

Reimagining the Dissertation Chair Role Through the Lens of Mentoring

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Research indicates that many students struggle with the rigor of doctoral studies, particularly the writing components. The faculty and staff at Marymount University have reimagined the role of the dissertation chair by adopting an approach that embraces mentorship in conjunction with dissertation support for the student. This structure enables the doctoral program to create a safe environment in which the dissertation chairs can grow their academic mentorship practices and students can grow in their role as a scholar-practitioner. By rooting the dissertation chair practices in best practices in mentorship, the likelihood of student success and degree completion improves. With a scaffolded and process-oriented perspective, dissertation chairs focus on the development of the student as a whole, not just their dissertation. Instead, chairs use the dissertation writing process to foster a professional relationship through trust, help their students develop executive functioning skills to manage doctoral program demands, and build capacity for social-emotional learning and growth as a leader. This concept and subsequent program created at Marymount University embraces themes such as the impact of dissertation chair mentorship on student retention, best practices and attributes of effective dissertation chairs, and suggestions for future practice whereby institutions can better support dissertation chairs. This article suggests a new framework for a mentorship model that fosters reciprocal wellbeing for mentees and mentors during the doctoral students' transformation to scholar practitioners.

Keywords: Dissertation chair, mentorship, retention, best practices, research support, faculty mentorship, faculty development

Introduction

Within the context of doctoral studies in western cultures, there are primarily two ways to view the role of dissertation chair. One is a product-oriented approach whereby the goal is to work with the student to complete their manuscript, defend successfully, and go forth with a doctorate in hand, complete with publication. The second is the process-oriented approach. Instead of focusing on the final product of the dissertation, chairs can use the formation of the dissertation to help their students develop executive functioning skills, such as time management and research organization, to manage doctoral program demands, progress as a scholar-practitioner, and build capacity for social-emotional learning and growth as a leader. This is grounded in fostering a reciprocal relationship through instilling trust. While mentorship is an ubiquitous practice across industries, Brown and colleagues (2020) offer an illustrative and comprehensive definition of mentoring in a doctoral program. Brown et al. (2020) defined mentoring as:

A mutually beneficial relationship between scholar practitioners in the field of education that does not adhere to the typical tiered

approach, but rather supports readiness, self-efficacy, and progress by providing sustained support and networking opportunities to achieve the participants' desired outcomes. (p. 21).

In order to provide a holistic model of doctoral advising, Marymount University created the Lead Doctoral Faculty Mentor (LDFM) program. The mission of this program is to equip dissertation chairs with best practices necessary to effectively mentor and guide doctoral candidates through the dissertation process. Rooted in principles of transformational leadership, Socratic mentorship, and innovative scholarship, this program promotes a supportive and rigorous research environment that fosters chairs to uphold the highest standards of research and scholarship while navigating the complexities of dissertation advising and driving student success.

Review of the Literature

Area of Concern in EdD Programs

To better understand the research regarding the best practices for dissertation chairs as mentors, the area of concern must first be explored. Doctoral

programs are plagued with a poor retention rate identity. Attrition rates as high as 70% are published (Boone et al., 2021; Mullen, 2021; Rigler et al., 2017) and are reported to be higher (Hill & Conceição, 2020) and increasing (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021) for online doctoral programs such as EdD programs. High attrition rates affect key stakeholders in more ways than simply losing a student. First, the cost to the student is great. Not only does failure to complete this degree affect one's mental health, but studies support that failing to complete the doctoral program affects a student's quality of life, academic productivity (Wollast et al., 2023), career opportunities, and their financial stability (Lee et al., 2020). In addition to student stress, researchers share that dissertation chairs experience psychological costs including burnout, feelings of ineptitude, sacrifice, and grief or loss when students fail out of the program (Abouzaki, 2024; Lunsford, 2017; Rinfret et al., 2023; Wollast et al., 2023). Lastly, low retention rates leave universities to incur increased costs with onboarding, recruiting, and retaining quality faculty and students; leading to ineffective use of higher education resources (Hurtado et al., 2024).

Program/Model

Building Trust Through Mentorship in the Dissertation Chair Role

One proven way to address student attrition is through employing effective dissertation chairs that can build strong relationships with their students and advance academic writing practices (Rigler et al., 2017). However, while best practices for dissertation chairs have been widely published, standards and best practices for dissertation chairs from an institutional level have not been widely adopted (Borders et al., 2012) and institutional support for and training of dissertation chairs is infrequently reported (Lundine, 2022; Mullen, 2021). Dissertation chairs often feeling under-supported, under-appreciated, and ill-prepared, are noted in Mullen's (2021) study and Young and colleagues' (2022) study prior to participants engaging in implemented training. Ill-prepared dissertation chairs create a breeding ground for inequity (Hill & Conceição, 2020; Lundine, 2022; Pifer & Baker, 2016) by providing unequal and inconsistent support across the student population. Universities need to expand on ways in which doctoral programs can reframe the intentionality of their students' research to be rooted in possibility instead of a problem (Yu & Oleet, 2025) through the use of effective mentorship and transformational leadership practices by adjusting the expectations of the dissertation chair. Different mentorship practices influence the student's self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001) and scholarly writing development. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) (2001) proposes that individuals acquire new behaviors by watching and mimicking others. This process involves four key components:

attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. When we observe others experiencing positive or rewarding outcomes, we tend to internalize and replicate their actions. SLT suggests that learning takes place in a social context and arises from the interaction between an individual, their environment, and their behavior. When applying this to a mentoring relationship, the mentor's actions and communication style should serve as a model for the student and they must use reflective methods and discussions to help reinforce learning (Schunk & Mullen, 2013). When mentors provide their mentee with opportunities to practice skills and use encouragement to acknowledge their mentee's progress, it boosts internal motivation (Schunk & Mullen, 2013). Major (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of 18 original studies on doctoral mentoring and found that "trust emerged as essential to helping a mentee feel comfortable sharing their challenges and successes with their mentor, who in return could provide guidance and feedback in a safe and supportive environment" (p. 16). Trust is initiated through a series of exchanges of ideas. Without trust, realistic goals and progress may be stunted and contribute to mentee frustration or worse, abandonment of studies. Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) Revised Model of Small Group Development can act as a frame in which to investigate trust development

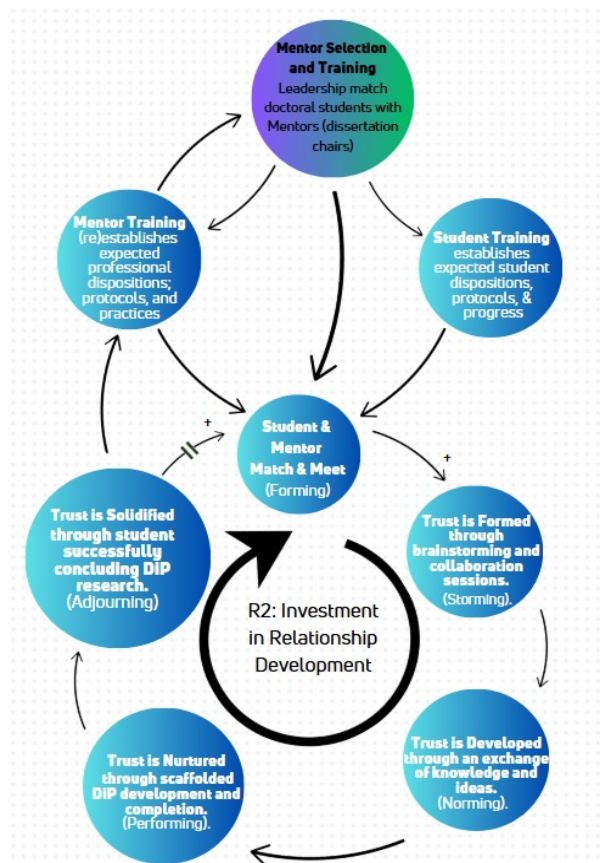
Five Stages in Small Group Relationships

Tuckman and Jensen (1977) suggest that the relationship in small groups develops through five stages. These stages include forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. In applying these stages to specific phases in the mentorship dyad, trust development occurs through specific interactions. Each stage is indicated as a circle in the Investment in Relationship Development virtuous reinforcing loop (Figure 1). This loop is a virtuous reinforcing loop due to the nature of the relationship growing in impact, reliance, performance, and magnitude through the cycle and its ability to repeat itself in new dynamics formed between LDFM and student post-graduation. First, the student and the mentor are matched and meet: the relationship is forming. Matching students and mentors is an intricate process. LDFM program leaders match students and mentors based upon the alignment of a variety of factors to include but not limited to methodology, topic, working style, time zone, and familiarity with academic writing. This is a critical time to develop mutually agreed upon expectations and follow through with commitments made. As indicated in Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) Forming stage, students and mentors may approach this stage with little clarity about the purpose of the meetings and a broad direction for their Dissertation in Practice (DiP). The student and the LDFM rely on the guidance and direction of the provided LDFM training and resources to agree upon a training structure conducive to the student's research development and the student's development as an emerging

scholar-practitioner. Explicit conversations about how one works best, sharing past experiences, expectations for the relationship, strengths and weaknesses of each party in research practices, executive functioning practices and social-emotional practices, and the use and development of a working agreement can help to establish a strong foundation for mentorship. Next, trust is developed through showing commitment, brainstorming, and collaborative sessions on the topic; the relationship is now in the storming phase. This period can test and show the resilience of both the mentor and mentee, as well as the resilience of the relationship. Norms and expectations are established, clarified and reiterated by the frequency of interactions and direct communications. Further, trust is developed through an exchange of knowledge, mutual respect, and ideas; the relationship is norming. Mutual respect is fostered during this stage. Through a scaffolded instructional approach towards student's development as a researcher,

mentor and mentee exchange knowledge as the relationship continues to build. Agreement and consensus regarding each person's role and responsibilities starts to form. Additionally, mutual understanding and assent of the research topic develops. Once the dynamics and roles of the partners are understood by both parties, the relationship moves into the performing stage and productivity increases. With time, trust is nurtured through scaffolded dissertation development and completion. The mentor and mentee continue to exchange and critique knowledge as the relationship continues to build. This is where the majority of student and mentor growth occurs, revelations are made, and progress hits its stride. Last, trust is solidified through the student's successful conclusion of their dissertation research, presentation, and publication; the relationship is adjourning. At this point during the relationship the student and mentee can part ways or reform their relationship in a new capacity.

Figure 1
The Student and Mentor Investment in Relationship Development Loop



Note: The Student and Mentor loop is based upon Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) revised model of small group development. As the impact of the relationship grows, each subsequent phase also grows in significance toward the development of a healthy working relationship. Mentors receive ongoing training with each new match to stay abreast of programmatic updates and to engage in professional development.

Research-Based Best Practices in the Lead Doctoral Faculty Mentor Model

Through a high-touch method of mentorship (Hauth et al., 2024), the LDFM Mentoring and Coaching model addresses the critical role, need, and development of the LDFM as dissertation chair and as a mentor. LDFMs help their students develop personally and professionally. In order to be an effective dissertation chair mentor, the chair needs to show competence in their field, be available, challenge and introduce new ideas, be relatable, have strong communication skills, and offer emotional support (Yob & Crawford, 2012). Yob and Crawford's (2012) Conceptual Framework for Mentoring emphasizes the importance of activating the academic and psychosocial domains to construct meaning in doctoral mentorship. The dual domains of Yob and Crawford's framework align with the humanistic approach practiced in the EdD program (Hauth et al., 2024). Through the program promoting a process-oriented perspective, LDFMs are encouraged to focus on the development of the student through first solidifying trust in the relationship and then using the dissertation as a way to enhance their student's scholarship. The LDFM acts as a support for developing academic writing skills, academic research skills, executive functioning skills, and leadership practices. When mentorship is woven into the role of dissertation chair, the student develops as a scholar-practitioner by learning the principles of research. The LDFM extends teaching through questioning, motivating, and providing accountability while staying action-focused and goal-oriented. Of critical importance, effective mentors engage their students in productive struggle but do not let them falter in their beliefs that they can earn their doctorate. Institutional support in matching LDFMs and students support the alignment of factors across personal, student, and professional spheres that can contribute to a productive working relationship. Uniformity in relationships is strongly encouraged across mentor-mentee dynamics through the use of a training sequence, regular check-ins, and protocols tracking student progress. This process is completed through semesterly progress reports submitted by the LDFM and provides accountability for LDFMs and students. Effective dissertation chairs help their students create realistic goals, provide effective feedback on writing mechanics, and engage in productive and fruitful meetings regarding research implementation and chapter development.

Results

By applying research-based best practices to the LDFM model, the relationship encourages higher-order thinking skills and scholar-practitioner development. For example, applying the Socratic method of inquiry, LDFMs often ask questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas as well as underlying presuppositions. Roberts et al. (2019) describes key features of the Socratic method that mirror the actions of an LDFM. These include encouraging students to explore ideas, challenge assumptions from past research, and identify gaps in the research that they would like to explore. Furthermore, LDFMs can focus on student participation and active engagement within the learning process, orchestrate exchange of ideas through conversation and feedback cycles, uncover ways to fully understand the problem of practice, and promote discovery through enacting scholarly practices. Similarly, in using the design thinking approach, using the dissertation as a product, it creates a structure for LDFMs to guide students in focusing on human needs (Dunne & Martin, 2006). LDFMs use an iterative process, engaging in creative problem-solving, and exploring past research to inform new processes (Dunne & Martin, 2006). LDFMs are encouraged to empathize by seeking to understand the student, their proposed research, their needs, and their challenges and work with the student to clearly define their problem of practice for which they are trying to present a possible solution. Strategies are shared in LDFM training and engagement opportunities to help foster this skillset. Additionally, based on design thinking principles (Dunne & Martin, 2006), LDFMs engage students in ideating their problem of practice and generating a wide range of creative ways in which to approach the problem of practice. Through this, LDFMs suggest and help the student explore past research conducted on the problem to identify successes and limitations. By remaining proactive in mentoring relationships and planning an approach to research, LDFMs are able to not only focus on their students' academic needs but also create space to ensure development in project management and emotional intelligence (Brown et al. 2018). This mentorship model, coupled with multi-tiered support in the program (Hauth et al. 2024), addresses ways in which students can overcome common barriers faced in doctoral programs such as time management, lack of scholarly writing techniques and emotional regulation as well as feel safe to lean on their mentors to provide them with tools they can use to craft a possible improvement in their field of study.

Discussion

A Conceptual Model Charting the Future of Dissertation Chair Mentorship

In charting the future for dissertation chair mentorship, institutional factors play a pivotal role

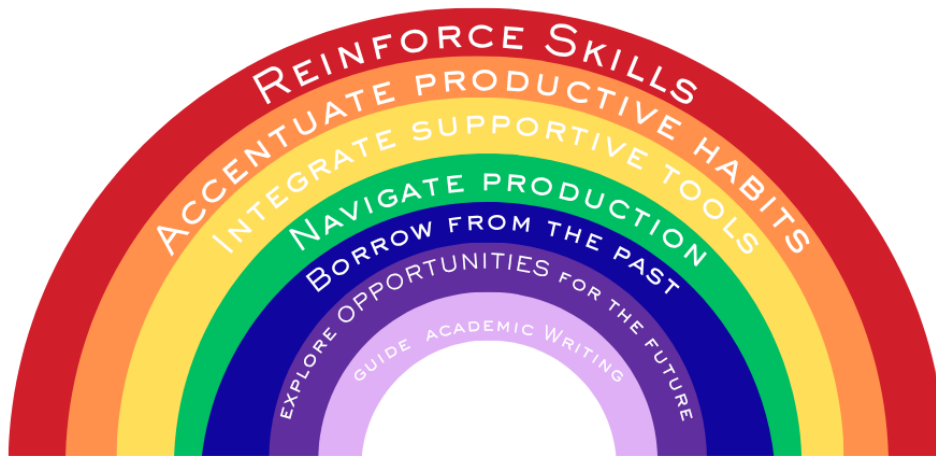
(Hurtado et al., 2024). The structure provided by the doctoral program for doctoral candidates and their dissertation chair can make a difference in whether there is a successful acquisition of the degree (Wollast et al., 2023). Regardless of the doctoral program model, institutions can help to invest in and provide high quality mentorship training for dissertation chairs for each stage of student's development in the program. Additionally, ensuring that dissertation chairs have the capacity and skills for mentorship requires mindfulness on part of the University. Considering workloads, competing obligations, and the student's needed level of support will help to maintain emotional stability and availability of the dissertation chair for the student. To help ensure program success, institutions can consider creating a dissertation chair leadership board, instituting checks and balances to ensure leveraged support for each student, creating a repository of resources for all dissertation chairs, and creating a common virtual space for dissertation chairs. Additionally, creating a community of support for dissertation chairs to experience success and satisfaction in the role can help retain quality mentors, and ensure the students get the support they deserve and need

to succeed.

Conclusion

The goal of the institution is to support the development of the dissertation chair as a mentor in key areas so the mentor can in turn support the growth and progression of the student. Through the lens of mentoring, dissertation support for the student helps to build upon the longstanding traditions of mentorship and the purpose of doctoral programs to create critical and innovative thinkers, change agents, and scholar-practitioners. By supporting and preparing dissertation chairs to lead through mentorship, those in this critical role will be able to follow a RAINBOW framework. As seen in figure 2, this structure necessitates a mentor to: reinforce a student's existing skills, accentuate a student's productive habits, integrate supportive and aptly tools, help a student navigate the production of their research, manuscript, and final presentation, guide students' ability to build upon past research, explore opportunities for future research, and leave the program as a committed and scholarly leader that can contribute to their field of study through writing academically.

Figure 2
Doctoral Mentoring RAINBOW Framework



Exploring practices and ways in which we can instill these values in dissertation chair mentorship, barriers facing dissertation chairs and students move from stalling progress and contribution to the high attrition rate associated with doctoral programs to becoming steps towards developing possibilities that can address problems of practice (Yu & Oleet, 2025). We encourage those in leadership positions to provide support and structured, regular training for dissertation chairs that enable them to learn about and practice these research-based strategies and constructs. By doing so, dissertation chairs will have the opportunity to explore and practice techniques

that lead to exploring opportunities with their mentees to expose possibilities for future research. This comprehensive summary provides key skills that all mentors can use to ensure integrated and holistic support of their mentee as they progress through their doctoral journey.

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