

THE IMPACT OF EARLY PROSPECTUS REVIEW

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Abstract- Approximately 40% of doctoral students are unable to complete their independent capstone research at the conclusion of their coursework and of those who do complete the capstone, time to completion is often longer than anticipated. At Walden University, students are often successful during their structured course work, but become overwhelmed with the demands of their capstone research and fail to progress. In order to scaffold the capstone process, the EdD program has several discrete steps in the completion and review processes such as prospectus (research plan) development, and later the proposal and final study approvals by committee members and the University Research Reviewer (URR). The EdD program recently added another early step to provide structured feedback and additional guidance to assist students in the development of their research plans. This step is the prospectus-stage review by the Research Program Director (RPD) or designee. Grounded by Hattie and Timperley's model of feedback to enhance student learning, the purpose of this study is to assess the impact of the RPD review by examining differences in the number of months to proposal approval between students who had their prospectus reviewed by the RPD and students who did not. Differences in the number of URR proposal returns will also be examined. Data analysis will include analysis of variances for the two dependent measures and descriptive statistics for the study sample.

Index Terms- Online doctoral students, prospectus review, prospectus feedback, completion time.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), approximately 175,000 doctoral degrees were conferred by postsecondary institutions during the academic year 2012-2013, with 10,500 in the field of education alone [1]. These are impressive numbers; however, there are many students who begin doctoral degree programs and do not complete them. Depending on the field, up to 40% of students who begin doctoral programs never complete [2]. Additionally, the inefficiency of many doctoral programs creates timelines for completion of 8 to 10 years or more [2].

II. RESEARCH CAPSTONE

The hallmark of doctoral education is the student research capstone, and many consider the transition to independent researcher as one of the most important components [3]. However, the transition from coursework to independent scholar proves difficult for many students [4]. In particular, online doctoral students have reported that of the many challenges, lack of face-to-face meetings and lack of confidence in their research abilities are among the most difficult to overcome [5].

Online student enrollment continues to grow, and while most academic leaders rate the learning outcomes equal to or better than traditional face-to-face learning [6], challenges still exist for the online student [5]. In traditional brick-and-mortar universities, doctoral students meet often with their faculty and fellow students. They frequently attend doctoral seminars where they have to defend their study plan in front of a larger audience, hence, making it more likely to receive early feedback. In the online

environment, time and distance play key roles in the challenges, and researchers have found that students are best supported by providing effective feedback early and often in their independent research work [5].

III. COMPLETION TIME

Walden University is an online institution with more than 47,800 students attending. The university offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in a broad range of disciplines. Currently, the University has over 7,000 students actively pursuing their professional doctorate or PhD. In education alone, 1,972 students were enrolled in the EdD program during June 2015. These students have shown an average of

- 7 months from forming a committee to the prospectus approval
- 26 months from the prospectus approval to the proposal approval
- 11 months from the proposal approval to the approval of the final study

The EdD program has several discrete steps built into the completion and review processes for the research capstone. There is the prospectus (research plan) stage, proposal stage, and final study stage. The proposal and final study stages require evaluation rubric approvals by committee members and the committee's University Research Reviewer (URR). From the initiation of the doctoral research sequence to the final completion of the research capstone takes an average of 4 years. This does not lead to any conclusions about completion rates; however, it does give a clear picture on what a doctoral student is committed to financially as well as professionally and personally.

IV. PROPOSED STUDY

This study will investigate the recent implementation of a feedback step in Walden University's online EdD program that was initiated in December 2014. This early step is meant to provide structured feedback and additional guidance to enhance student learning during the development of the research plan, or prospectus. The process is the prospectus-stage review by the Research Program Director (RPD) or designee. Prior to December 2014, students had their prospectus documents reviewed by their chair and second member only. After December 2014, completed prospectus documents are rubric-evaluated by both the committee members and also by a designee from the divisional research office. Designees must be vetted as strong researchers and specifically, methodologists. The impact of the RPD review has not yet been measured.

The appropriate kind of feedback is one of the most influential effects on student learning and achievement [7]. Similar to Hattie and Timperley's model of feedback, the main purpose of the early RPD review is to reduce discrepancies between students' performance on their research plan development and the Program's goals for the research plan development. As such, the RPD review is founded in the EdD Prospectus Guide. This Guide provides the purpose of the prospectus, an annotated outline of what needs to be included, a sample prospectus document, the nine quality indicators of the prospectus evaluation rubric, tips for writing a quality prospectus, and a design alignment tool (design outline) of the sample prospectus research design. As noted in Hattie and Timperley's model of feedback to enhance student learning, RPD feedback reminds students of a) the goals for each section of the prospectus, b) the progress being made toward those goals, and c) what needs to be undertaken to make better progress.

The RPD review as a new feedback step in the EdD doctoral capstone process was implemented to provide earlier guidance to students and committees to assist with research capstone progress and completion. As the Council of Graduate Schools' Ph.D. Completion Project [2] suggested, in the humanities where students work more individually on their doctoral studies (compared to a research team in the sciences) and have little or no preparation for the research required once they finish the coursework, students may linger for years in a program before gaining a full understanding of what the doctoral study requires. By adding early, actionable feedback focused on reducing the gap between current prospectus development and prospectus development goals, it is anticipated that the time to capstone proposal approval and the number of URR returns for the proposal will be reduced.

The RPD review is grounded in the EdD Prospectus Guide for content and the EdD Prospectus Rubric quality indicators for quality. In the first 5 months after the initiation of the early review process, the RPD

designees provided feedback on 250 research plans in a variety of educational specializations, including Administrator Leadership for Teaching and Learning, Adult Education, College Teaching and Learning, Early Childhood, Higher Education Leadership, Special Education, etc. The reviews included assessments of whether a doctoral-level problem was identified and justified, whether the design was appropriate and feasible, and whether all pieces of the study design were aligned.

Once a prospectus has been approved by any one of the three RPD designees, it is considered approved by the Research Program Director (RPD). Out of the first 250 reviewed prospecti: a) 47 (19%) were returned to the committee with no or almost no suggestions or concerns related to the rubric standards; b) 120 (48%) were returned to the committee with actionable and detailed feedback related to potential pitfalls, such as an unclear problem statement or a lack of alignment; and c) 83 (33%) were returned to the committee with substantial concerns about the feasibility of the study plan and these committees were offered the opportunity to submit a revised plan for additional feedback. The review process has high demands on resources; therefore, the impact of this early feedback on research capstone progress needs to be examined.

V. SIGNIFICANCE

When students fail to complete their doctoral program, the result is losses for not only the student and university, but the work force in general if they lack the trained individuals with advanced degrees [2]. Many researchers have focused on reasons for attrition and improvements that can be made [2, 4] in order to increase doctoral completion rates. Mentoring, advising, and early feedback/guidance are consistently noted as activities and innovations to improve the completion rates of doctoral students. Regular and uniform progress checks and review systems, along with early advising and guidance are noted as making the biggest impact (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). By providing effective feedback in a systematic and uniform early review stage to enhance student learning [7], the rates of doctoral capstone, and therefore program, completion may improve.

This study will contribute to the gap in research related to the impact of a newly implemented step in the capstone review processes at a large online University. The RPD review is intended to reduce discrepancies between students' performance on their research plan development and the goals for the research plan development. By examining the impact of the RPD review on capstone proposal approval, the research will also support professional practice at the study site. By providing research-based data on the impact of the RPD review, the University can make more informed decisions on resource allocations related to the process.

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