

Virtual Dissertation Circles: Student Engagement Strategies and Lessons Learned

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A great body of research demonstrates that online doctoral student needs center around motivation, community, affirmation from peers, and feedback (e.g., Akojie, Entrekin, Bacon, & Kanai, 2019; Gibson, Fields, Wladkowski, Kusmaul, Greenfield, & Mauldin, 2019; Kumar, & Coe, 2017). This study focused on the development of a Dissertation Circles Model to provide students with a forum for connecting with peers at various stages of the dissertation process with rotated supervision by long-serving dissertation chairs within the department. Future directions include expansion of the initiative to include non-clinical practicum, to support improved preparation of students by setting expectations and providing mentorship opportunities.

Keywords: dissertation circles, online program administration, online doctoral students, online student engagement, online faculty engagement, self-determination theory

INTRODUCTION

The dissertation is arguably one of the most challenging aspects of doctoral degree completion. Students enrolled in online doctoral programs are typically faced with competing priorities, as adults, and they have complex needs (Akojie, Entrekin, Bacon, & Kanai, 2019; Gibson, Fields, Wladkowski, Kusmaul, Greenfield, & Mauldin, 2019; Kumar, & Coe, 2017). Research demonstrates that online doctoral students experience internal needs, such as the need for motivation, community, and affirmation (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011; Deshpande, 2017; Lake, Koper, Balayan, & Lynch, 2016; Muirhead, & Metros, 2016). Online doctoral students also tend to experience external needs, such as the need for direction, modeling, clear expectations, and effective feedback (Anderson et al., 2019; Geesa, Lowery, &

McConnell, 2018; Roberts, & Ferro-Almeida, 2019). Administrators of online doctoral programs must understand and effectively meet the needs of their students.

Strategies such as faculty and peer-based mentoring have been employed to support online doctoral students. Early efforts to involve peer mentoring throughout culminating projects focused on thesis circles (Lee & Boud, 2003; Larcombe, McCosker & O'Loughlin, 2007 and these efforts have been evaluated in the recent literature, with positive findings (Kamakshi et al., 2021).

This study focused on the evaluation of a pilot Virtual Dissertation Circle Model, which was implemented within the Online Campus of a small university in terms of needs addressed, model development, evaluation and planned formal implementation. Included in an analysis of future directions for the model such as applications to non-clinical practicum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Doctoral program completion rates are relatively low (Ames, Berman, & Casteel, 2018) and one of the key factors impacting these rates is the dissertation (Scott & Johnson, 2022). One reason that dissertation completion is a struggle for many doctoral students is that dissertation chair-based support is not always aligned to the needs of the students (Leijen, Lepp, & Remmik, 2016). Doctoral students who are at the dissertation phase of their programs are required to work independently, but the necessary level of independence varies widely based on doctoral program, reader, and dissertation chair characteristics (Gittings, Bergman, Shuck, & Rose, 2018). The need for structured support during the dissertation process has been widely researched (Litalien & Guay, 2015) and the persistence needed to successfully complete a dissertation is certainly impacted by the chair (Martin & Harrell, 2020). Research demonstrates that agency, preparation, and support on the part of the dissertation chair has the potential to facilitate a mentoring relationship that nurtures program completion (Lafrance, Lafrance, & Melton, 2020). Student needs vary based on multiple factors, however, and program administration must ensure that the needs of their students are prioritized if they hope to provide relevant and sufficient support (Gibson et al., 2019; Shavers & Moore, 2014). There are a number of strategies which have been implemented with varied levels of success.

One strategy is formal mentorship for productivity, which involves regular student-chair meetings to discuss progress. Doctoral student mentoring has been shown to impact success during the dissertation stage (Anderson et al., 2019; Muirhead & Metros, 2016). Boot-camp style sessions, such as the dissertation deep dive presented by Ball & Fuchs (2020) have been implemented to provide doctoral students with targeted training and resources pertaining to research and writing and to nourish motivation and highlight supports. Another strategy is to embed the dissertation into the entire program, rather than placing it at the end. This is an impactful strategy because it diminishes anxiety surrounding the project by breaking it down into many smaller parts and providing preparation early in the doctoral program (Cresswell-Yeager & Bandlow, 2020). Glazek, Adu, & McFeeters (2018) present research on the implementation of a formal dissertation support center and its evaluation, based on the premise that the center format will be able to address the unique needs of individual students. Writing sessions have also been employed as a strategy for supporting students engaged in the dissertation process (Maldonado, Dolfi, Bartlett, & Bartlett, 2021). When working to support online doctoral students engaged in the dissertation process, unique challenges apply.

A great body of research has explored the needs of online doctoral students (e.g., Akojie, Entrekin, Bacon, & Kanai, 2019; Mullen, 2020). Structure and support must be provided in ways that align with the experience of the online doctoral student (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2019) and technology must be utilized effectively to adequately nurture engagement (Serhan, 2020). Data collection and its management must adhere to ethical principles (Sroka, 2021) and both formal and informal learning must be considered in the virtual realm (Peters & Romero, 2019). Many strategies which have been employed to support doctoral students enrolled in face-to-face programs can be adjusted for use in online programs. For instance, research by Fladd, Bermingham, & Westlund Stewart (2019) demonstrated equivalent outcomes of dissertation boot camps offered in various formats, including the online format. Garcia & Yao (2019) explored the utility of an online seminar to prepare students for scholarly work at the doctoral level. Werse,

Lively, & Crocker Papadakis (2021) found that high-impact support in the area of writing had a positive impact on the dissertation outcomes of online doctoral students. Key parameters influencing student outcomes center around student factors, faculty factors and peer-mentoring.

First, in terms of student factors, emotions play an important role in coping during the dissertation phase (Cotterall, 2013). Babcock & Beford (2022) explored the role played by stress in the outcomes of online doctoral student dissertations and how faculty may impact student experiences of and responses to stress. Writing-related stress can be addressed through the provision of targeted supports (Burrington, Madison, & Schmitt, 2020; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019; Weller Swanson, West, Carr, & Augustine, 2019). For instance, e-mentoring has been shown to effectively support online students (Deshpande, 2017). Stadlander (2021) explored applications of positive leadership theory to successfully mentoring online dissertation students. Research on applications of the conceptual framework pioneered by Yob & Crawford (2012) indicates that competence, availability, induction, challenge, communication, and emotional support impact the success of e-mentoring relationships (Byrnes, Uribe-Flórez, Trespalacios, & Chilson, 2019). Trust is a key factor impacting the success of mentoring relationships (Rademaker, Duffy, Wetzler, & Zaikina-Montgomery, 2016; Roberts & Ferro-Almeida, 2019). Mentoring should encompass a significant portion of the doctoral program (Black, 2017; Halupa, 2018) and can be conceptualized in terms of three core categories, enculturation, emancipation, and healthy relationship (Gray & Crosta, 2019). Support for online doctoral students should not be restricted to the chair and committee. Research by Kim (2018) demonstrates the benefits of comprehensive academic socialization of doctoral students through the use of feedback networks.

One non-faculty-based source of support for doctoral students comes from the cohort (Capello, 2020). Research demonstrates that connections among cohort members is associated with doctoral student retention (Capello, 2020; Geesa, Lowery, & McConnell, 2018). Further, these connections contribute to self-determination (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011), which is a predictor of dissertation success (Martin & Harrell, 2020). Denman, Corrales, Smyth, & Craven (2018) explored the benefits of a support group during the dissertation phase of an online doctoral program. Research describing the provision of support for online doctoral students demonstrates that peer-assisted learning is a key contributor to degree completion (Tibingana-Ahimbisibwe, Willis, Catherall, Butler, & Harrison, 2022). One type of peer-assisted learning which has been utilized in Master's degree programs during the thesis phase is the student circle.

Lee and Voud (2003) presented research on the impacts of writing groups and academic identity. Kamakshi, Vrieling-Teunter, Hsiao, Van Seggelen-Damen, & Verjans (2021) explored thesis circles as a way to increase self-regulated learning and peer feedback and reduce loneliness. Larcombe, McCosker, & O'Loughlin (2007) conducted an evaluation of thesis writing circles, finding that they served to impact confidence with academic writing. This pilot involved the implementation of a Virtual Dissertation Circle Model that aimed to provide support, increase motivation, reduce isolation, and build peer engagement among online doctoral students engaged in the dissertation process.

METHOD

Administration and faculty serving the online campus housing the pilot described here aimed to provide support for fully online doctoral students while preserving the adjunct-faculty-based resource model applied to the campus. Over the life of the campus, several other key initiatives were implemented to this end, including a doctoral student colloquium model (Dennis, DiMatteo-Gibson, Halbert, Gonzalez, & Prioleau Byrd, 2020) and a doctoral student cohort mentor model (Dennis & DiMatteo-Gibson, 2022). More recently, a series of ongoing program-based meetups were implemented, which facilitate engagement among students, faculty and administrators and provides students with the opportunity to receive information, pose questions and connect with resources. Faculty feedback regarding meetups led to the development of a model focused on the intentional socialization of scholarship in an academic village format, termed a Dissertation Circle.

Model Development

The process for developing the Dissertation Circles Model involved key program faculty and administration. Faculty and administration first explored some of the issues that online doctoral students face as they enter the dissertation process, noting other constraints such as 8-week terms and the fact that many students in the online doctoral programs offered through the campus are working adults. Taking a qualitative inquiry approach, administrators and faculty identified gaps and opportunities for added support. This was done via discussions, meetings, semi-structured interviews, and general inquiry with current students, alumni, and faculty involved in dissertations as either a chair or a reader. Once these areas of opportunities were identified, key faculty and staff worked together to determine the best format for supporting students during the dissertation process. The development of this model represented a team effort which included the identification of strengths, capabilities, and capacity to further support and engage online doctoral students.

The Dissertation Circles Model had the following aims:

- 1) Provide support to students who are at various stages of their dissertations, thereby improving doctoral student experience and contributing to successful program completion.
- 2) Expose doctoral students to faculty who may serve on their dissertation committees early in their doctoral programs, thereby contributing to relationship development.
- 3) Empower students at the later stages of dissertation completion to serve as mentors to their peers, thereby contributing to increased learning and engagement.
- 4) Provide students with an open forum to ask questions of faculty members who are heavily involved in the dissertation process, thereby increasing awareness regarding the experience for all students.
- 5) Provide guidance to students on how to effectively complete a dissertation, thereby empowering students.

Model Implementation

Implementation of the pilot involved the selection of a group of faculty who served as dissertation chairs on the campus. Future iterations of the circle were planned to involve rotated facilitation by chairs to preserve resources and so it was important to solicit feedback regarding process from all who may be involved. The initial circle was facilitated by a faculty administrator and involved a short presentation on types of research studies. This topic was selected due to its relevance and the assumption that it would lead to student sharing regarding the topic. The presentation was followed by a Q&A session with the presenter.

The majority of the session involved a Q&A with attendees, including doctoral students at various stages of the program and any faculty members in attendance. Model parameters were informed by administrator and faculty experience with the students on the campus. For instance, the pilot circle was hosted in the evening, based on the results of a survey which had been administered to students on the campus regarding their availability to attend extracurricular activities. Further, the circle was recorded. This was done to ensure that students who were not able to attend live did not miss out on the experience. Additionally, the session was scheduled for a one-hour period based on faculty experience with student engagement in online meetings.

Due in part to the relevant topic, attendance at the pilot circle was higher than expected. Twenty students attended the pilot circle, along with four faculty members. The presentation focused on types of research and provided students with examples of dissertation topics of students that had graduated from the program in prior years. Students in attendance posed engaging questions and a rich dialogue ensued, during which the type of peer-to-peer mentorship that was aimed for began to emerge.

RESULTS

Feedback was collected from students and faculty participating in the pilot utilizing the survey method, and the results outlined below will be utilized to inform future iterations of the Dissertation Circles Model. Several key takeaways were gleaned from feedback regarding the implementation of the pilot circle

described above, which can be categorized in terms of source group, into student and faculty impacts. First, in terms of student impacts, feedback centered around the normalization of anxiety, the experience of community and the benefit of information sharing. Hearing others share similar concerns or experiences tends to normalize one's own experience. This is one of the reasons that peer-feedback is so valuable. Students reported that they felt less worried about the dissertation process following their participation in the circle. Student feedback also centered around the experience of community, and a feeling of belongingness, a reduction in feelings of isolation and a sense of connection to peers in their program. Finally, a great deal of the feedback from students focused on benefits of the information was shared. For instance, some students reported that they were able to identify potential dissertation topics based on the content of the pilot circle discussion.

Research demonstrates that involvement in mentoring relationships supports engagement of the mentors as well as the mentees (Dennis & Dimatteo-Gibson, 2022) and the faculty feedback shared during the was consistent with this. Faculty impacts centered around experiencing a sense of community during the session. This is important, because the campus where this pilot was implemented utilizes an adjunct faculty model, which is often associated with poor faculty retention rates (Dennis, Halbert & Fornero, 2021). As such, efforts to engage faculty in a community of learners have been prioritized within the campus for some time. The second theme that emerged from faculty centered around the observation that peer engagement among students was present, which aligns with multiple campus goals. Students were fully engaged with one another, sharing ideas, and posing questions. Further, students expressed an interest in future circles, demonstrating that full implementation beyond the pilot would be useful for students. The final theme pertaining to faculty impacts was the importance of being informed regarding student needs. Faculty reported that the discussion they observed among students helped to inform their interactions with other students as well as the assignments and activities they implement in their courses.

DISCUSSION

Piloting the Dissertation Circles Model highlighted the impact of student and faculty led platforms. Students benefited from the opportunity to pose questions and share feedback and the experience reduced the potential for loneliness and isolation, which are sometimes experienced by students enrolled in online doctoral programs (Akojie, Entrekin, Bacon, & Kanai, 2019). Presenting students with a place and time to meet to discuss concerns and experiences helped to promote student growth and it also demonstrated to faculty what issues needed to be addressed. Ensuring that dissertation chairs are checking in on their students on a regular basis and addressing their concerns, and not just waiting for the student to reach out to them is a proactive best practice the benefits of which were elucidated by the feedback received from participants in the pilot described here. Many students may try to address their problems on their own, creating even more barriers. This Dissertation Circle Model not only helped with students' engagement with other students, but it also benefitted the relationship between faculty and students.

Limitations of this study center around the data collection methods which were employed. Targeted focus groups and the use of qualitative coding procedures to identify core themes would have generated more robust results. Future directions include the formal launch of the Dissertation Circles Model and the inclusion of relevant topics. Based on student feedback, library resources will be a topic of focus, as it is highly relevant and lends itself well to peer mentorship. Another topic on which a circle will focus is dealing with stress during the dissertation process. It is the hope of the authors that this topic will bring together students in mutual support, thereby reducing the impacts of stress on engagement. Additionally, considerations for gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board will be included in a future circle, to provide students with support and feedback on this challenging process. Additional directions include the expansion of circles to include other program requirements and the implementation of optional face-to-face circles.

First, in terms of the expansion of the circle model, thesis projects would likely lend themselves well to this model on the campus, and thesis circles have been implemented with success elsewhere (Kamakshi, Vrieling-Teunter, Hsiao, Van Seggelen-Damen, & Verjans (2021). It also may be advantageous to allow

doctoral students who completed their thesis projects on the campus to facilitate thesis circles. This could serve to be truly inspiring for students, particularly those who are new to online education. This group of students would really benefit from hearing first-hand how a peer successfully completed a thesis online. In addition to research, there are opportunities to expand the circle model to other required student activities.

One potential application of the circle model is non-clinical practicum, which tends to generate anxiety among online students in a manner similar to that of culminating research projects. Students preparing to start non-clinical practicum tend to pose many questions and voice many concerns. It is presumed that discussions with peers who are at various stages of the practicum would serve as a calming experience for new students. Further, students who have completed their non-clinical practicum may be able to share ideas for sites with new students. Peer mentorship, administered through circles, could serve to become a key feature in overall student experience on the campus. Additionally, circles could be an effective way to connect off campus.

Optional face-to-face meetings have not yet been implemented on the campus described here, but they would likely be extremely beneficial, and could follow the same format as the circles highlighted here. Web-conferencing software could be utilized to avoid the exclusion of those who are not able to travel to attend. Further, circles could be scheduled based on availability surveys that would be administered to students. This option would further position the campus as a responsive unit, dedicated to the student experience.

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