

## Challenges and Opportunities of the ABD (All but Dissertation) Cohort Program: Lessons Learned

*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).

### *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

1 drop out of the program altogether or be readmitted with an appeal to the Graduate  
2 School for a time extension.

3  
4 *Background of Study*

5  
6 The Office of Academic Affairs recognized this lack of doctoral student  
7 completion as an opportunity to implement a targeted intervention and provide  
8 necessary resources and strategies to engage, motivate, and encourage these  
9 individuals to push through and finish. As a result, the *All But Dissertation (ABD)*  
10 *Cohort Program* was created and designed to address this issue by providing a  
11 structured program to support and assist these students in successfully completing  
12 their dissertations.

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

17 The policy further states that:

18  
19 Extension of time for completing course requirements may occasionally be granted  
20 because of interruptions in graduate studies due to extenuating circumstances, such as  
21 family leave, illness, or military services.

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

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

36  
37 Mechanisms for revalidating out-of-date courses are limited to the following:

- 38  
39
- 40 • re-taking expired courses; or
  - 41 • re-taking related courses (equal in credit hours to the expired courses)  
42 approved by the department, and added to the Program of Study; or
  - 43 • **re-taking a competency test** (qualifying or **comprehensive examination**)  
44 [emphasis added] administered by the department...

45 Revalidation will only apply to courses on the approved Program of Study or  
46 approved as transfer credit for inclusion in the Program of Study. Students who have  
47 been out of school for one or more semesters must apply for readmission to  
48 Graduate School. If approved for an extension, documentation of completion of the

1 approved revalidation plan must be submitted to the Graduate School by the  
2 department, and the Program of Study must be submitted or revised to indicate  
3 revalidated courses (*TSU Graduate Catalog, 2024-2025*).

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

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

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

### 32 *Purpose and Organization of the Paper*

33 This paper provides an overview of faculty’s experience with the development  
34 of the *ABD Cohort Program*. Information is included on: (a) significance of this  
35 project, (b) the guiding research questions, (c) a description of Vincent Tinto’s  
36 *Theory of Involvement and Student Departure* as the theoretical framework focusing  
37 on graduate education, (d) a review of the related literature including challenges and  
38 barriers to dissertation completion, (e) targeted interventions, (f) the foundation of  
39 the *ABD Cohort Program* including its key components and faculty involvement,  
40 (g) successful outcomes, (h) lessons learned, and (i) recommendations.  
41  
42  
43

## 1 *Significance of Project*

2  
3 The significance of this project lies in its potential to contribute to the  
4 understanding of doctoral student attrition, especially at the dissertation stage of  
5 their program. Attrition at any level of post-secondary education is costly to both  
6 students and higher education institutions. Doctoral students are often funding their  
7 own education while balancing careers, families, and/or studies. There is immense  
8 potential on society and educational institutions if more students complete the  
9 programs that they have started and invested in financially and emotionally.

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

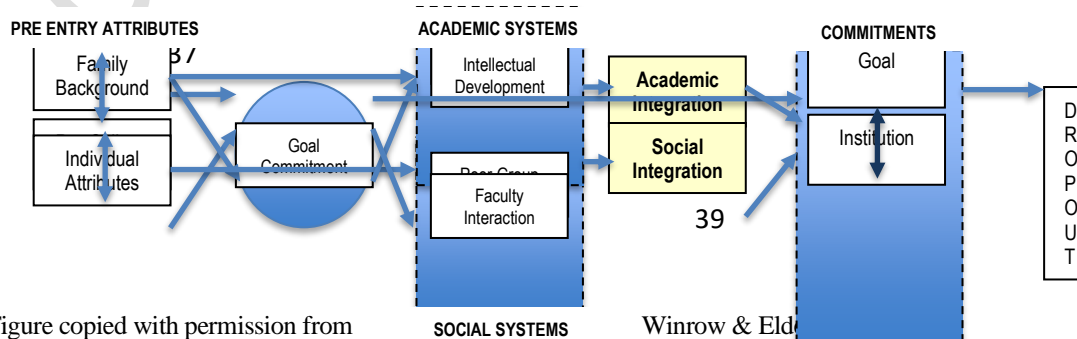
## 17 *Guiding Research Questions*

- 18 1. What are some common barriers and challenges doctoral students face while
- 19 2. How are comparable doctoral programs addressing similar attrition issues?
- 20 3. How is participating in the *ABD Cohort Program* impacting persistence to
- 21 22 23 24 25 degree completion? (benefits)

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

27  
28 According to Vincent Tinto, the theorist credited with developing the most  
29 comprehensive theoretical model of persistence and withdrawal behavior (1975,  
30 1993), higher education institutions are made up of distinct *social* and *academic*  
31 systems. Integration into these systems, which reflects a student's judgement of *fit*  
32 within the unfamiliar environment, represents perceptions on the part of the student  
33 of shared values and support in the college community. See Figure 1.

34  
35 **Figure 1.** *Tinto's Theory of Involvement and Student Departure (1975, 1993)*



40  
41  
42 Figure copied with permission from

Winrow & Eld

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

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

21  
22

## 23 Literature Review

24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30

### 31 *Barriers to Completion*

32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46

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; Williams, Sicard, Lundstrom, & Hart, 2021). 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 (Kumar,

1 Kumar & Taylor, 2021; McAlpine, Castello, & Pyhältö, 2022; Spencer &  
2 Casteñeda, 2022) and faculty mentoring (Levine & Nettles, 2023; O'Meara, Griffin,  
3 Kuvaeva, Nyunt & Robinson, 2017; Weidman, & DeAngelo, 2023).

4 A critical question in doctoral education is why students who succeed in the  
5 coursework (dependent) phase of their graduate education have different fates in the  
6 independent research phase of their education. In one focus group-based study,  
7 faculty were asked to talk about students who had difficulty making the transition  
8 to independent research or who did not make it at all. They were also asked to talk  
9 about students who made the transition to independent research with relative ease.  
10 The focus group discussions were analyzed using a theoretical perspective derived  
11 from theory and research on creativity and degree completion. The descriptions of  
12 students who made the transition with relative success matched closely with  
13 characterizations of highly creative people (Lovitts, 2008). Yet, this is but one study.

#### 14 15 *Tinto's Theory and Doctoral Student Attrition*

16  
17 Tinto's *Theory of Student Involvement and Departure*, when applied to doctoral  
18 students abandoning their programs before dissertation completion, reveals several  
19 key insights related to the core elements of Tinto's theory. Tinto's model emphasizes  
20 that student persistence depends on successful academic and social integration into  
21 the institutional community. For doctoral students specifically, this manifests in  
22 unique ways. Academic integration becomes more specialized. It may involve  
23 transition from coursework to independent research; development of scholarly  
24 identity within their discipline; mastery of specialized methodologies and literature;  
25 meaningful relationships with advisors/mentors. Moreover, it encompasses the  
26 elements of social integration at the doctoral level and may include: integration into  
27 departmental culture and academic community; development of professional  
28 networks with faculty and peers; participation in disciplinary communities beyond  
29 the institution; and, balancing academic demands with external commitments.  
30 Isolation during dissertation writing and limited peer support after coursework  
31 completion are two quite common issues.

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

40 Understanding doctoral attrition through Tinto's lens highlights the critical  
41 importance of both academic and social integration, while recognizing the unique  
42 developmental journey doctoral students undertake as they transition from students  
43 to independent scholars. Gardner's work (2021) tracked doctoral students across  
44 disciplines, confirming that integration factors predicted completion rates, with  
45 departmental culture being particularly influential during the dissertation phase.  
46 Furthermore, Gonzalez and Martinez's research (2020) demonstrated that sense of

1 belonging (a key aspect of social integration) was significantly correlated with  
2 persistence for underrepresented doctoral students.

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

8 Additionally, institutional commitment problems include challenges such as:  
9 inadequate mentorship or advisor conflicts; limited departmental support structures;  
10 insufficient funding opportunities; and, lack of clear milestones and expectations.  
11 Regarding advisor-student relationship research, Pifer and Baker (2023) quantified  
12 the impact of mentoring quality on dissertation completion, finding that students  
13 with regular, constructive advisor interactions were 3.7 times more likely to  
14 complete their degrees. O'Meara et al. (2022) showed that transparency in advising  
15 expectations and clear communication about research milestones significantly  
16 reduced time-to-degree and attrition rates. Additional research revealed that students  
17 who receive social support through regular interactions with their advisors tend to  
18 complete their degrees more quickly than students whose advisors do not provide  
19 as much feedback (Maddox & Wilson, 2023; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

20 Identity development research revealed how scholarly identity formation  
21 impacts persistence, finding that students who viewed themselves as contributing  
22 members of their academic community showed greater resilience during  
23 dissertation challenges (Castelló et al. 2024). Baker and Pifer (2020) tracked the  
24 transition from student to scholar identity, confirming this as a critical factor in  
25 dissertation persistence. With regard to external factors and support systems,  
26 Martinez et al. (2023) demonstrated the effectiveness of structured writing groups  
27 in increasing social integration and dissertation progress. Whereas Wao and  
28 Onwuegbuzie (2011) quantified how financial support during the dissertation phase  
29 reduced attrition by 46%, underscoring the impact of external pressures.

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

#### 41 *Impact of Targeted Dissertation Intervention Programs on Degree Completion*

42  
43 Recent research on intervention strategies for ABD (All But Dissertation)  
44 students highlights various approaches to improve dissertation completion rates.  
45 Workshops focusing on dissertation writing and research skills have shown promise  
46 in supporting students (Burrus et al., 2019; Kania-Gosche & Leavitt, 2011). These

1 interventions can include peer review activities, literature review processes, and  
2 problem definition exercises. Shifting from traditional dissertations to implementing  
3 intensive research-focused workshops has been identified as predictors of online  
4 doctoral student success (Burrus et al., 2019). Successful interventions often involve  
5 institutional resources, structured strategies, and conscious leadership to develop  
6 programs that promote equity and improve completion rates for diverse student  
7 populations (Martinez-Colon & Richardson, 2022; Posselt & Miller, 2023; Ross-  
8 Sheriff, Edwards & Orme, 2021).

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

19 Students who are enrolled in part-time programs benefit from cohorts, which  
20 allow for additional peer support (Hodson & Buckley, 2023; Jackson & Michelson,  
21 2023). The definition of *cohort* can vary with how it is used. In the book *College  
22 Student Retention*, Tom Mortenson defines *cohort* as the identification of a clearly  
23 defined group of students at one point in time and place with specific demographic  
24 and enrollment characteristics (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). West, Gokalp, Pena, and  
25 Fischer (2011) defined *cohort* as a group of students who begin at the same time and  
26 emphasize the benefits of networking, support, ease in scheduling and satisfaction  
27 after graduation. Students in a cohort are better prepared (West, et al. 2011). Cohort  
28 models have shown to be beneficial for community development (Garrison, &  
29 Vaughan, 2023; Lei, Gorelick, Short, & Smallwood, 2021; Peterson, & Dill, 2022),  
30 socialization (Maher, Wofford, Roksa, & Feldon, 2021), and in distance learning  
31 and virtual communities (Bettencourt, Malaney, Kidder, & George, 2022;  
32 Pemberton, & Akkary, 2022; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade, 2022).

33 Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding (2022) recommended the cohort model and  
34 outlined four stages of the doctoral program: (a) the entry stage, (b) the skill and  
35 development stage, (c) the consolidation state, and (d) the completion stage. Tinto  
36 (1993) outlined three stages as a student maneuvers throughout the doctoral degree  
37 process, transition, candidacy, and dissertation. Sawicka & Pretorius (2023)  
38 conducted a literature review of the states of doctoral education and categorized  
39 three stages: knowledge consumption, knowledge creation, and knowledge  
40 enactment. West, et al. (2011) reported two stages: the course stage, which is  
41 structured and familiar, and the dissertation stage which is unstructured and  
42 unfamiliar. Tinto's (1993) first and second stages could be considered dependent  
43 stages due to their structured format while his third could be classified as  
44 independent or unstructured and unfamiliar to the student.

45



1 *The ABD Cohort Program Design: The Boot Camp*

2

3       Dissertation writing is often the most challenging part of the doctoral program  
 4 for many students. A large number of them never make it past this point. In an effort  
 5 to raise completion rates and as well as increase student satisfaction with the  
 6 program, professors in our Ed.D. program developed the *ABD Cohort Program* to  
 7 support students with the dissertation process.

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

20

21 **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	<b>Chapter 1</b> Purpose of Study and Research Questions Theoretical Framework Due
April	Research Design	<b>Chapter 2</b> – Literature Review
May	Proposal Design – (IRB/CITI Certificate) Informed Consent Letters...	<b>Chapter 3</b> 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	<b>Chapter 4</b> Due
August	Writing conclusions and recommendations	<b>Chapter 5</b> 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

22

23

24 *Faculty Involvement and Organization*

25

26       A group of dedicated department faculty members with graduate faculty status  
 27 volunteered to participate in the program. They thought about what could be  
 28 preventing students from not completing their dissertation and driving them to drop  
 29 out of the program. Could it be lack of skills, no knowledge of the process, poor

1 mentoring, or inconsistency of engagement with advisor? Faculty members also  
2 discussed which processes worked to ensure completion and which led to hindrances.

3 Faculty were organized into topic-specific groups to provide targeted expertise  
4 and support to students with similar dissertation topics. For example, Faculty 1:  
5 Instructional leadership and improving student learning: This theme investigates  
6 how educational leaders can effectively support and improve teaching and learning  
7 in their schools. Researchers in this area study the impact of leadership practices on  
8 teacher quality, curriculum development, and instructional innovation. Faculty 2's  
9 interest was in School culture and climate: This theme explores how educational  
10 leaders can create positive and supportive school cultures that promote student  
11 learning and well-being. Researchers in this area study the impact of school climate  
12 on student achievement, teacher morale, and parent involvement.) Students selected  
13 a dissertation chair based on research interests. This structure fostered collaboration  
14 among faculty and students, creating a supportive and collaborative learning  
15 environment.

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

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

### 28 29 *Implications for Leadership*

30  
31 Leadership must begin with analyzing dissertation completion through a  
32 quality assurance lens. This begins with identifying the problem. With nearly 100  
33 students at the ABD stage, the first question was “why”? We looked at the factors  
34 below to understand the “Why”:

- 35
- 36 • From Students – ABD Student Satisfaction/Completion Survey
- 37 • From Students – Advisor Support Survey
- 38 • From Faculty – Examine Dissertation completion rates by faculty
- 39 • From Faculty – Department meetings/Discussions regarding the *Why*'s for
- 40 non-completers
- 41 • From Topic – Do certain topics (or dissertation types) ensure greater success?
- 42

43 From each of these metrics, we employed program changes and resources that  
44 addressed the reported concerns. We continue to reassess and evaluate for the best  
45 results. See Figure 3 for a list of concerns and suggested solutions. As each semester  
46 passed, we saw higher numbers of students completing their doctoral degrees.

1 Progress monitoring is ongoing and will occur through graduation rates and student  
 2 satisfaction surveys.

3

4 **Figure 3. Common Concerns and Suggested Solutions**

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

5

6

7 *Implications for Reducing Doctoral Attrition*

8

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

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

21

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

28

29

30 **Conclusions and Recommendations**

31

32 In conclusion, doctoral students make considerable progress in a supportive  
 33 environment (Bueno, 2023). Students supported by mentors and by peers help them  
 34 to feel a sense of belonging and be successful and guide them throughout the  
 35 research process. By implementing a structured mentorship program, we have  
 36 discovered an increase in students’ confidence levels. It is just as simple as a system

1 of pairing students with faculty with similar research interests or personality  
 2 characteristics and meeting together constantly.

3 Similarly, offering regular progress review sessions scheduled periodically  
 4 with structured progress reviews to help students stay on track allows the students  
 5 to feel a sense of community and part of a group. They are able to talk to people just  
 6 like them and who “understand.” Making students accountable for their work and  
 7 progress is the key to getting the work done. We found that providing time  
 8 management and productivity workshops help students to organize their dissertation  
 9 work.

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

18 **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									
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>									
Background									
Statement of Problem									
Purpose of Study									
Research Questions									
Significance of Study									
Theoretical Framework									
Assumptions									
Definitions									
Chapter Summary									
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>									
Introduction to Chapter									
Historical Background									
Subtopics									
Synthesis of Literature									
Chapter Summary									
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>									
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									
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>									
CONTINUE WITH TASKS									

20  
21

1 A vast number of software applications have been developed for project  
2 management, and most of these use a Gantt chart to visualize the project schedule.  
3 However, if one does not need all the bells and whistles of these applications, a  
4 spreadsheet, such as Excel, can be a simple solution. One must know all the  
5 individual tasks required to complete the project in order to create a Gantt Chart, in  
6 addition to an estimate of how long each task will take and which tasks are  
7 dependent on others. The very process of pulling this information together helps a  
8 student focus on the essential part of the project and begin to establish a realistic  
9 timeframe for completion. Figure 3 displays an example of a simple (partial)  
10 dissertation timeline Gantt Chart made in Microsoft Word.

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

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

27 *Elicit: The AI Research Assistant* (Elicit.com) is another unbelievably valuable  
28 AI tool. *Elicit* is an AI research assistant which helps researchers find relevant  
29 papers and summarize information. It can automate tasks like literature reviews,  
30 systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. It can find relevant research and search and  
31 discover papers. *Elicit* can search a vast database of academic papers, including  
32 those from *Semantic Scholar*, to find relevant articles, even if they do not match  
33 exact keywords. Additionally, *Elicit* is able to summarize papers and can generate  
34 concise summaries of individual papers or groups of papers, highlighting key  
35 findings and arguments. *Elicit* can help researchers brainstorm and refine their  
36 research questions. The tool is capable of identifying search terms and can suggest  
37 relevant search terms and keywords for a given research topic. It can assist in  
38 defining terms and concepts used in students' research. It is truly an assistant

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

1 overcame the negativity and procrastination, she was able to produce and “move  
2 on” and enjoyed the process.

### 3 4 5 **References**

- 6  
7 Bair, C. R., & Haworth, J. G. (2004). Doctoral student attrition and persistence: A meta-  
8 synthesis of research. In *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 481-  
9 534). Springer.
- 10 Bettencourt, G. M., Malaney, V. K., Kidder, C. J., & George Mwangi, C. A. (2022). Building  
11 scholarly communities amid disruption: Examining virtual cohort experiences during the  
12 COVID-19 pandemic. *Innovative Higher Education*, 47(5), 789-811.
- 13 Bueno, D.C. (2023). Faculty mentorship: A key factor in developing graduate students’  
14 research competencies. *Institutional Multidisciplinary Research and Development*  
15 *Journal*, 4, 1-9. <https://orcid.org/0000-00030072-0326>
- 16 Burns, E. M. & Gillespie, C. W. (2018). A phenomenological study of attrition from a  
17 doctoral cohort program: Changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness in the  
18 dissertation stage. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 517-537. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4158>
- 19  
20 Burrus, S. W., Fiore, T. D., Rice, T. H., & Shaw, M. E. (2021, July). Effectiveness of a virtual  
21 option for a limited-residency online doctoral program. In *ANNUAL* (p. 33).
- 22 Castelló, M., Pyhältö, K., & McAlpine, L. (2018). European cross-national mixed-method  
23 study on early career researcher experience. In *The Postdoc Landscape* (pp. 143-174).  
24 Academic Press.
- 25 Church-Duran, J. (2022). Doctoral student persistence in the social sciences: A systematic  
26 review of the literature. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(3), 953-967.
- 27 Crook, C. (2015). Navigating the doctoral journey: A handbook of strategies for success.  
28 *Higher Education*, 69, 1027-1030. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9800-7>
- 29 Curtin, N., Stewart, A. J., & Cole, E. R. (2022). Fostering belonging in graduate education:  
30 The role of peer communities and structured interventions. *International Journal of*  
31 *Doctoral Studies*, 17, 155-174.
- 32 Devos, C., & Van der Linden, N. (2022). Predicting doctoral completion: Developing a  
33 comprehensive model of individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors. *Higher*  
34 *Education Research & Development*, 41(5), 1567-1583.
- 35 Franklin, J., & Morales, V. (2023). Beyond ABD: Implementing a structured dissertation  
36 coaching model to improve doctoral completion rates. *Journal of College Student*  
37 *Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(2), 341-360.
- 38 Gardner, S. K. (2021). Student and faculty attributions of attrition in high and low-  
39 completing doctoral programs in the United States. *Higher Education*, 58, 97-112.
- 40 Gardner, S.K. & Gopaul, B (2012). The part-time doctoral student experience. *International*  
41 *Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 7, 63-78. <https://doi.org/10.28945/1561>.
- 42 Garrison, D. R., & Vaughan, N. D. (2023). Cohort-based doctoral programs: A longitudinal  
43 study of persistence factors and community development. *Studies in Higher Education*,  
44 48(3), 512-527.
- 45 Gonzalez, K., & Martinez, E. (2023). Faculty mentoring practices that support doctoral  
46 student well-being and persistence: A study of underrepresented minorities in STEM  
47 fields. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 94(2), 297-325.
- 48 Hodson, L., & Buckley, A. (2023). Reimagining doctoral cohort models for part-time and  
49 professional students: Innovations in program design and delivery. *Higher Education*  
50 *Research & Development*, 42(3), 611-625.

- 1 Jackson, D., & Michelson, G. (2023). A longitudinal phenomenological investigation of  
2 doctoral student isolation and belonging during dissertation writing. *International*  
3 *Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 18, 211-230.
- 4 Kania-Gosche, B., & Leavitt, L. (2011). A Case Study of an Intervention to Support Ed.D.  
5 Students in Dissertation Writing. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education*  
6 *and Technology*, 2, 17-27.
- 7 Kumar, S., Kumar, V., & Taylor, S. (2021). A guide to overcoming institutional obstacles  
8 in doctoral dissertation completion: Strategies for students and universities.  
9 *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 16, 753-776.
- 10 Lei, S., Gorelick, D., Short, K., & Smallwood, L. (2021). Cohort-based doctoral education:  
11 Student experiences of collective learning environments and their impact on scholarly  
12 identity. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 12(2), 256-273.
- 13 Levine, A., & Nettles, M. T. (2023). Institutional accountability for doctoral completion:  
14 Examining systemic barriers in the dissertation phase. *Journal of College Student*  
15 *Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(3), 401-423.
- 16 Lovitts, B. E. (2008). The transition to independent research: Who makes it, who doesn't,  
17 and why. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(3), 296-325.
- 18 Maddox, S., & Wilson, K. (2023). Factors influencing time-to-degree in contemporary  
19 doctoral education: A mixed methods investigation across disciplines. *International*  
20 *Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 18, 45-67.
- 21 McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2021). Building doctoral researchers' personal networks:  
22 An ethnographic study of informal support mechanisms. *International Journal of*  
23 *Doctoral Studies*, 16, 245-267.
- 24 McAlpine, L., Castello, M., & Pyhältö, K. (2022). When institutional structures impede  
25 progress: Analyzing doctoral writing barriers across international contexts. *Studies in*  
26 *Continuing Education*, 44(2), 219-235.
- 27 Maher, M. A., Wofford, A. M., Roksa, J., & Feldon, D. F. (2021). Doctoral cohort  
28 socialization: Examining the role of peer support in developing research self-efficacy  
29 and productivity. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 92(6), 956-980.
- 30 Martinez-Colon, G., & Richardson, V. (2022). Structural impediments to dissertation  
31 completion: Identifying institutional barriers in doctoral education. *Higher Education*  
32 *Research & Development*, 41(4), 823-837.
- 33 O'Meara, K., Griffin, K. A., Kuvaeva, A., Nyunt, G., & Robinson, T. (2017). Sense of  
34 belonging and its contributing factors in graduate education. *International Journal of*  
35 *Doctoral Studies*, 12, 251-279.
- 36 O'Meara, K., Griffin, K. A., Nyunt, G., & Robinson, T. (2021). Dismantling institutional  
37 barriers to dissertation completion: A comprehensive approach to doctoral student  
38 support. *The Review of Higher Education*, 45(1), 83-106.
- 39 Pemberton, C. L., & Akkary, R. K. (2022). Building cohesive doctoral cohorts: Strategies  
40 for developing scholarly communities in online and hybrid environments. *Studies in*  
41 *Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 13(2), 181-199.
- 42 Pifer, M. J. & Baker, V. L., & (2023). The role of relationships in the transition from doctoral  
43 student to independent scholar. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(1), 5-17.
- 44 Posselt, J., & Miller, A. L. (2023). Structural inequities in doctoral education: How  
45 institutional policies create barriers to dissertation completion for historically  
46 marginalized students. *Journal of Higher Education*, 94(5), 731-754.
- 47 Posselt, J. (2018). Normalizing struggle: Dimensions of faculty support for doctoral students  
48 and implications for persistence and well-being. *The Journal of Higher Education*,  
49 89(6), 988-1013.



- 1 Prieto, L.P., Odriozola-Gonzalez, P., Rodriguez-Triana, M.J., Dimitriadis, Y., Ley, T.  
2 (2022). Progress-Oriented Workshops for Doctoral Well-being: Evidence From a  
3 Two-Country Design-Based Research. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*.
- 4 Pyhältö, K., McAlpine, L., Peltonen, J., & Castello, M. (2023). European doctoral education  
5 in transition: Expanding contexts and evolving support structures. *Studies in Higher*  
6 *Education*, 48(1), 77-93.
- 7 Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., Spaulding, L. S., & Bade, B. (2022). Virtual cohort models in  
8 doctoral education: Fostering social presence and community in distance learning. *The*  
9 *Internet and Higher Education*, 55, 100890.
- 10 Rockinson-Szapkiw, A., & Spaulding, L. S. (2022). Examining factors influencing doctoral  
11 persistence in online limited-residency programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The*  
12 *Internet and Higher Education*, 54, 100871.
- 13 Ross-Sheriff, F., Edwards, J. B., & Orme, J. (2021). Addressing institutional barriers to  
14 dissertation completion for marginalized doctoral students: A case study in social work  
15 education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(4), 695-710.
- 16 Sawicka, K. M., & Pretorius, L. (2023). Gendered experiences in the doctoral journey:  
17 Persistent challenges for women in academia. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(2), 284-  
18 299.
- 19 Spencer, D. C., & Casteñeda, M. B. (2022). Beyond individual responsibility: Examining  
20 institutional and structural barriers to dissertation completion among underrepresented  
21 minorities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15(3), 390-404.
- 22 *Tennessee State University Graduate School Catalog* (2024-2025). Tennessee State  
23 University. *Extension of Time Limitations*. [https://catalog.tnstate.edu/index.php?](https://catalog.tnstate.edu/index.php?catoid=13)  
24 [catoid=13](https://catalog.tnstate.edu/index.php?catoid=13)
- 25 Thompson, M.D. (2001). Informal student-faculty interaction: Its relationship to educational  
26 gains in science and mathematics among community college students. *Community*  
27 *College Review*, 29(1), 35-58.
- 28 Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent literature.  
29 *A Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89-125. [https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430](https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089)  
30 [45001089](https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089)
- 31 Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures for student attrition* (2<sup>nd</sup>  
32 ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 33 Wao, H. O., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2011). A mixed research investigation of factors related  
34 to time to the doctorate in education. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 6, 115-  
35 134.
- 36 Weidman, J. C., & DeAngelo, L. (2023). Faculty availability and departmental resources:  
37 Key institutional barriers impacting doctoral student progress to dissertation  
38 completion. *Research in Higher Education*, 64(4), 615-639.
- 39 *What Is a Gantt Chart? - Definition & Examples – APM* (2025). <https://whatisagantt.com>
- 40 Williams, J.K., Sicard, K., Lundstrom, A., & Hart, S. (2021). Overcoming Barriers to PhD  
41 Education in Nursing. *The Journal of Nursing Education*, 60 (7), 400-403.
- 42 Winrow, G.L. & Elder, E.C. (2025). The Impact of Male University Marching Band  
43 Members' Sense of Belonging on Retention at One Historically Black University  
44 (HBCU) in Tennessee. *Athens Journal of Education*, 12, 1-45.