central and must have at least some depth to promote student success. It was also clear that an effective dissertation chair-doctoral student relationship is not a hierarchical one. While it is not necessarily a true partnership, it is not the role of the dissertation chair to control and/or limit the dialogue to fit her own preferences for how the dissertation should be crafted or to be "in charge of" the result. Yet, at the same time the dissertation chair must facilitate the development of the doctoral student's ownership of the dissertation outcome while simultaneously ensuring university requirements are satisfied.

Respondents spoke of feedback relevance as being like a companion to feedback effectiveness when they commented on the need for the doctoral student to be able to trust the chair for guidance in relation to the study topic, the research methodology, research design, and/or writing and formatting requirements. Participants noted that in their institutional environments they may sometimes serve as a dissertation chair because they are a subject matter expert in the student's discipline or topic area, and at other times they may be placed in this role because of a specific methodological expertise. In these circumstances, the dissertation chair must know when to reach out to her colleagues as a kind of *broker* to get the correct, necessary assistance for their doctoral student from a different faculty member, whether that is regarding topical content or research methodology/design. The bottom line is to get each individual student what he or she needs when it is needed. Two participants said one of the areas they do not tend to provide a lot of feedback is related to writing, because they do not feel this is their job or their area of expertise. Both suggested writing centers and/or editors were more appropriate sources for assistance with writing. On the other hand, two respondents took the opposite view, indicating they felt feedback on writing is something they can and should provide to enhance the overall quality of the doctoral student's work.

Scholarly Expectations

Part of the dissertation chair role is to help a doctoral student evolve from being overly dependent on faculty advice to having their own ideas and being able to articulate and defend those ideas. Although the dissertation chair serves in a *gatekeeper* capacity for their university (ensuring students produce work that meets their university's requirements) the chair must balance this institutional role with their role in supporting the student's growth and development from non-researcher, to novice researcher, to independent scholar-practitioner. Resiliency and persistence were mentioned by several participants in this study. Companion concepts were identified as consistency, constancy, and camaraderie.

An important component of the dissertation chair role is to act as a partner with the doctoral student. The dissertation chair brings their scholarly experience as well as their student support experience into the role of

working with a doctoral student through the dissertation process and journey. Despite the gatekeeper responsibilities, the dissertation chair helps the student transition into a new level of largely student-driven but dissertation chair-guided work. It is vitally important for the dissertation chair to understand that while their guidance and expertise plays an important role, the study belongs to the student. It is their topic, their dream, and their mission to advance. The dissertation chair must facilitate movement of the student into the center of the process, and participants in this study pointed to the necessity for the dissertation chair to make their expectations clear (which also represent the expectations of the university) while at the same time helping the doctoral student to see that it is not the dissertation chair's study to *own*. The dissertation belongs to the student and supporting doctoral student agency is a crucial piece of the doctoral student success puzzle, but student agency cannot be achieved in the dissertation chair-doctoral student relationship without establishing high levels of mutual trust and rapport. One participant added that in environments where the dissertation chair-student relationship is primarily or wholly virtual, this relationship building requires extra vigilance.

The expectation to become a scholar-practitioner involves learning to represent oneself in a scholarly voice, learning to conduct original research, and learning to tell the story of that research in a way that is consistent with a field of scholarship and practice, as well as with the research methodology chosen for the study. The dissertation chair might be thought of, in these processes, as a transformer, one who enables the two-way flow of energy that moves back and forth as this relationship evolves. Participants in this study spoke of this relationship as more than a professional one. There are many times when the student does not want to interact only in relation to the dissertation study but rather on a more personal level.

Conclusion: Best Practices for Doctoral Student Success in the Dissertation Process

It takes a village to mint a new doctor. Support from many corners of the individual's world must be brought to bear over a period of several years to increase the chances that this person will eventually walk down the aisle to don the doctoral hood. Looking in from the outside, this support can range from spouses to children to extended family to coworkers and beyond. Peering at the doctoral journey from inside the university, the support comes from the faculty members who teach academic subject courses, student advisors, library staff, and support services staff (e.g., the writing center), but it has been argued that ultimately the individuals who have the most wide-ranging impact on the likelihood of a doctoral student's success are the student him- or herself (Bagaka's, Badillo, Bransteter & Rispinto, 2015) and the dissertation chair (Rigler, Bowlin, Sweat, Watts, Throne, 2017; Roberts, et al, 2019; Sugimoto, 2012).

A growing body of literature on the dissertation chair-doctoral student relationship has noted the connection between the efficacy and strength of this relationship and student persistence to completion of the doctoral degree (Black, 2017; Gray & Crosta, 2018; Rigler et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2019; Throne & Oddi, 2019; Throne, Shaw, Fore, O'Connor Duffy, & Clowes, 2015). Factors framed as being supportive; demonstrating a willingness to commit to providing a high level of mentoring; and fostering an interactive, connected, collaborative rather than a hierarchical relationship are recognized as being key elements of doctoral student success (Baghurst, 2013; Roberts, et al., 2019; Throne & Duffy, 2016; Throne et al., 2015; Throne & Oddi, 2019). These conclusions from relevant literature are consistent with what was reported by the participants in this study, though the specific focus of this research was limited to the role of various types of behavior as it relates to ensuring regular contact and providing feedback to doctoral students to strengthen their resilience and enhance the likelihood of their persistence to the successful completion of the doctoral journey.

Trust Building and Caring Behaviors

The dissertation chairs interviewed for this study agreed that trust building is one of the most important aspects of the dissertation chair role, and that without taking time to build trust the dissertation chair-doctoral student dyad is less effective. Participants called trust "imperative," "crucial," and "number one, at the head of the list most important thing a chair must do." It is as though this intentionally built relationship must function as a 'safe container' within which these two individuals interact, and while it is a dyad that exists primarily to guide a doctoral student through the completion of the dissertation, it is also a location in which an important relationship is built. One participant pointed out, that the relationship can be long-term and noted that she

sometimes publishes work with former students. Another participant spoke of how easily the relationship can flounder, or perhaps not even get off the ground successfully, in circumstances where the doctoral student does not appear interested in establishing the relationship and/or it is difficult to build and sustain a positive, trusting relationship between student and dissertation chair. A third noted that the trusting relationship cuts both ways, e.g. the chair must be able to trust the student will follow through on necessary modifications to a manuscript and the student must be able to trust that she or he will be provided with trustworthy and timely feedback.

One respondent spoke of the friendship component of the dissertation chair-doctoral student relationship that can develop and yet this individual and others also reflected upon the reality that the relationship must be grounded in the understanding that the chair, while being there to offer support, must also ensure that focus remains on getting the doctoral student successfully to the completion of the doctoral journey. This very often means having to give feedback that is difficult for the student to hear. However, there was a consensus that if students experience the dissertation chair as knowledgeable enough, while they may not like getting negative feedback, they are nevertheless aware that being held to specific expectations is ultimately for their benefit. Participants seemed to be sensitive to the reality that there needs to be a fine balance in terms of how the dissertation chair behaves in relation to the student and that the environment must make mutual trust possible. The dissertation chair-doctoral student dyads that seem to work the best, according to these respondents, are those in which if a student sometimes feels the chair is being "hard" on them they can also recognize that this "hardness" is justified in the interest of facilitating the student's success. Respondents mentioned the importance of setting expectations clearly in the early days of the dyad's inception and reinforcing these expectations as necessary.

Individualized Coaching and Guidance

Study participants repeatedly returned to the notion that the dissertation chair, to be successful, must approach each student as an individual where coaching and guidance are concerned as opposed to having a one-size-fits-all approach. The relationship evolves over time and the doctoral student becomes more confident over time as they grow in knowledge. While all doctoral students must be guided in relation to their specific university's expectations, each of those students have unique needs, working styles, problems, and goals with respect to their studies. In supervising the dissertation process for each of their students, the dissertation chair must cultivate the capability of being able to discern how to work with each student as the process proceeds and the dissertation chair and doctoral student get to know each other and become more comfortable with one another. At times this means the chair must know when she needs to bring in some extra help; not every chair is a subject matter expert in a specific student's research topic and not every chair can be a methods expert for all her students. In another vein, responding to the individual needs of each doctoral student also means the dissertation chair must be adept at knowing when and how to apply different mentoring styles, where one end of a continuum might be expressed in terms of being more directive with a student to ensure dissertation quality expectations are achieved, while at the opposite end of the continuum one might employ a mentoring style that is more *laid back* or *flexible*. Furthermore, participants noted that throughout the lifecycle of the dissertation journey each student is going to have different needs related to various steps in the process. For example, while one student may need more *hand holding* in relation to understanding data analysis, another student may run into difficulty where participant recruitment is concerned. Each case is different, and the dissertation chair must be prescient with respect to both intuiting and inquiring to determine how best to support their doctoral students as individuals.

In addition, while several participants in this study agreed that the writing capabilities of a student play an important role in the crafting of a quality dissertation, not everyone expressed that they felt especially competent to act as a writing tutor. One context in which writing proficiency was addressed in this study resulted from an interview question about the online education environment becoming more diverse and whether the participants had given thought to supporting students from diverse backgrounds. Several participants interpreted diversity as being about the kind of individual need for support that arises in the context of working with doctoral students who come from different cultures and are not native English speakers/writers. While these respondents noted that their institutions either currently have or are working to create programs designed to support a more culturally diverse student body, as dissertation chairs their emphasis when asked this 'diversity question' was primarily about the need to be nimble enough in their work with individual students to support them effectively in relation to writing challenges that arise from language differences. For several of the dissertation chairs who participated

in this study, working with students from different cultural backgrounds provided them with opportunities to expand their own horizons. One participant pointed out, that cultural differences sometimes mean people approach problems in different ways or perceive working together differently, and understanding these differences aids the dissertation chair in learning about additional ways to provide feedback to students. In the end, it seems being faced with cultural differences opens a window onto a view from which working with students as individuals, rather than in a rote manner, is a key to helping a doctoral student achieve a completed and successfully defended dissertation.

Balancing Institutional Requirements and Student Needs

One thread that ran through this study, expressed by participants in relation to several of the interview questions, was how they work to mentor students with individual needs against the backdrop of institutional requirements. As pointed out by one participant, "chairs need to have the latitude to be more organic with each student," rather than working with each student in the exact same way. Several noted that the leadership of doctoral programs where they are employed as dissertation chairs require them to meet with students "X" number of times a week or per session, and yet some students may need to meet with them more often whereas others generally require less contact, or their needs to meet with their chair shift along with where the student is situated along the various steps of the dissertation process. What is termed "research supervisor agency" in some of the literature suggests that this concept is a partner to the concept of doctoral student agency (Rigler et al., 2017; Throne & Walters, 2019). It was also noted that some institutions have policies, or stated preferences, that dissertation chair-doctoral student contact occur through specific tools/mechanisms and/or that feedback be provided using specific approaches (e.g., embedded feedback on manuscripts using margin comments or track changes). Most of the participants in this study suggested that what is a best practice for supporting and communicating with one student may need to be different for another student. As put by one respondent, institutions need to "give chairs and students the opportunity to decide what works best for them on a case-by-case basis."

Participants in this study spoke in varying ways about the importance of building rapport and relationship with each of their doctoral students. This was asserted as crucial to ensure that the way feedback from the chair is received by the student promotes growth and development as opposed to discouraging progress. For feedback on manuscript components to be regarded as constructive there must first be put into place the understanding that the study being completed belongs to the student, not to the dissertation chair. One respondent pointed out that while he makes his expectations clear about what constitutes a quality product, he balances this with the clear communication that the study is theirs: the student must meet the institution's stated requirements, but at the same time they need to travel down their own path and defend their own ideas. Another participant pointed out the importance of "teaching through engagement" and that the dissertation chair is there to support their efforts, not "to beat them up." Feedback on a dissertation a student has been working on for a considerable amount of time may be "hard to swallow" and therefore should be delivered in a way that is encouraging and results from a relationship in which solid rapport has been built. This is consistent with recent research (Throne & Oddi, 2019; Throne & Walters, 2019) that suggests doctoral student success owes a great deal to the building of dissertation chair-doctoral student relationships grounded in regular, ongoing communication and feedback processes that are diverse, so students' unique needs can be met; empathetic, so students know they will have emotional as well as academic support through the inevitable rough spots along the dissertation journey; collaborative and trusting rather than hierarchical and distant, thereby acknowledging the study belongs to the student, not the chair; and mentoring oriented, so that doctoral student agency is an outgrowth of the dissertation chair's agency.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several avenues for pursuit of robust understanding of best practices in the dissertation chair-doctoral student relationship. The present study findings could be expanded through a quantitative project that invites a larger number of dissertation chairs from the target population to evaluate the best practices identified through this current study. In addition, the authors of this research noted that while there is a growing body of literature that explores the dissertation chair-doctoral student relationship from the viewpoint of the dissertation chair, there is comparatively little literature that examines this dyad from the point of view of the doctoral student. One approach to this effort would be to invite graduates of online scholar-practitioner doctoral programs to offer their

reflections and suggestions in their relationship with their dissertation chair as an important piece in the puzzle of understanding how to enhance the effectiveness of the dissertation chair-doctoral student relationship. Finally, doctoral students certainly differ in their specific needs for support overall and at varying moments in the dissertation journey, and dissertation chairs differ in their mentoring styles. Given this, the authors suggest there is a need for in-depth investigation into best mentoring practices for improving the online doctoral student engagement along the various steps in the dissertation journey to improve their persistence to completion of degree.

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