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# Doctoral Student Perceptions of Faculty Advisors: Four Supportive Behaviors to Promote Doctoral Completion

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*The number of doctoral recipients per year in the United States has grown considerably, yet on average, half of all students do not persist to degree completion or far exceed the expected completion timeline. Attrition and extended time to degree negatively impact both doctoral students and institutions and costs each time, money, and effort. Advisor-advisee relationship quality significantly affects degree completion. This study explores experiences of 17 full-time working professionals who had recently completed a doctoral degree in education within 6 consecutive years at a regionally accredited institution in the United States. Our findings revealed four faculty advisor behaviors that contribute to doctoral completion: encouragement, accessibility, dependability, and expertise. We offer recommendations for advisors to improve the student doctoral journey.*

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The number of research doctorate recipients per year in the United States has grown considerably from 8,611 in 1957 to 55,006 in 2015 (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2017). Despite tremendous numerical growth of doctoral degrees awarded each year relative to the total number of doctoral students, the number of degrees awarded was less than 12% of the entire doctoral population (Okahana et al., 2016). On average, half of all doctoral students drop out of programs at various stages and do not persist to degree completion (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008). The high rate of doctoral student attrition (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008) is surprising because, "paradoxically, the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system—doctoral students—are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals" (Golde, 2000, p. 199).

Of those doctoral students who complete the degree, many take years beyond expected timeframes to finish (Fletcher et al., 2011). The most recent 2021 Survey of Earned Doctorates report reveals the median time to degree for all doctoral degrees as 5.8 years from initial entrance in a program (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2021). This number includes time spent on the master's degree, only if it was a prerequisite to the doctoral program or in the same major and from the same institution as the doctoral program. The median for all science, mathematics, engineering, and math (STEM) fields ranged between 5.3 years and 5.6 years. Psychology, social sciences, and education degrees averaged 5.8 years to 6 years to complete, followed by the humanities and arts fields at 6.8 years. The longer a doctoral student takes to progress, the more likely they are to drop out (Kim & Otts, 2010).

Doctoral student attrition and extended time to degree impact both students and institutions as both lose time, money, and effort (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2015). Doctoral students' career goals, life plans, and societal contributions could be significantly altered should they fail to complete the degree. In fact, in a study of doctoral candidate drop-outs (those who fulfilled all requirements but the dissertation), participants reported difficulty with initial job searches and felt they had limited career options (Jacks et al., 1983). Another study of doctoral noncompleters revealed that many participants did not work in the careers or positions they had previously envisioned for themselves, such as faculty or academic careers, and several felt their careers were drastically different than anticipated (Lovitts, 2001). Additionally, high doctoral student

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attrition rates could negatively affect the academic reputation and ability of an institution or individual program to attract qualified faculty members, personnel, students, and financial donors.

The quality of the advisor-advisee relationship is one of the most significant factors related to doctoral degree completion (Barnes et al., 2010; Creighton et al., 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Pearson, 2012). Advising quality affects doctoral students' experiences and socialization processes (Lovitts, 2001). A study on barriers to doctoral degree completion found student success was strongly connected to a constructive relationship with dissertation chairs who "provided much-needed emotional support, while still challenging students to produce valuable work" (West et al., 2011, pp. 318-319).

Experiences differ between doctoral students enrolled part time and full time. Full-time students who also work full time, for instance, face the additional challenge of balancing the competing demands of employment with academic and other personal commitments. Part-time students, on the other hand, face the significant obstacle of scholarly and dissertation demands and deadlines (Klocko et al., 2015). Support from faculty advisors and dissertation chairs is imperative throughout the dissertation stage (Zahl, 2015). At some institutions, faculty advisors and dissertation chairs are used synonymously; other institutions may assign separate roles for a faculty advisor who supports coursework issues and another who mentors through the dissertation process. In either case, part-time students indicated that maintaining relationships with faculty members can be an additional challenge due to fluctuating cohorts, distance, and accessibility of faculty members (Zahl, 2015). Part-time doctoral students reported lower rates of satisfaction with their experiences (Nettles & Millett, 2006) and some reported they did not feel as if they fit the mold of a traditional doctoral student (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

Doctoral students vary regarding academic and professional backgrounds and pursue degrees at various career stages. Some have obligations, family or otherwise, that interfere with their ability to participate in a traditional, research-based doctoral program (Offerman, 2011). Nontraditional doctoral students interact less with faculty members, and faculty members must adjust to a different working relationship with older, more mature adult professionals and sometimes, colleagues. Those in pursuit of doctoral degrees do not necessarily plan to become faculty members, as most already have a full-time career. The nontraditional doctoral student is now starting to become the most common doctoral student (Offerman, 2011).

Doctoral students in the field of education experience unique challenges. A study of 103 students enrolled in a Doctor of Education (EdD) program revealed two common impediments to degree completion: poor time management skills and ineffective relationships with dissertation chairs (West et al., 2011). Research indicated that doctoral students in education also have "difficulty with planning and writing, working independently, and financial and personal-relationship pressures" (D'Andrea, 2002, p. 42). Other barriers to degree completion include feelings of isolation and perceptions of unsupportive environments (Quarterman, 2008). Because students have different goals, skill sets, work situations, and personal lives, a combination of barriers to doctoral degree completion may negatively impact student persistence. Ultimately, "doctoral students in education programs require longer time to complete the degree than doctoral students in other fields" (Craft et al., 2016, p. 62). In one study, doctoral students employed full-time in the field of education reported making personal sacrifices, such as less sleep or time spent with family, to make time to complete doctoral obligations (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). These personal sacrifices may lead some doctoral students to experience emotional exhaustion. It is important to understand both barriers to doctoral degree completion and facilitators to improve doctoral student persistence and time to degree.

Little research exists regarding part-time doctoral students, especially those employed full time (Roy, 2019). We respond to call from a Craft (2016) and her colleagues regarding the need for more research in this area: "we call for a more in-depth review of doctoral student advising and additional investigation into understanding both graduate students' and faculty advisors' perceptions in this area" (p. 62). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the doctoral advising and mentoring experiences of 17 full-time working professionals who had recently completed a doctoral degree in education within 6 consecutive years at a regionally accredited institution in the United States. Qualitative methods of exploration could produce valuable

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information toward how doctoral student advisors might approach their work. Thus, we pose the following research question: What do doctoral students perceive as helpful faculty advisor attributes and behaviors that assist them in degree completion?

## Methods

This qualitative study was a basic, interpretive study, commonly used in applied fields of practice, such as education, health, social work, and business (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants included 17 doctoral graduates who completed a traditional PhD program in Educational Leadership (or equivalent program under a different name) within 6 years at a public research institution along the eastern seaboard of the United States while maintaining full-time professional employment. Most participants completed a doctoral program part time, although enrollment status was not part of the sample criteria for participation. Participants earned doctoral degrees from five different public, regionally accredited research institutions (all pseudonyms): Alpha University in Florida ($n = 9$), Beta University in South Carolina ($n = 3$), Charlie University in Florida ($n = 2$), Delta University in Virginia ($n = 2$), and Echo University in South Carolina ($n = 1$). Table 1 provides the background and demographics information for all participants.

There were three sources of data for this study, collected in two separate phases: 1) all participants completed a short background information survey, 2) all participated in an in-depth, semistructured individual interview (Phase I), and 3) four of the 17 participated in a focus group (Phase II). Once they confirmed participation in the study, they received the background survey and consent form via email and returned both via email before the interview or via physical copy at the interview. The survey collected demographic, employment, timeline, and personal information from participants to learn about roles and responsibilities during the doctoral program and to get a clear sense of the completion timeline. Each participant was interviewed once for approximately 60 minutes using an established semistructured interview protocol. Peers and faculty members reviewed protocols and background surveys to ensure open-ended, appropriate, and clear questions. The interview protocol consisted of four sections. The first section, coursework phase, contained questions such as "What was the coursework phase like for you?" and "What was a typical week like for you during this phase?" The second section, comprehensive examination phase, had questions like "What other life roles and responsibilities did you have during this time?" and "What was the most rewarding part of this phase?" The third section, dissertation phase, had questions like "What other life roles and responsibilities did you have during this time?" and "What strategies and/or resources did you use to complete this phase?" The final section, closing, contained two questions "Can you offer any tips or advice—anything that you feel was essential to your success—for other full-time professionals who are considering or currently pursuing a doctorate?" and "Is there anything that we have not discussed, about any phase of the program, that you would like to share about your experience?"

Participants received a copy of the questions, consent form, and background information request before the interview. When possible, interviews were conducted in person ($n = 10$). Participants outside the researcher's area completed interviews via Skype or Zoom video call ($n = 7$), and completed interviews were transcribed. All 17 participants were asked to review their transcript for accuracy (member checking), but only eight completed the review and replied they were satisfied with the transcript.

A subsample of four interview participants took part in a 60-minute focus group. Focus group data allow interactive discussion between participants and yields data that could not be collected through individual interviews (Hennink, 2014). All interview participants inside the researcher's location were invited to the focus group, however only four (all from Alpha University) participated. The focus group was conducted using an established protocol approximately 6 weeks after the participants' individual interviews. The first author shared preliminary findings with the participants as a form of validation and collected additional data that added further nuances to the preliminary findings. The format of this discussion was: "Preliminary finding #1 is managing time and competing demands was a significant challenge. Is this finding reflective of your experiences completing the degree? Does it resonate with you?" The first author then allowed discussion to ensue. She followed up discussion with probing questions such as "How or why? Can you provide an example? Was this more prominent in a specific

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**Table 1**. Participant Background and Demographics Information

| Participant | Institution | Gender | Current Age Range | Race/Ethnicity | Relationship Status during PhD | Children/ Dependents during PhD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amy | Alpha | Female | 25–34 | White/Caucasian | Married | None |
| Beth | Alpha | Female | 35–44 | White/Caucasian | Married | 2 |
| Carl | Alpha | Male | 25–34 | White/Caucasian | Single | None |
| Diane | Alpha | Female | 45–54 | White/Caucasian | Married | 2 |
| Emma | Echo | Female | 35–44 | Asian | Engaged; single | None |
| Francine | Alpha | Female | 45–54 | White/Caucasian | In a relationship | None |
| Gail | Alpha | Female | 25–34 | White/Caucasian | Married; separated; divorced | None |
| Heather | Charlie | Female | 35–44 | White/Caucasian | Married | None |
| Isaac | Delta | Male | 35–44 | White/ Caucasian | Married | 1 born during PhD |
| Jack | Alpha | Male | 35–44 | White/Caucasian | Married | 2 |
| Kristy | Beta | Female | 35–44 | White/Caucasian | Married | 1 born during PhD |
| Lisa | Beta | Female | 35–44 | White/Caucasian | Single | None |
| Mary | Delta | Female | 25–34 | White/Caucasian | Engaged; married | None (pregnant near end) |
| Nora | Beta | Female | 35–44 | White/Caucasian | Married | 3 |
| Olivia | Charlie | Female | 25–34 | White/Caucasian | Single | None |
| Paulette | Alpha | Female | 35–44 | Black or African American | Single | None |
| Quinton | Alpha | Male | 25–34 | Asian | Dating; engaged; married | None |

phase of the degree?” This process produced more data and enriched the findings from the interview data.

All data and participant information were kept confidential. Institution pseudonyms ensured both participant and institution confidentiality. To minimize field issues in interviewing, the first author bracketed experiences and attempted to practice good interview procedures such as minimal commentary and adherence to the

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**Table 1**. Participant Background and Demographics Information (extend.)

| Master's Degree(s) | Master's credits counted toward PhD | Classes/ Credits per Semester | Employer Paid Tuition | Professional Position(s) held during PhD and Hours per Week |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MEd Educational Psychology | Approx. 9 | 2-3 classes/ 6-9 credits | Yes – partial | University asst. program director - 40 |
| MA Linguistics | None | 3-4 classes/ -12 credits | Yes – partial | University instructor; senior instructor - 40 |
| MBA | 6 | 3 classes/ 9 credits | Yes - partial | University adjunct faculty; visiting instructor; instructor - 40 |
| MEd Education | None | 2-3 classes/ 6-9 credits | No | K-12 teacher; ESE coach; principal/ administrator - 55 |
| MEd Curriculum and Instruction: College Student Affairs | None | 2 classes / 6 credits | Yes | University area coordinator; asst. director; assoc. director - 60+ |
| MS Nonprofit Management | Unknown | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | Government agency learning and dev. officer - 40 |
| MA College Student Development | 15 | 3 classes/9 credits | Yes | University academic coach - 40 |
| MEd Higher Education | 12 | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | University director - 55-60 |
| MEd Higher Education | 9 | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | University director; asst. director - 40+ |
| MEd Educational Leadership | Unknown | 2 classes/6 credits | No | K-12 principal - 40-60 |
| MEd Higher Education and Student Affairs | Unknown | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | University assoc. director - 40 |
| MEd Student Affairs Admin. in Higher Ed. | Unknown; some | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | University assoc. director - 45-50 |
| MEd Higher Education and Student Affairs | 9 credits | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | University asst. director; assoc. director - 40 |
| MEd | 20 credits | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | University director - 60 |
| MEd Higher Education and Student Affairs | 9 credits | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | University asst. director; assoc. director - 50 |
| MEd College Student Personnel | 9 credits | 3 classes/9 credits | No | University exec. director; asst. dean; assoc. dean - 50 |
| MS Education | 9 credits | 2 classes/6 credits | Yes | University coordinator; exec. director - 40+ |

interview protocol (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bracketing or "epoche" (a term developed by Husserl), means "investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78). To mitigate any potential influence on the study, the first author reflected on personal assumptions about the experience and the expected findings. To increase dependability (Saldaña, 2016), the

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first author maintained a researcher journal and audit trail of all data collection and analysis procedures throughout the study.

Data analysis was concurrent with data collection and continued beyond the conclusion of data collection. Audio recorded interviews and focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts and field notes were read, re-read, and coded in three rounds (Miles et al., 2013). The first round of coding was completed using the initial coding method, a "first cycle, open-ended approach to coding the data with some recommended general guidelines" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115), wherein multiple types of coding can be used. For this study, a combination of in vivo, process and affective coding methods, including emotion and values coding, were used to create codes. In vivo coding is accomplished by creating a code using a verbatim word or short phrase in the data (Saldaña, 2016). Process coding is used to capture actions in the data, typically by using words that end in -ing (Saldaña, 2016). Emotion coding "labels the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant or inferred by the researcher about the participant" (Miles et al., 2013, p. 75), while values coding reflects a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs (Miles et al., 2013). Thus, the approach was disciplined but also open-ended and flexible.

The first round of coding was followed by a first-to-second cycle transition round by completing one iteration of code mapping, a way of organizing and categorizing first cycle codes (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, pattern coding, a way of consolidating the first cycle codes into a smaller number of similar categories or concepts (Saldaña, 2016), was used as the second cycle method to develop themes within the data. The three rounds of coding were used to generate a master code list. This data condensation stage was followed by data display, wherein large amounts of data were presented in matrices (Miles et al., 2013). Findings of the study are presented in textural descriptions using verbatim quotes and examples from participants.

## Findings

We sought to explore the doctoral advising and mentoring experiences of full-time working professionals who had recently completed a doctoral degree in education within 6 consecutive years at a regionally accredited institution in the United States. Importantly, for participants, the faculty member assigned to advise a student at the beginning of the program may or may not have continued as the student's dissertation chair (student may have had the option to choose their chair). Some participants used the terms "advisor" and "chair" interchangeably to refer to their dissertation chair. Four behaviors were identified: encouragement, accessibility, dependability, and providing expertise. Both positive and negative aspects of these four behaviors are discussed herein.

### Encouragement

First, 12 out of 17 participants discussed the importance of encouragement from faculty advisors as motivation to complete their dissertation. Paulette shared the importance of choosing the right faculty member to chair her dissertation: "having someone who has your best interests in mind, wants to help you explore what you want… makes a huge, huge difference." Mary talked about an encouraging meeting with her dissertation committee: "it was like one big cheerleading session with people that were really supportive of you… three people that were just like big fans of you that just wanted you to succeed."

Five out of the 17 participants also experienced issues related to ambiguous or changing expectations concerning their dissertation. For example, Nora believed her chair was unaware of her research focus and would send her into different directions as a form of academic hazing. She characterized some of the changed expectations as the "wrenches your advisor throws in the process towards the end." Heather had a similar experience with an advisor she thought would be her dissertation chair through the comps phase. She met with her advisor for help with her methodology and her advisor responded, "Well, go think about it more." Heather laughed as she continued, "I already thought about it a lot and you telling me to go think about it more is like kind of not helpful." Similarly, Amy mentioned that "getting on the same page as your committee" was a challenge. When Jack submitted his dissertation proposal to his chair, she returned it and told him the writing needed a lot more work. He said, "I had never received feedback on my writing before that, so it was like, 'What the hell? [laughing] What do I do now? Why'd they wait for me to get three years in before they say anything?'" Although critical feedback is a necessary part of the doctoral process, unclear

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or changing expectations were discouraging for several participants.

**Accessibility**

The second behavior, discussed by 7 of 17 participants, was the accessibility of both advisors and dissertation committee members. Kristy said, "I just needed somebody and she was there. [She] took on a whole next level role of support for me in the dissertation." Similarly, Emma detailed how accessible her chair was, "3 to 4 months before my actual dissertation defense, he was on me every other day, answering questions, moving meetings, Skyping me."

The accessibility of other committee members was also important. Gail met with her methodologist 2 hours each week: "He was consistent in my schedule when I needed him to be, and he gave me feedback when I needed it." A few participants even had faculty members who left the institution but were still willing to avail themselves to their former doctoral students from a distance.

However, 5 of 17 participants described challenges related to faculty accessibility, primarily the lack of communication and meeting availability. For instance, Gail recalled a time she was unable to reach her chair for assistance on a crucial part of her dissertation. She eventually had to ask another faculty member for assistance in connecting with her chair: "whatever she did, I don't know, but [the professor] emerged and did what I needed him to do for me." She continued, "so the most challenging thing at that time was trying to get my chair's attention." Francine was also frustrated by the lack of communication from a dissertation committee member: "I would send materials and not hear anything back." Other students had difficulty accessing faculty for meetings or conversations. Nora explained, "[I] made myself available... there would be times that I just needed guidance or just the okay that I was going down the right path... [and he] wasn't available for the one-on-one meetings." Faculty inaccessibility is problematic for doctoral students, especially while they are conducting dissertation research, and can result in delays in research, writing, and timely degree completion.

**Dependability**

The third behavior identified was dependability, discussed by 7 of 17 participants. Kristy characterized her advisor/chair as her "anchor":

> Anytime I needed something, she was there. I tried not to bother her (she was an incredibly busy person), but I knew when there was something I needed help with she would be the primary person I could talk with.

Similarly, Emma noted her entire committee was "amazing because they were the people I really depended on and they really helped me there."

Kristy's advisor "was absolutely critical... she helped see me through so much of the process." Regarding his committee, Carl stated, "they cared about helping you get through the program. I really felt they were taking a vested interest in what I was doing." And other participants talked about help navigating the comprehensive exams. "Dr. [Professor] was a really great resource in just demystifying the process," explained Nora. Carl noted, "none of us really knew what we were doing... I still remember when we were meeting with [Professor] and trying to figure out... what our research questions were." Carl also mentioned the methodologist on his committee:

> He was constantly making sure I was having enough time with certain things. He would say, "you're going to rerun this test, make sure you get it done by this time because we want to make sure we get this to the committee by this date."

None of the participants specifically referenced the undependability of faculty with whom they worked, but arguably the negatives discussed in the previous section on accessibility may also be characterized as undependability.

**Providing Expertise**

Finally, 10 of 17 participants expressed reliance on the role of their advisor to teach and provide expertise. Gail explained her advisor "gave solid, sound feedback" that she could apply to her work. Speaking of her methodologist, Olivia explained, "I had a lot of really interesting conversations with her about [the educational concept] because she was the director of [the educational concept] initiative... so she had some unique perspectives I wasn't finding in the literature." Similarly, Heather benefitted from her chair's expertise, which led to a research design appropriate for her research questions. She

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had not learned about this design during her coursework phase and may not have heard of it otherwise. Indeed, the faculty members with whom the participants worked provided a great deal of expertise; none of the participants shared any negative comments or experiences in this area.

## Recommendations

Given the strenuous demands placed on doctoral students also employed full time, it is not surprising that they experience challenges, such as departmental or program requirements, policies, and procedures (Ferrer de Valero, 2001) or unexpected events within their personal lives (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; West et al., 2011), which hinder their time to degree or degree completion. Research also shows some doctoral students experience difficulties with time management or working with dissertation chairs (West et al., 2011). To improve the experience for part-time doctoral students "explicit, research-informed role expectations about doctoral advising must be disseminated in the process of developing positive advisor-advisee relationships" (Craft et al., 2016, p. 55). In this spirit, we offer recommendations for dissertation chairs/advisors.

Faculty members play a significant role in the promotion of doctoral advisee psychosocial development (Goldman & Goodboy, 2017). In addition to challenging students and holding them to high standards, faculty members also help students to understand what it means to receive a terminal degree in their chosen field and to build student self-efficacy in completing academic and research tasks. Clear communication and encouragement to the doctoral student is perhaps the most fundamental advisor task. This has been referred to as the "hidden curriculum" (Elliot et al., 2020; Harding-DeKam et al., 2012), in which students learn major life skills often not explicitly found in the degree curriculum. In building students' self-efficacy, it also is important that faculty members not enable their students with too much handholding (Roberts & Bandlow, 2018). A critical aspect of the doctoral process is to learn to become a self-sufficient, independent scholar, and faculty members must teach students to be self-reliant and to learn to navigate institutional resources when they needed.

Given the importance of building relationships with faculty members and peers throughout the doctoral process, faculty members should facilitate regular meetings with advisees. For example, advisors can host monthly "brown bag lunch and learn" meetings or virtual Zoom meetings where students share their highs, lows, and challenges as they progress through the doctoral program. This opportunity to share their experiences with peers can help normalize students' feelings and allow them to feel supported by both their advisor/chair and their peers. In fact, more than half of the participants cited the support and camaraderie from their peers as a critical support network during their program. These networks were maintained through informal study and writing groups among friends in the program. Because students who work full-time often have fewer opportunities to grow peer networks, these intentional meetings can create a place to share ideas, information, and strategies, and encourage formation of informal mentorships between seasoned and new students. Faculty members may also be able to facilitate similar interactions within classes.

Faculty members can also promote relationship-building by organizing writing groups, which may help keep students on track during the dissertation (Nolan & Rocco, 2009; Plakhotnik et al., 2019; Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2012). One study suggested that scholarly productivity and persistence to degree completion increases through writing groups (Maher et al., 2013). The researchers identified the following perceived outcomes of participation in a writing group: peer support networks, easier access to faculty members who participated in the group, and the ability to create spin-off writing groups with others from the original group.

Though faculty members can be a major source of support to doctoral students, the existing literature (D'Andrea, 2002; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) and the findings of this study demonstrate that faculty relationships can also impede doctoral degree completion. We implore faculty members to reflect upon practices and interactions with students to identify both areas of strength and areas for improvement. One of the biggest complaints from students about faculty advisors is lack of availability and communication and this has been suggested to be related to advisee satisfaction with the advising relationship (Inman et al., 2011). To improve communication with advisees, faculty members should respond to emails or calls clearly, in a timely manner, and in the advisee's

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preferred mode of communication (e.g., email, text, or phone), and include an expected response time. Lack of faculty member response to outreach efforts causes frustration and discouragement for students (Tatum et al., 2018).

## Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, institutional, cultural, programmatic, or regional biases could exist based on where the participant completed the doctoral degree. Furthermore, the delimitations selected for this study (i.e., the criteria for participation), though purposeful, also create limitations because findings are not necessarily transferrable to other doctoral programs or student populations. For instance, PhD students were interviewed, but not EdD students. Future researchers could examine experiences of both types of students in different types of doctoral programs to better understand how the doctoral program impacts the experiences and successful completion of doctoral students.

Second, the first author recruited participants through referrals from friends, faculty members, and colleagues, and consequently was familiar to some participants through past academic interactions. The third author, listed as the primary investigator on the IRB approval and consent form, also had relationships with nine participants from previous positions advising, teaching, or serving on dissertation committees during their master's or doctoral degree programs, and a few participants through other professional activities or organizations. These relationships could have potentially affected the authenticity or depth of these participants' responses if they were worried about the potential spread of sensitive information or opinions to anyone in their professional or academic circles.

A final limitation was the bias inherent in asking people who were successful in completing the degree about challenges and facilitators of completion. The experiences of those who did not complete the degree could be significantly different, however, the noncompleters could have also experienced the same challenges and facilitators of completion and still not been able to finish the degree.

## Conclusion

Doctoral study is demanding, time consuming, and potentially emotionally exhausting. Only 50% of all doctoral students persist to degree completion (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008) and doctoral students who work full time are faced with the additional challenge of balancing the employment demands. Of course, doctoral study also includes many benefits for intellectual and emotional growth including positive outcomes such as professional and personal development, increased knowledge and writing skills, research experience, and friendships (Leonard et al., 2005). One of the most significant factors related to doctoral degree completion is advising and mentoring (Barnes et al., 2010; Creighton et al., 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Pearson, 2012). Doctoral advising and mentoring can be provided from a student's advisor or dissertation chair as well as other faculty members with whom they interact throughout their doctoral experience. This research sought to examine the doctoral advising and mentoring experiences of full-time working professionals who completed a doctoral degree in a timely manner. Participants described behaviors of supportive faculty members and challenges to working with faculty members. These findings were used to make recommendations for graduate units and faculty advisors and chairs to better support doctoral students.

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