# Evaluating Supports for "All But Dissertation" Students

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**Abstract:** The authors of this roundtable session will lead a discussion debating effective methods for evaluating support services for "All But Dissertation" students to better focus university resources.

The fact that half of all doctoral students fail to complete their program is well documented, although specific completion rates vary by discipline and cohort (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; Nettles & Millett, 2006). The difficulties "all but dissertation" students face can be compounded when they are working adults. In theory, these students should be self-directed adults who have learned the necessary research, writing, and technology skills to complete a dissertation. As any professor or student in an adult education doctoral program will admit, the reality may be very different (Lovitts, 2007). Following the recommendations of the Council of Graduate Schools' PhD Completion Project (2010) and many other research studies on doctoral student attrition, many institutions have implemented various interventions for doctoral students. In addition, students may be accessing informal support systems through peers, social media, or even hiring dissertation coaches or editors. Their struggles may stem from unfamiliarity with the technology tools, ranging from software for data analysis to formatting a Microsoft Word document, that are becoming necessary for completion of a dissertation.

These support or intervention services may include graduate writing centers or tutors (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010), peer writing groups (Maher, Seaton, McMullen, Fitzgerald, Otsuji, & Lee, 2008), dissertation seminars or "boot camps" (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; Di Pierro, 2007), workshops on specific topics related to scholarly publication and dissertation research (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010), training for faculty who chair dissertations (Di Pierro, 2007), and even entire courses devoted to dissertation writing (Delyser 2003). Technology provides even more options such as text message reminders, discussion boards, blogs, web sites, videos, and dissertation templates, most of which do not require the students to physically be present on campus. However, technology may also present a challenge to doctoral students of all ages; it can help students be more productive or cause immense frustration.

With shrinking budgets, administrators may be requiring justification and data to continue funding these services services. The Council of Graduate Schools (2010) found that its research project led to a "culture of evidence" in participating institutions. In addition, many doctoral faculty may be unsure how to best focus these supports or how to tailor existing university services such as a writing or counseling center for traditional undergraduates for working adult doctoral students. In addition, support services may not always be helping students become more self-directed; they may unintentionally make students more reliant on the professor or service rather than less.

Evaluating the effectiveness of a specified dissertation support service is no easy task. Ideally these interventions assist doctoral students with generic tasks, like formatting a table, so the dissertation faculty can focus on the research. Attendance and participation, either face-to-face or online, is simple to calculate, but numbers may not represent the quality of the experience. While qualitative data about the service may be positive, this does not always equate to lower time-to-degree, higher completion rates, or

better experiences in the doctoral program.  In the words of Di Pierro (2007), which follows the recommendations of the PhD Completion Project (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010),

> Those institutions which do not invest research dollars, time, and initiative into assessments of the quality of their doctoral programs, including time to degree, attrition and completion rates, as well as technical and psychosocial support mechanisms that increase opportunities for persistence, will lose students to other institutions that value and maintain such a competitive edge. (Di Pierro, 2007, p. 368)

Doctoral programs must continue to offer support services for ABD and all doctoral students in a targeted, effective manner, but there is no one-size-fits all approach that is best.  Each institution's population may have different needs, and those needs may change as modifications are made to existing programs to be more effective.

## References

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