Yu-Hui Chen

Faculty/librarian collaborations enhance doctoral student success

Strategies for retention and graduation

Doctoral study is perhaps the most rigorous educational experience anybody can have. In higher education, a great amount of effort has been focused on increasing retention and graduation rates of undergraduate students. Yet, there has been little discussion about effective qualitative measures for retaining and graduating doctoral students. This neglect masks the reality that doctoral student attrition rates in the United States have been problematic for several years. A meta-analysis conducted in 2001 showed that about 50% to 71% of doctoral candidates in the humanities did not complete their degrees.[1]

In a meta-synthesis of research on doctoral student attrition and persistence in some prestigious universities and colleges, Carolyn Richert Bair and Jennifer Grant Haworth indicated a dropout rate between 40 and 60 percent.[2] More recently, in 2008, the Council of Graduate Schools showed that in general 57% of doctoral students did not obtain a doctorate.[3] Some factors contributing to this phenomenon are insufficient mental preparation for the doctoral training, fear of failure or fear of success, deficient time management skills, poor foundations for doing independent research, lack of self-sufficiency, poor student-advisor relationship, sense of isolation, as well as emotional exhaustion and attrition.[4]

The idea of doctoral discussion forums

As a subject librarian for education at the University at Albany, I provide one-on-one research consultations for doctoral students on

a regular basis. Frequently, I have observed struggles encountered by this student population, such as selecting dissertation topics, crafting dissertation research questions, conducting literature reviews, selecting appropriate research methods, forming dissertation committees, setting up face-to-face meetings with dissertation advisors, and overcoming loneliness.

Based on my observations, I surmised that in addition to research consultations with librarians, doctoral students need guidance from faculty for successfully navigating the path to their destination. In the library literature, discussions on doctoral students' unique needs tend to focus on information-seeking behavior, information literacy, and library instruction.[5] In contrast, research on practical faculty-librarian collaborative approaches to providing needed advice that can advance students through each stage of their doctoral study is nonexistent. Thus, I determined that there was value in the idea of holding broad-based discussion forums to guide doctoral students.

Having gone through the journey of doctoral study myself, I have observed that certain faculty members tend to chair many more dissertation committees than others. In summer 2015, I searched the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses @ SUNY Albany database to find the

Yu-Hui Chen is librarian for Education and East Asian Studies University Libraries at the University at Albany, SUNY, email: ychen@albany.edu

number of dissertations chaired by each teaching faculty member at my institution. Based on this information, I compiled a list of potential forum panelists from various academic departments in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

Additionally, since it would be difficult and overwhelming to cover all stages of the doctoral study process in one session, I drafted an outline of discussion topics and organized them into two separate sessions. The first addressed issues encountered by students in their early doctoral careers, and the second focused on dissertation and career paths.

Formulating the discussion forum

At the beginning of fall semester 2015, I discussed this initiative with a distinguished professor at our Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, who has chaired numerous dissertation committees. Based upon the themes we discussed, we finalized discussion topics and the forum logistics. During the first session, "Developing Your Academic Identity and Effectively Navigating Your Doctoral Journey," panelists would address the following topics:

• starting a PhD (What do you need to know for your first year? How does doctoral study differ from previous academic pursuits?),
• developing your academic identity,
• moving from course focus to research focus,
• choosing a dissertation topic,
• beginning your dissertation,
• forming a dissertation committee (picking a committee chair and working with a committee),
• finding resources for dissertation structure, and
• writing and defending dissertation proposals.

The issues identified for discussion in the second session, "Strategies for Completing Your Dissertation," were:

• conducting a literature review, formulating a problem statement and hypotheses, applying research methodology, writing the discussion, and drawing conclusions;

• defending your dissertation; and
• creating your career path beyond your dissertation.

Additionally, topics such as dealing with setbacks, building a support system, and time management were integrated into each session.

Collaborating with faculty and other campus constituents

Based on the planned contents of each session, I also invited two college deans to serve on the panels and solicited their opinions on potential faculty participants. The deans' perspectives not only generated further interest in the program, but also helped me to recruit expert participants and to finalize the panel make-up for each session.

Next, I emailed the selected faculty members, inviting them to serve on the panels. In the message, I briefly stated the need for and the purpose of the discussion forums, making it a point to indicate that they were chosen because they had been recommended by colleagues as caring, seasoned dissertation chairs. The faculty members embraced this initiative with great enthusiasm, based on recognition of our common goal of guiding students strategically through every stage of their doctoral pursuit and developing them as scholars. Ultimately, the first session had seven dissertation committee chairs serving on the panel, and the second had nine, including the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the dean of the School of Education.

Scheduling the forum dates and times was challenging because of the faculty members' diverse teaching schedules and committee obligations, as well as the busy calendars of the two deans. Thus, I kept my own schedule flexible to minimize conflicts. Finally, I identified two time slots that worked for all panelists, and the forums were scheduled for 3 to 4 p.m. on two Tuesday afternoons in October 2015, with time allotted for networking prior to each session, at 2:45 p.m.

In addition, I contacted the dean of graduate education informing him of this initiative. He,

too, gladly disseminated information about the forums to the directors of graduate programs at various schools and colleges. Lastly, I reached out to the programming chair of Graduate Student Association (GSA) for help raising awareness of this program by posting the information on its listserv.

Carrying out the discussion forums

Because different disciplines and departments within them may have very different ways of working with doctoral students, I structured the forums to include two-to-three panelists from the humanities, the social sciences, and STEM fields respectively, thereby ensuring that the needs of students from various programs would be addressed. Due to time constraints, instead of having all panelists comment on every agenda item, I divided the work among them. For each topic, there were three panelists from the three distinct disciplines. One panelist served as the lead speaker, responsible for starting the talk and summarizing comments at the end.

As the moderator, I used my introduction to the forums to stress the point that because of the wide disciplinary representation among the attendees, participants should keep in mind that neither the lead, nor any of the other speakers, had all the "correct answers" for all students. Those panelists who were not designated as speakers for a topic in discussion were encouraged to add their perspectives on any subject that might have gotten left out after the speakers finished their remarks. In order to cover all the topics and leave time for a Q&A session, I asked everybody to keep their comments brief.

Twenty-six students attended the first session held at the Science Library main conference room with long tables and comfortable chairs. The panelists were very pleased with the turnout, especially because of the diversity of doctoral students' schedules and the difficulty of finding a time suitable for everyone. They enthusiastically shared their own personal experiences and insights. As a result, the faculty talks lasted longer than planned, and the Q&A session had to be shortened. Even so, according to the forms completed by the participating students, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated that they found the session to be "extremely useful," while 27% thought it "quite useful," and the remaining 9% regarded it "moderately useful."

The students' perceived usefulness of the forum was also reflected in their comments, for example:

> "It was helpful to hear from people who represented a range of departments/subject areas. Their suggestion on choosing a dissertation topic for a clinical career versus a research career was very insightful."

> "Have more of these regularly i.e., each year etc."

> "Make this event a full 90 minutes."

Likewise, the panelists appreciated that the forums dealt with the various struggles encountered by doctoral students. Their heartfelt support for the forums was revealed by their comments, such as "This forum has long been needed" and "Please do not stop."

Additionally, they appreciated the opportunity to meet with and learn from colleagues in other disciplines about their research cultures and practices. Because of the differences in research methods and dissertation requirements in humanities, compared to those in social sciences and the STEM fields, a couple of faculty members suggested that we have a separate forum for the humanities in the future.

Based on the feedback received from both students and panelists, I made a minor change to the format for the second session "Strategies for Completing Your Dissertation" to allow for increased interaction between the students and the panelists in their fields. For the Q&A session, after the talks, the students and the panelists gathered at five roundtables organized on three broad disciplines (one for humanities, two for social sciences, and three for STEM fields). This Q&A in round-table format was very much appreciated by both the panelists and the students. This adjustment also provided extra time, on

top of the 15-minute networking time prior to the forum, for the students to meet with and build a support system with their peers. Since most panelists were able to spend additional time after the forum, I extended the Q&A session.

As construction work made access to the Science Library inconvenient, the second session was held at a Campus Center conference room, where more than 40 students participated. Like the first session, the outcome of participants' feedback survey was 100% positive, ranging from extremely to moderately useful, with favorable comments, such as:

> "The topics were very comprehensive and addressed thoroughly, with different viewpoints."

> "All panel members offered real, practical advice."

> "The diversity of the panel was great. Thank you very much for organizing this forum. It was very informative and helpful."

The discussion forum goes on

After conducting the two forum sessions, I met briefly with the panelists to share students' feedback with them and to consider future enhancements for the program. Because of overwhelming positive feedback from students and the enthusiasm of panelists, and with support from the Office of Graduate Education and our GSA, I have repeated this program annually since fall 2016. Further, I replaced the one broad-based discussion forum with three broad discipline-based ones, with two sessions for each. GSA has continued to sponsor this event by generously providing refreshments.

A strong indicator of the usefulness of the program is that, typically, the invited faculty members happily repeat as panelists, encouraged by the evidence that the program provides student support in ways that was not available in the past. For that reason, they strongly urge students in their departments to attend the forums.

Academic libraries are trying to provide services relevant to their users and to demonstrate their impact on student success. The high attrition rate at the doctoral level encountered by colleges and universities suggests a vehicle through which librarians can help address this issue. Librarians can offer point-of-need advice and resources while carrying out their unique roles as state-of-the-art service providers, robust collection builders, innovative information literacy instructors, knowledgeable research coaches, resourceful support systems, and effective partners. Collaborating with faculty and other campus constituents to foster future scholars is one way to maximize the library's efforts and contributions to increasing retention and graduation rates of doctoral students.

Notes

1. Barbara E. Lovitts, *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Cause and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 23.

2. Carolyn Richert Bair and Jennifer Grant Haworth, "Doctoral student attrition and persistence: A meta-synthesis of research," in *Higher Education: Handbook of theory and research,* ed. John C. Smart (Boston, MA: Kluwer, 2004), 481.

3. Council of Graduate Schools, *Ph.D. Completion and Attrition: Analysis of Baseline Demographic Data from the Ph.D. Completion Project* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools, 2008).

4. Lovitts, *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Cause and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study;* Susan K. Gardner, "Student and Faculty Attributions of Attrition in High and Low-Completing Doctoral Programs in the United States," *High Education* 58, (2008): 97-112, doi:10.1007/s10734-008-9184-7; David Litalien and Frédéric Guay, "Dropout Intentions in PhD Studies: A Comprehensive Model Based on Interpersonal Relationships and Motivational Resources," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 41, (2015): 218-231, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.

cedpsych.2015.03; Christelle Devos, Gentiane Boudrenghien, Nicolas Van der Linden, Assaad Azzi, Mariane Frenay, Benoit Galand and Olivier Klein, "Doctoral Students' Experiences Leading to Completion or Attrition: A Matter of Sense, Progress and Distress," *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 32, no. 1 (2017): 61-77, doi:10.1007/s10212-016-0290-0; Lise M. Dyckman, "Fear of Failure and Fear of Finishing: A Case Study on the Emotional Aspects of Dissertation Proposal Research, with Thoughts on Library Instruction and Graduate Student Retention," in "Currents and Convergence: Navigating the Rivers of Change, Proceedings of the ACRL 12th National Conference" (2005): 351-362. www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/events/pdf/dyckman05.pdf.

5. Valérie Spezi, "Is Information-Seeking Behavior of Doctoral Students Changing?: A Review of the Literature (2010-2015)," *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 22, no. 1 (2016): 78-106; Johanna Tuñón and Laura Ramirez, "ABD or EdD? A Model of Library Training for Distance Doctoral Students," *Journal of Library Administration* 50, (2010): 989-996, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2010.489004; Peter Macauley and Green Rosemary, "Can Our Relationships Be Reconceptualized? Librarians, Information Literacy, and Doctoral Learners," J*ournal of Education for Library and Information Science* 50, no. 2 (2009): 68-78; Colleen Harris, "The Case for Partnering Doctoral Students with Librarians: A Synthesis of the Literatures," *Library Review* 60, no. 7 (2011): 599-620, https://doi.org/10.1108/00242531111153614. ✚

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work environment for all individuals to thrive. Individuals from diverse backgrounds are often subjected to subtle or overt microaggressions within the workplace. As our series concludes, we hope that you will do your part to help identify microaggressions, recognize the impact they have on others and yourself, and begin to implement some of the coping strategies and suggestions within your own institutions. Regardless of your position, we all have a role to play in helping shift our culture.

Notes

1. Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," *American Psychologist* 62, no. 4 (2007): 271–86, 272–73.

2. "The Quiet Discrimination of Microinequities: A Q&A with Adjunct Professor Mary Rowe," *Newsroom,* February 3, 2016, accessed July 8, 2018, http://mitsloan.mit.edu/newroom/articles/the-quiet-discrimination-of-microinequities-a-qa-with-adjunct-professor-mary-rowe/.

3. Ibid., Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," 273.

4. Ibid., 274.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 273.

8. Oxford Dictionary, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/intersectionality.

9. Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 14–15.

10. Ibid., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," 279.

11. Some of these recommendations come from an Indiana State Library webinar I attended February 15, 2018, titled, "Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace." The webinar was led by Endia Sowers-Paige, pre-law advisor at the University of Georgia, http://indianastatelibrary.evanced.info/signup/EventDetails?eventid=2985.

12. Aisha Holder, Margo A. Jackson, and Joseph G. Ponterotto, "Racial Microaggression Experiences and Coping Strategies of Black Women in Corporate Leadership," *Qualitative Psychology* 2, no. 2 (2015): 164–80, 173.

13. Ibid., 173–74.

14. Ibid., 174. ✚