

The ABD (All but Dissertation) Cohort Program: Challenges and Opportunities

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The Department of Educational Leadership at Tennessee State University (TSU) faced a significant challenge in the Fall of 2023. Nearly 100 students had completed their doctoral coursework; however, they had not completed their dissertations. The majority of the students were nearing or exceeding the maximum time allowed of 10 years to complete their doctoral programs. Many students had requested extensions due to the global pandemic, further complicating the situation. The *All But Dissertation (ABD) Cohort Program* was developed and designed to address this issue and assist students in successfully completing their dissertations. The department recognized this as an opportunity to implement a targeted intervention and provide necessary support and strategies to engage, motivate, and help students succeed. Currently, the *ABD Cohort Program* has achieved significant success in helping students complete their dissertations. Of the 100 ABD students, 40 have completed a prediction completion rate of 90+%. Students have until December 2025 to complete the program. Based upon a recent Student Satisfaction Survey, students expressed elevated levels of satisfaction with the program and the support they have received. This paper will provide an overview of the program's structure, key components, faculty involvement, successful outcomes, lessons learned, and recommendations. Key takeaways will include: the importance of policy considerations; the importance of targeted support and mentorship; the benefits of a structured program with clear guidelines; and, the value of incorporating Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools into the dissertation process.

Keywords: doctoral persistence, dissertation completion, ABD cohort program

Introduction

Time to complete a doctoral degree continues to increase. The current time for completing a doctoral degree averages about 13.7 years (Church & Duran, 2022). The doctoral degree is pursued by 100,000 students each year (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2021). Yet, between 40-60% of these doctoral students are making the decision to discontinue work toward a degree they have already invested significant amounts of time, money, and energy into earning (Jackson & Michelson, 2023).

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Statement of the Problem

The Department of Educational Leadership at Tennessee State University (TSU) faced a significant challenge in the Fall of 2023. Nearly 100 students had completed their doctoral coursework; however, they had not completed their dissertations. The majority of the students were nearing or exceeding the maximum time allowed (ten years) to complete their doctoral programs according to the university's graduate catalog. Many students had requested extensions due to the global pandemic, further complicating the situation. These students either had to drop out of the program altogether or be readmitted with an appeal to the Graduate School for a time extension.

Background of Study

The Office of Academic Affairs recognized this lack of doctoral student completion as an opportunity to implement a targeted intervention and provide necessary resources and strategies to engage, motivate, and encourage these individuals to push through and finish. As a result, the *All But Dissertation (ABD) Cohort Program* was created and designed to address this issue by providing a structured program to support and assist these students in successfully completing their dissertations.

Most universities apply time limitations for completing degree requirements. At TSU, the policy states that, "credits earned more than ten (10) years prior to the student's graduation cannot be applied toward meeting requirements for the Ed.D. or Ph.D. degrees" (*TSU Graduate Catalog*, 2024-2025).

The policy further states that:

Extension of time for completing course requirements may occasionally be granted because of interruptions in graduate studies due to extenuating circumstances, such as family leave, illness, or military services.

All petitions to extend the program of study beyond the degree program time limits must be submitted by the student before the courses expire, using the Graduate School *Appeal/Petition Form*. Following a positive recommendation by the Advisor, Department Head, and Academic Dean, the petition will be sent to the Graduate School for review by the Graduate Council Appeals Committee, and finally the Graduate Council. The decision of the Graduate Council is final. Extensions will be granted with the following stipulations.

There will be only one such extension granted, for a time period specified on the Appeal/Petition Form. Courses taken outside the degree program time limits may not be counted toward the degree unless they are **revalidated** [emphasis added] to demonstrate that mastery of knowledge/skills is current. Revalidated courses are added back to the Program of Study. The plan for revalidation must be prepared in conjunction with the student's major department and submitted with the Appeal/Petition Form.

Mechanisms for revalidating out-of-date courses are limited to the following:

- re-taking expired courses; or
- re-taking related courses (equal in credit hours to the expired courses) approved by the department, and added to the Program of Study; or
- **re-taking a competency test** (qualifying or **comprehensive examination**) [emphasis added] administered by the department. . .

Revalidation will only apply to courses on the approved Program of Study or approved as transfer credit for inclusion in the Program of Study. Students who have been out of school for one or more semesters must apply for readmission to Graduate School. If approved for an extension, documentation of completion of the approved revalidation plan must be submitted to the Graduate School by the department, and the Program of Study must be submitted or revised to indicate revalidated courses (*TSU Graduate Catalog, 2024-2025*).

According to the Graduate School's policy on Extension of Time Limitations (*TSU Graduate Catalog, 2024-2025*): the university outlines a strict time limit for completing doctoral programs (10 years). However, there were some limitations. For instance, the policy did not adequately account for exceptional circumstances such as the global pandemic. There was a need for flexibility. It became evident that a more flexible approach was necessary to support the students facing unique challenges.

These select ABD individuals (approximately 100) were contacted at the end of the Fall 2023 semester and asked if they would be interested in participating in an ABD Bootcamp Cohort with other students in the same position as themselves. The program would be a structured program with monthly group informational meetings. There would be mentor guidance and group support. The Department Chair explained to them that the Department would prepare a blanket appeal for time extensions on behalf of all the students who were interested in participating in the program. They were told they would have to be finished with their dissertation, all program requirements, and graduated by December 2025, or they would be permanently dropped from the program.

The Department Chair and faculty, with support from the College of Education Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs petitioned the Graduate Council at TSU for an exception to time limit, citing the extraordinary circumstances faced by the ABD students. The blanket justification petition highlighted the impact of the pandemic on students' academic progress and the need for additional time to complete their dissertations. The department requested a time extension until December 2025 to allow all interested ABD students to complete their doctoral degree. A revalidation of each student's program of study was requested which required that each student revalidate courses older than 10 years. This revalidation was done by having each student complete a 350–400-word paper (with resources) for *each* course that had exceeded the 10-year time limit.

Purpose and Organization of the Paper

This paper provides an overview of faculty's experience with the development of the *ABD Cohort Program*. Information is included on: (a) significance of this project, (b) the guiding research questions, (c) a description of Vincent Tinto's *Theory of Involvement and Student Departure* as the theoretical framework focusing on graduate education, (d) a review of the related literature including challenges and barriers to dissertation completion, (e) targeted interventions, (f) the foundation of the *ABD Cohort Program* including its key components and faculty involvement, (g) successful outcomes, (h) lessons learned, and (i) recommendations.

Significance of Project

The significance of this project lies in its potential to contribute to the understanding of doctoral student attrition, especially at the dissertation stage of their program. Attrition at any level of post-secondary education is costly to both students and higher education institutions. Doctoral students are often funding their own education while balancing careers, families, and/or studies. There is immense potential on society and educational institutions if more students complete the programs that they have started and invested in financially and emotionally.

There are endless barriers and challenges that doctoral students, especially part-time students, face. Barriers may include personal or individual challenges or institutional or departmental barriers. This study hopes to bring to the forefront many of the challenges that have hindered many doctoral students from completing their dissertations, and therefore, their degrees. Thus, allowing faculty to fully understand and help provide students with opportunities to intervene with strategies for motivation and success.

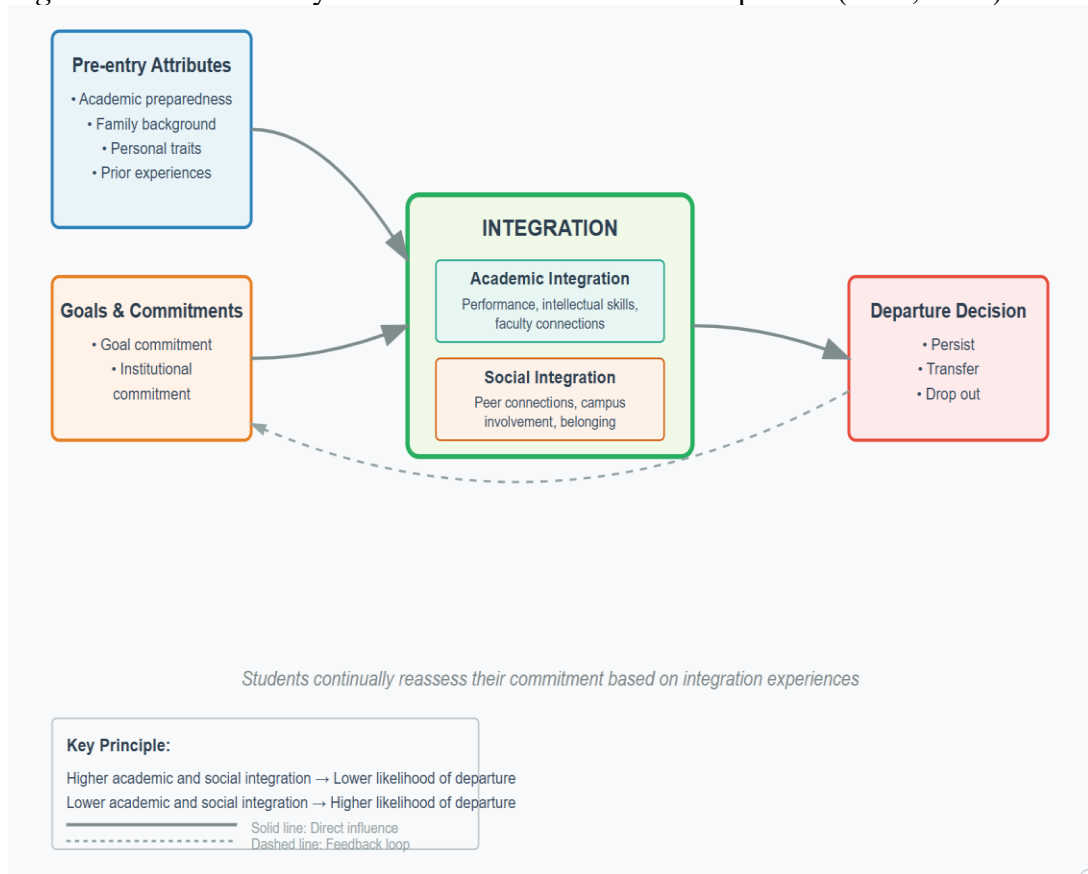
Guiding Research Questions

1. What are some common barriers and challenges doctoral students face while completing their dissertations? (personal and institutional)
2. How are comparable doctoral programs addressing similar attrition issues?
3. How is participating in the *ABD Cohort Program* impacting persistence to degree completion? (benefits)

Theoretical Framework: Tinto's Theory of Involvement and Student Departure

According to Vincent Tinto, the theorist credited with developing the most comprehensive theoretical model of persistence and withdrawal behavior (1975, 1993), higher education institutions are made up of distinct *social* and *academic* systems. Integration into these systems, which reflects a student's judgement of *fit* within an unfamiliar environment, represents perceptions on the part of the student of shared values and support in the college community. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Tinto's Theory of Involvement and Student Departure (1975, 1993)



Tinto's theory seeks to explain the reasons why some college students drop out of school while others persist and graduate. The key components of the theory are the concepts of academic and social integration (the center part of Tinto's model). *Academic Integration* refers to a student's academic performance, their personal development of intellectual skills, and their satisfaction with the school's academic systems. Students who do well grade-wise and connect with faculty and staff are more integrated. *Social Integration* refers to how socially connected and involved students are in college life. Making friends, joining groups or clubs, and bonding with peers and faculty members denotes higher social integration. Tinto argues that students who become more academically and socially involved in college life are less likely to drop out.

Other key aspects of the theory include: (a) *Pre-entry Attributes*, where students come to college with certain background characteristics and prior experiences that influence their commitment to completing college. This includes things like academic preparedness, personality traits, family background, etc.; (b) *Goals and Commitments*, where students have varying levels of commitment to the goal of college graduation and to the institution they are attending. Important levels of commitment make students more likely to persist; and, (c) *The Departure Decision*, which is the result of students continually reassessing their commitment to graduating and/or staying at the current institution.

Literature Review

The literature review for this project aimed to provide information and research on (a) the common barriers and challenges students encounter toward dissertation completion, (b) necessary supports for doctoral students, (c) the impact of targeted dissertation intervention programs on degree completion, and (d) strategies to engage, motivate, and help doctoral students succeed.

Barriers to Completion

The dissertation pathway is different for each person. Each student brings with him or her his or her own characteristics, set of skills (i.e., research, statistical, typing, grammar, writing, notetaking, synthesizing, editing), knowledge of the dissertation process, and background. The students are no longer following a prescribed program of study where they are told what to do. There are both personal and institutional barriers to dissertation completion. Doctoral students face significant challenges in completing their dissertations, with attrition rates ranging on an average of 50% (Burns & Gillespie, 2018). Several factors contribute to this high dropout rate, including stress, social isolation, procrastination, and perfectionism (Garrison & Vaugh, 2023). The transition from coursework to independent research is particularly difficult for many students (Lovitts, 2008). In addition to personal, individual obstacles there are programmatic, or institutional, barriers to completing the dissertation. Among these barriers include: lack of program flexibility (McAlpine, Castello, & Pyhäntö, 2022) and faculty mentoring (Levine & Nettles, 2023; O'Meara, Griffin, Kuvaeva, Nyunt & Robinson, 2017).

A critical question in doctoral education is why students who succeed in the coursework (dependent) phase of their graduate education have different fates in the independent research phase of their education. In one focus group-based study, faculty were asked to talk about students who had difficulty making the transition to independent research or who did not make it at all. They were also asked to talk about students who made the transition to independent research with relative ease. The focus group discussions were analyzed using a theoretical perspective derived from theory and research on creativity and degree

completion. The descriptions of students who made the transition with relative success matched closely with characterizations of highly creative people (Lovitts, 2008). Yet, this is but one study.

Tinto's Theory and Doctoral Student Attrition

Tinto's *Theory of Student Involvement and Departure*, when applied to doctoral students abandoning their programs before dissertation completion, reveals several key insights related to the core elements of Tinto's theory. Tinto's model emphasizes that student persistence depends on successful academic and social integration into the institutional community. For doctoral students specifically, this manifests in unique ways. Academic integration becomes more specialized. It may involve transition from coursework to independent research; development of scholarly identity within their discipline; mastery of specialized methodologies and literature; meaningful relationships with advisors/mentors. Moreover, it encompasses the elements of social integration at the doctoral level and may include: integration into departmental culture and academic community; development of professional networks with faculty and peers; participation in disciplinary communities beyond the institution; and, balancing academic demands with external commitments. Isolation during dissertation writing and limited peer support after coursework completion are two quite common issues.

In relation to social and academic integration, some research findings include Golde's (2019) expanded work that integration challenges differ by discipline, with humanities students facing particular isolation challenges during the dissertation phase. Bueno's follow-up study (2023) found that efficacy of Ed.D. lecturers in supporting students in developing research skills and competencies was found to be essential in graduate education. Stewart and Cole (2022) found that the role of peer communities and structured interventions lent to the fostering of belonging in graduate education.

Understanding doctoral attrition through Tinto's lens highlights the critical importance of both academic and social integration, while recognizing the unique developmental journey doctoral students undertake as they transition from students to independent scholars. Gardner's work (2021) tracked doctoral students across disciplines, confirming that integration factors predicted completion rates, with departmental culture being particularly influential during the dissertation phase. Furthermore, Gonzalez and Martinez's research (2020) demonstrated that sense of belonging (a key aspect of social integration) was significantly correlated with persistence for underrepresented doctoral students.

Moreover, doctoral students face distinct challenges during dissertation stage that align with Tinto's framework and goal commitment issues. These challenges may include: unclear or shifting career aspirations; diminishing perceived value of the degree; competing professional opportunities; and, research fatigue and isolation during dissertation phase.

Additionally, institutional commitment problems include challenges such as: inadequate mentorship or advisor conflicts; limited departmental support structures; insufficient funding opportunities; and, lack of clear milestones and

expectations. Regarding advisor-student relationship research, Pifer and Baker (2023) quantified the impact of mentoring quality on dissertation completion, finding that students with regular, constructive advisor interactions were 3.7 times more likely to complete their degrees. O'Meara et al. (2022) showed that transparency in advising expectations and clear communication about research milestones significantly reduced time-to-degree and attrition rates. Additional research revealed that students who receive social support through regular interactions with their advisors tend to complete their degrees more quickly than students whose advisors do not provide as much feedback (Maddox & Wilson, 2023).

Identity development research revealed how scholarly identity formation impacts persistence, finding that students who viewed themselves as contributing members of their academic community showed greater resilience during dissertation challenges (Castelló et al. 2024). Baker and Pifer (2020) tracked the transition from student to scholar identity, confirming this as a critical factor in dissertation persistence. With regard to external factors and support systems, Martinez et al. (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of structured writing groups in increasing social integration and dissertation progress. Whereas O'Meara, et al, (2021) quantified how financial support during the dissertation phase reduced attrition by 46%, underscoring the impact of external pressures.

Recent mixed-methods studies (Devos et al., 2022) have created more nuanced models of doctoral persistence that build upon Tinto's framework while incorporating discipline-specific factors. Bair and Haworth's comprehensive meta-analysis (2020) synthesized 30 years of doctoral attrition research, confirming that integration factors consistently predict completion across all time periods studied. These studies collectively validate Tinto's core principles while extending them to address the unique characteristics of doctoral education. The research consistently shows that both academic and social integration remain powerful predictors of dissertation completion, though the specific mechanisms may differ from undergraduate contexts.

Impact of Targeted Dissertation Intervention Programs on Degree Completion

Recent research on intervention strategies for ABD (All But Dissertation) students highlights various approaches to improve dissertation completion rates. Workshops focusing on dissertation writing and research skills have shown promise in supporting students (Burrus et al., 2019; Kania-Gosche & Leavitt, 2011). These interventions can include peer review activities, literature review processes, and problem definition exercises. Shifting from traditional dissertations to implementing intensive research-focused workshops has been identified as predictors of online doctoral student success (Burrus et al., 2019). Successful interventions often involve institutional resources, structured strategies, and conscious leadership to develop programs that promote equity and improve

completion rates for diverse student populations (Martinez-Colon & Richardson, 2022; Posselt & Miller, 2023).

Progress-oriented workshops have shown promise in improving doctoral well-being and addressing dropout rates by focusing on productivity, mental health, and progress perception (Prieto et al., 2022). Qualitative case studies have identified key themes in successful dissertation completion interventions, including extrinsic factors, socioemotional support, formal program structures, and personal development (Franklin & Morales, 2023). Interventions have shown promise in increasing students' success beliefs, writing skills, and emotional well-being (Prieto et al., 2022). Key components of successful programs include providing a supportive environment, offering individualized attention, and incorporating activities that make progress visible (Prieto et al., 2022).

Students who are enrolled in part-time programs benefit from cohorts, which allow for additional peer support (Hodson & Buckley, 2023; Jackson & Michelson, 2023). The definition of *cohort* can vary with how it is used. In the book *College Student Retention*, Tom Mortenson defines *cohort* as the identification of a clearly defined group of students at one point in time and place with specific demographic and enrollment characteristics (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Maher, Wofford, Roksa, and Feldon (2021) defined *cohort* as a group of students who begin at the same time and emphasize the benefits of networking, support, ease in scheduling and satisfaction after graduation. Students in a cohort are better prepared (West, et al. 2011). Cohort models have shown to be beneficial for community development (Garrison, & Vaughan, 2023; Lei, Gorelick, Short, & Smallwood, 2021; Peterson, & Dill, 2022), socialization (Maher, Wofford, Roksa, & Feldon, 2021), and in distance learning and virtual communities (Bettencourt, Malaney, Kidder, & George, 2022; Pemberton, & Akkary, 2022; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade, 2022).

Lehan, Hussey, and Holtz (2021) recommended the cohort model and outlined four stages of the doctoral program: (a) the entry stage, (b) the skill and development stage, (c) the consolidation state, and (d) the completion stage. Tinto (1993) outlined three stages as a student maneuvers throughout the doctoral degree process, transition, candidacy, and dissertation. Sawicka & Pretorius (2023) conducted a literature review of the states of doctoral education and categorized three stages: knowledge consumption, knowledge creation, and knowledge enactment. West, et al. (2011) reported two stages: the course stage, which is structured and familiar, and the dissertation stage which is unstructured and unfamiliar. Tinto's (1993) first and second stages could be considered dependent stages due to their structured format while his third could be classified as independent or unstructured and unfamiliar to the student.

The ABD Cohort Program Design: The Boot Camp

Dissertation writing is often the most challenging part of the doctoral program for many students. A large number of them never make it past this point. In an effort to raise completion rates and as well as increase student satisfaction

with the program, professors in our Ed.D. program developed the *ABD Cohort Program* to support students with the dissertation process.

Designing a program for the ABD students seemed intuitive. First, all ABD students and faculty advisors were added to an online eLearn community. In that space, synchronous workshops were held, and many resources were housed. The *ABD cohort program* consisted of a series of monthly workshops focused on specific areas of the dissertation process. Workshop topics included: conducting a literature review, selecting a research design and drafting a chapter three, developing a presentation-ready proposal—Chapters 1-3, preparing an IRB application with all related documentation (CITI ethics training, consent forms, permissions), training on Qualtrics survey software and IBM SPSS software, among others. See Figure 2 for the complete list of ABD Boot Camp topics and deliverables. The workshops were recorded and saved on the ABD eLearn course site. These recordings are available to all ABD students and future students.

Figure 2. *The ABD Cohort Program Topics and Schedule of Monthly Workshops*

	Boot Camp Topics – Month 2024 First Monday of the Month	Deliverable Due Dates - Last Day of the Month
January	Conducting Literature Review	Extended Bibliography – min 100 primary sources* within five years unless the work is seminal. Min 20 dissertations from ProQuest if possible. Dissertation Committee Formed
February	Introduction / Statement of the Problem/Purpose of Study/ Significance/ Research Questions	Conceptual Framework Due
March	Outline of Chapter 2	Chapter 1 Purpose of Study and Research Questions Theoretical Framework Due
April	Research Design	Chapter 2 – Literature Review
May	Proposal Design – (IRB/CITI Certificate) Informed Consent Letters...	Chapter 3 Due CITI Certificate / Draft IRB Application/ Proposal Draft
June	Data Collection Qualtrics	Presentation Marathon Week (Second week in June) IRB Application Submitted
July	Write results of data analysis	Chapter 4 Due
August	Writing conclusions and recommendations	Chapter 5 Due
September	Dissertation Refinement Workshop	Final draft of complete document and PowerPoint
October	Dissertation Defense Workshop Apply for Graduation Order Cap and Gown	Dissertation Defense* (Final date for October 2024 per the Graduate School Schedule)
November	Attend Graduate School ETD Workshop	Make final adjustments and upload them to Proquest

Faculty Involvement and Organization

A group of dedicated department faculty members with graduate faculty status volunteered to participate in the program. They thought about what could be preventing students from not completing their dissertation and driving them to drop out of the program. Could it be lack of skills, no knowledge of the process, poor mentoring, or inconsistency of engagement with advisor? Faculty members also discussed which processes worked to ensure completion and which led to hindrances.

Faculty were organized into topic-specific groups to provide targeted expertise and support to students with similar dissertation topics. For example, Faculty A: Instructional leadership and improving student learning: This theme investigates how educational leaders can effectively support and improve teaching and learning in their schools. Researchers in this area study the impact of leadership practices on teacher quality, curriculum development, and instructional innovation. Faculty B's interest was in School culture and climate: This theme explores how educational leaders can create positive and supportive school cultures that promote student learning and well-being. Researchers in this area study the impact of school climate on student achievement, teacher morale, and parent involvement.) Students selected a dissertation chair based on research interests. This structure fostered collaboration among faculty and students, creating a supportive and collaborative learning environment.

Another form of collaboration and networking among students and faculty included a motivational speaker series with a "Mix and Mingle" in collaboration with the Graduate Student Association. These evening events took place on campus and were widely popular. They included topics such as "Believe in Yourself" and "Building Your Dream."

In addition to the ABD Boot Camp, the Graduate School supported Graduate students with a Graduate Writing Center. The Center is free and open to all Tennessee State University Graduate students. It is staffed with Faculty Tutors focused on assisting graduate students with writing projects, theses, and dissertation writing, publications, literature reviews, and much more. With regular office hours and meetings by request, the Writing Center help with APA and Graduate School formatting.

Implications for Leadership

Leadership must begin with analyzing dissertation completion through a quality assurance lens. This begins with identifying the problem. With nearly 100 students at the ABD stage, the first question was "why"? We looked at the factors below to understand the "Why":

- From Students – ABD Student Satisfaction/Completion Survey
- From Students – Advisor Support Survey
- From Faculty – Examine Dissertation completion rates by faculty
- From Faculty – Department meetings/Discussions regarding the *Why's* for non-completers
- From Topic – Do certain topics (or dissertation types) ensure greater success?

From each of these metrics, we employed program changes and resources that addressed the reported concerns. We continue to reassess and evaluate for the best results. See Figure 3 for a list of concerns and suggested solutions. As each semester passed, we saw higher numbers of students completing their doctoral degrees. Progress monitoring is ongoing and will occur through graduation rates and student satisfaction surveys.

Figure 3. Common Concerns and Suggested Solutions

Concern	Solution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of psychological and/or community support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cohort Groups Time Management/Mental Health Support Learning Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More Writing Assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graduate Writing Center Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistance with research tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AI/Research Tools Professional Development for students and Faculty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of advisor responsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required online weekly dissertation meetings with mentor/dissertation chair
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of ongoing academic support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monthly ABD Boot Camp sessions (whole group) Topic-based
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly sessions with mentor – Individual meetings (progress reports)

Implications for Reducing Doctoral Attrition

Teachers with the PreK-12 setting typically begin their classes each semester with a Learning Styles Inventory. This tool helps teachers to best align their instructional practices with the students learning styles. This approach identifies the instructional strategy that would help to promote student success. In the doctoral setting, similarly, institutions must identify the environmental and programmatic tools that would best address the needs of their doctoral students as they begin the dissertation process. Factors such as writing support, community, and research assistance can be readily identified based on student surveys, past student performance or the chosen dissertation topic. Then, an individualized or group system of support can be developed for the students.

Also, a series of “courageous conversations” is needed for dissertation advisors. These conversations would include:

- discussions on dissertation completion rates by dissertation chair
- what is an acceptable rate?
- why are some professors rates higher than others?
- how to support professors to encourage student motivation and success
- how to align professors with dissertation topics
- how to maximize your professors’ intellectual capacity

In conclusion, doctoral students make considerable progress in a supportive environment (Bueno, 2023). Students supported by mentors and by peers help them to feel a sense of belonging and be successful and guide them throughout the research process. By implementing a structured mentorship program, we have discovered an increase in students’ confidence levels. It is just as simple as a system of pairing students with faculty with similar research interests or personality characteristics and meeting together constantly.

Similarly, offering regular progress review sessions scheduled periodically with structured progress reviews to help students stay on track allows the students to feel a sense of community and part of a group. They are able to talk to people just like them and who “understand.” Making students accountable for

their work and progress is the key to getting the work done. We found that providing time management and productivity workshops help students to organize their dissertation work.

One great tool is the Gantt chart. The Gantt Chart is a graphical representation of activity against time; it helps project professionals monitor progress. (*What Is a Gantt Chart?—Definition & Examples - APM*). It is comprised of a list of tasks to be performed on the vertical axis and time intervals on the horizontal axis. The Gantt Chart is a tool for project management developed by Henry Gantt in the early 1900s. It uses horizontal bars to show the period of time when each task or resource has been scheduled. It may also show the portion of work completed, task dependencies, milestones, and other data.

Figure 3. An Example of a (Partial) Dissertation Timeline Gantt Chart

TASKS TO BE COMPLETED	DATES (by week)								
	9/8-9/14	9/14-9/21	9/22-9/28	9/29-10/5	10/6-10/12	10/13-19	10/20-26	10/27-11/2
Committee Page									
Preliminary Pages									
CHAPTER 1									
Background									
Statement of Problem									
Purpose of Study									
Research Questions									
Significance of Study									
Theoretical Framework									
Assumptions									
Definitions									
Chapter Summary									
CHAPTER 2									
Introduction to Chapter									
Historical Background									
Subtopics									
Synthesis of Literature									
Chapter Summary									
CHAPTER 3									
Introduction to Chapter									
Research Design									
Population and Sample									
Instrumentation									
Permissions									
Consent Form									
Qualtrics (if applicable)									
Appendices									
Data Collection Process									
Data Analysis Plan									
Ethical Considerations									
CITI Certificate (ethics)									
Proposal Slides									
Date set for Proposal									
IRB Application Filed									
Data Collection Process									
CHAPTER 4									
CONTINUE WITH TASKS									

A vast number of software applications have been developed for project management, and most of these use a Gantt chart to visualize the project schedule. However, if one does not need all the bells and whistles of these applications, a spreadsheet, such as Excel, can be a simple solution. One must know all the individual tasks required to complete the project in order to create a Gantt Chart, in addition to an estimate of how long each task will take and which tasks are dependent on others. The very process of pulling this information together helps a student focus on the essential part of the project and begin to

establish a realistic period for completion. Figure 3 displays an example of a simple (partial) dissertation timeline Gantt Chart made in Microsoft Word.

Another recommendation and most valuable resource would be to provide training for faculty members and students in utilizing various AI (artificial intelligence) tools for constructing their drafts and compiling resources for their literature reviews. Two of the most popular and widely used tools among the ABD Boot Camp participants have been *Claude AI* (claude.ai) and *Elicit* (elicit.org). Both of these resources, at the most basic level, have no cost associated with them. However, if one wants to access more detailed or robust output, a nominal monthly fee is applied.

Claude AI, created by Anthropic, may be used to help a student in drafting and streamlining the first draft of a proposal. It assists into digging into powerful topics and can suggest a possible purpose, significance, background, theoretical framework, research questions, and methodology for a study. However, the quality of what one puts in creates the quality of what comes out. One may continually revise and edit the output by adding additional guiding questions. Nevertheless, the product of the *Claude* search is merely a jumping off point and should never be used as THE actual proposal.

There are several benefits of using *Claude* for dissertation students who are struggling to complete their work. One is breaking through writing blocks and maintaining momentum. *Claude* can help students overcome the paralysis that often comes with large, complex projects. When a student is stuck on a particular section or does not know how to begin, *Claude* can help brainstorm ideas, create detailed outlines, or even help write rough drafts that can refine them. This collaborative approach helps maintain forward progress rather than getting bogged down in perfectionism or overwhelm.

Another benefit of *Claude* is research organization and synthesis support. Dissertations require managing vast amounts of research from multiple sources. *Claude* can help a student organize a literature review, identify gaps in research, synthesize complex information from different studies, and help see connections between various theories and findings. This is particularly valuable when a student is drowning in sources and struggling to create a coherent narrative from research.

A third benefit of using *Claude* is feedback and revision assistance. Unlike human advisors who may have limited availability, *Claude* can provide immediate feedback on a student's writing, helping to identify unclear arguments, suggesting improvements to structure and flow, and aiding to refine academic voice. This constant availability for constructive feedback can be especially helpful during intensive writing periods when a student needs quick input to keep moving forward.

These benefits work best when *Claude* is used as a collaborative tool alongside proper academic supervision. *Claude* must not be used as a replacement for the critical thinking and original analysis that must come from the student as the researcher.

Elicit: The AI Research Assistant (Elicit.com) is another unbelievably valuable AI tool. *Elicit* is an AI research assistant which helps researchers find relevant papers and summarize information, It can automate tasks like literature

reviews, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. For struggling doctoral students, *ElicitAI* transforms the most time-consuming and overwhelming part of dissertation writing—the literature review—into a manageable, efficient process. This can provide the momentum boost needed to push through to completion, especially for students who have been stuck in the research phase for extended periods. It can find relevant research and search and discover papers. *Elicit* can search a vast database of academic papers, including those from *Semantic Scholar*, to find relevant articles, even if they do not match exact keywords. Additionally, *Elicit* is able to summarize papers and can generate concise summaries of individual papers or groups of papers, highlighting key findings and arguments. *Elicit* can help researchers brainstorm and refine their research questions. The tool is capable of identifying search terms and can suggest relevant search terms and keywords for a given research topic. It can assist in defining terms and concepts used in students' research. It is truly an assistant.

Final Thoughts

We learned many valuable lessons. By providing shared communities with clear milestones, a supportive environment with caring mentors and peers, students will feel a sense of belonging. Additionally, by providing easy, available access to resources, AI tools, and supports, students will feel empowered. The ABD Bootcamp provided all of these and more; students began to flourish. Our goal was to engage students and to motivate and empower them to want to finish their degree in which they had invested so much in emotionally, intellectually, and financially. One student commented that the biggest barrier for her was *herself*. Once she overcame the negativity and procrastination, she was able to produce and “move on” and enjoyed the process.

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