Doctoral advising: A case study of a 3-year doctoral program's recipe for success

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Abstract

Most studies concerning doctoral advising look at the high attrition rates of the programs, but rarely look at the student-advisor relationship. This study looks at the roles and responsibilities of the doctoral advisor as well as strategies for making the student-advisor relationship more positive. Doctoral advisors are expected to manage a variety of tasks including: keeping the student to a timeline, guiding the development of the student's research topic, providing guidance for the writing process, managing the student's dissertation committee, fostering the student's intellectual development, aiding the student with problems and challenges, and mentoring the student to become a scholar in the academic field. To add to the challenge, doctoral advisors at many academic institutions perform all of these functions with little to no guidance or training beyond their own experiences of being advised. Fourteen themes and eight best practices for doctoral advising were identified in this study.

Keywords: doctoral advising, doctoral supervision, mentorship, doctoral program attrition

Introduction

Despite the fact that doctoral programs typically recruit and select students who are high achievers, attrition rates in doctoral programs have historically been very high. It is estimated that 40 to 50% of students enrolled in residency-based, on-ground doctoral programs do not complete their degrees (Laufer & Gorup, 2019; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Rigler et al., 2017; Barnes, 2010; Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2005; Smallwood, 2004; Lovitts, 2001). The attrition rate for students enrolled in fully online or limited residency doctoral programs have an even higher attrition rate of 50 to 70% (Rigler et al., 2017; Terrell et al., 2012).

A doctoral student is paired with a faculty member who serves as the student's advisor throughout the process of writing the dissertation and serves as the chairperson of the student's dissertation committee. This faculty member is called the doctoral advisor, doctoral supervisor, or dissertation chair in most programs. The doctoral advisor is critical in getting the doctoral student to dissertation completion (Devos et al., 2017; Barnes, 2010; Lovitts, 2001) and effective advising is necessary not only to increase completion rates, but also to improve the quality of dissertation research (Taylor & Francis, 2015). To further illustrate this point, Barnes (2010) posits that "the *relationship* that doctoral students develop with their advisors is crucial to their success in completing their graduate degree" (p. 324) and that there are many negative consequences for a doctoral student who has an unsatisfying relationship with his or her advisor. In a comprehensive study of papers written on issues in doctoral studies over a period of 40 years (1971-2012), Jones (2013) found that it is the doctoral advisor who is fundamental in shaping the doctoral student into a future academic or practitioner. George et al. (2018) found that U.S. doctoral students are most likely to

quit their programs because of poor student-advisor relationships. Additionally, poor advising has been consistently suggested as the cause for high attrition rates in doctoral programs (Barnes, 2010). However, Jones (2013) found that only 15% of the research concerning doctoral work is around the student-supervisor relationship.

The task of advising doctoral students is a complex one, and doctoral advisors are often given little to no guidance or support before embarking upon the task of supervising their first advisee. In addition, it can be even more stressful for advisors who teach in accelerated doctoral programs to navigate the stresses of helping a student with their dissertation research in such a shortened period of time. Though there have been some studies about best practices in regard to doctoral advising, there has been little researched in regard to advising in accelerated doctoral programs. This study will explore best practices in doctoral advising for a three-year doctoral program at a university in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S.

Literature review

Roles and Responsibilities of Doctoral Advisors

Who is a doctoral advisor or mentor? Are they the same? An advisor is someone who gives advice (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Advisors support and oversee students' scholarly and professional development (Brown University Graduate School, 2022). Advisors are particularly interested in intellectual guidance and support. "An advisor should give good advice, give good direction, and be able to judge the quality of work being performed for a dissertation" (Davis, 2005, p. 15). Advisors must create a mutual, professional relationship with the advisee (Bogelund, 2015). This doesn't just happen. It happens through formal meetings and social activities. "Passion and a professional, critical sense are of the utmost importance" (Bogelund, 2015, 47). An advisor's primary responsibilities include: (1) helping students to be successful, (2) helping students to develop as a researcher, (3) helping students to develop their professional capacity, and (4) helping students to find their passion (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010).

A mentor is a trusted counselor or guide; a tutor or coach (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Mentoring comprises a deeper relationship with the student (Michigan State University, 2020). It is done to promote the professional development of others. Mentors act as advocates and role models (Brown University Graduate School, 2022). Mentors and students must have mutual respect (Spaulding, 2019; Brill et al., 2014). A doctoral mentor's primary responsibilities include two kinds of mentorship: professional and psychosocial (Lunsford, 2012). Professional mentorship involves helping a student to become a successful scholar and to begin to make contributions to the body of the literature in the field. It can also involve connecting a student with the mentor's network of people to help promote the student as a practitioner in the field. Psychosocial mentoring involves role modeling, counseling, and friendship (Kram, 1985), and has been found to be significantly related to doctoral students' satisfaction with their doctoral advisor (Lunsford, 2012).

In the context of doctoral programs, advisors play both the role of advisor and the role of mentor for their doctoral advisees. However, these roles are not often clearly defined. Faculty, students, and researchers often have varying or overlapping definitions of these two roles, which can lead to a great deal of confusion in doctoral programs. Titus and Ballou (2013) surveyed 3,500 faculty members who have served as doctoral advisors and found that faculty perceived few differences between advising and mentoring, though the majority, 54%, preferred being viewed as an advisor rather than a mentor. Further, the study found that faculty members are rarely given guidance or opportunities to develop the necessary skills of advisors and mentors; they are simply expected to know these skills. Only one quarter of the participants reported that their academic institution offered any training for doctoral advisors. Additionally, the findings indicated

that academic institutions of the participants had largely neglected to clearly define the job responsibilities of the doctoral advisor. Kamler and Thomson (2014) argue that it is imperative for supervision pedagogies to be designed purposefully, and the "lack of institutional and disciplinary attention to the pedagogical features of supervision leaves supervisors with relatively few educational resources to call on, other than their own experience of being supervised" (p. xii).

Characteristics of Effective Advisors

Effective advising is characterized by many different researchers in different ways, but common themes abound. However, there is clearly some overlap between advising and mentorship in the characteristics listed by some researchers, which is understandable given the confusion on clear understanding of these roles described in the previous section.

Effective advising often displays the following attributes: respect/courtesy, communication, awareness/professionalism, recognition/honesty, effort, and honesty. Respect has to do with being willing to be open and approachable and treating students with courtesy. Communication has to do with clear expectations about academic progress, the frequency of meetings, and procedures about email and face-to-face meetings. Awareness/professionalism refers to an understanding of power dynamics between the advisor and advisee and acting in a professional manner. Recognition is being up front and honest with students. Effort deals with moving forward in a professional manner (Indiana University, 2020; Michigan State University, 2020). Craft et al. (2016) found that effective advisors of doctoral students are perceived as accessible, helpful, socializing, and caring. "Both the interpersonal and the instructional components characterize the essential components of advising graduate students" (p. 54).

Barnes et al. (2010) identified a number of roles that characterize effective advising. These included information source, department socializer, advocate, role model, and occupational socializer. The four themes from the study identified as positive attributes include being accessible, being helpful, socializing, and caring. Accessible means being flexible and prompt in answering questions. Helpful means providing the information necessary to make the student understand the rules of the program. Socializing means extending the student's professional networks. Caring means having an interest in the student's well-being.

Expectation Setting

Setting expectations at the onset of an advising relationship between an advisor and student is one of the most critical elements of a successful relationship. It is important for advisors to both establish clear expectations and communicate those expectations to the student. Advisors should tell the student exactly what is expected of them, and ensure with each communication that there is mutual understanding (Brown University, 2022; Service Scape, 2020; Jackson State University, 2008).

Storms et al. (2011) posit that the advisor needs to have early conversations with the advisee about how each party works best, and start by setting up a long-range plan with milestones and due dates. Brown University (2022) also recommends that the advisor help to develop a timeline for the student. Esterman (2020) suggests a frequency of one-hour meetings every week, even for doctoral students who are experienced researchers, posits that just because a student is an experienced researcher does not mean that the student does not need as much supervision as a novice dissertation writer.

Accessibility of Advisor

Lunenberg and Irby (2008) studied successful dissertation writing and found that one of the two most important factors in regard to dissertation advisor selection is accessibility. Accessibility refers to how often the dissertation advisor will be available to meet or speak with the student about the dissertation, answer questions, and help with challenges. The doctoral advisor should plan to be accessible (Bloom et al., 2007) and meet regularly with an advisee to review progress, goals, challenges, and future plans (Brown University, 2022).

Management of the Dissertation Process

One of the roles of the doctoral advising is to assist the student in the selection of a dissertation topic and the design of the study to be conducted (Jackson State University, 2008). This can be a critical factor that impacts whether or not the student is successful in completing the dissertation. Esterman (2020) suggests that doctoral advisors should aid the advisee in selecting a research question that: can be addressed in four years, is easy to recruit for, is easy to get through the ethics board, is not expensive to undertake, and generates something new.

Advisors should instruct doctoral students on the structure that is expected for the dissertation, especially if there are specific requirements for the student's program. Advisors should also assist the student by offering advice about the dissertation committee, including its makeup and how the process of working with the committee should function (Jackson State University, 2008), and serving as a leader of the committee to encourage committee members to work together for the benefit of the student
(Storms et al., 2011).

Providing Feedback on Dissertation Drafts

Timely feedback is critical to a student's success in writing a dissertation, and one of the most important tasks of the doctoral advisor is to provide timely feedback on dissertation drafts (Jackson State University, 2008). Storms et al. (2011) note that an important role of the doctoral advisor is to be honest and give critical feedback on work. This will aid the student in making progress. Lunenberg and Irby (2008) found that feedback turnaround times was one of the two most important factors in selection of a dissertation advisor. Feedback turnaround times refer to how long it takes the advisor to provide meaningful feedback on a submitted draft and get that feedback back to the student.

Coaching of the Writing Process

One of the most important elements of doctoral advising that is often overlooked is the process through which the advisor coaches the writing process for the students' dissertation. While doctoral advisors should be well acquainted with the structure and content requirements of the dissertation, few are trained specifically in how to coach other students on how to write.

Kamler and Thomson (2014) object to the ubiquitous phrase *writing up* in doctoral research. They argue that when advisors give doctoral students the advice that they have already done the hard research work, reading, or data analysis, and suggest that now all the student needs to do is *write up* the research, the advisor is not only oversimplifying but is doing a disservice to the student and to the process of writing. Kamler and Thomson (2014) go on to explain that doctoral writing is thinking and it is not fully transparent. They argue, "Data is produced in writing, it is not found. And the data and subsequent written texts are shaped and crafted by the researcher through a multitude of selections about what to include and exclude

… These choices often have profound ethical dimensions and raise issues that need the conscious attention of doctoral writers" (p. 3). Kamler and Thomson's (2014) approach would have doctoral advisors approach research as writing, and put the writing process at "center stage" for the student.

Fostering Intellectual Development

An important element of doctoral advising is to foster intellectual development in an advisee. This can be done in a variety of ways and can include providing perspective about a students' research, inspiring a student to think independently, critically, and creatively (Jackson State University, 2008). An important task of the doctoral advisor is to help acquaint students with strategies for accessing literature for the field of study (Jackson State University, 2008). While the student should be able to conduct their own research, an advisor can often point out important journals in the field as well as seminal authors for specific content areas within the field that can help to acquaint the student with the body of literature in their area.

Davis (2004) suggests that two important tasks of a good advisor are to (1) introduce students to the literature of their academic discipline and start the student in a process of developing a research plan by having them read and discuss a sampling of classic literature and articles, and (2) introduce students to the research interests and possible faculty members with whom they might want to work. Often, doctoral students are not aware of the research interests of areas of expertise of the faculty and overlook valuable resources that could help them to grow intellectually.

Mentorship

While mentorship includes providing guidance and criticism to help with a student's research, it is also important for an advisor to provide moral support (Service Scape, 2020). Moral support for the writing process can be considered to be part of psychosocial mentoring, which involves both counseling and friendship as well as role modeling (Kram, 1985; Lunsford, 2012).

Mentoring that includes friendship with a student can often be a tricky situation for a doctoral advisor. There need to be clear boundaries between advisor and student and clearly there are university rules and regulations governing those relationships (Esterman, 2020). However, Esterman (2020) notes that going out for drinks or to social events with students on a regular basis can foster a good working relationship. Esterman (2020) notes in talking about doctoral advisees, "Importantly, I am not just a supervisor. I am also their mentor, someone they can talk to about their studies or their health, social, financial, or family situation. I advise them on who can support them on their PhD journey, and just how important it is to have a support network to debrief with, commiserate their hurdles, and celebrate their successes" (p. 23). Teaching and supervision at the doctoral level will often be characterized by friendship, though Lofstrom and Pyhalto (2015) suggest that doctoral students value relationship development more than their advisors.

Another element of mentoring is role modeling the characteristics of a good scholar. Many see one of the most critical tasks of the doctoral advisor to be the task of producing a good researcher and scholar, not just good research (Service Scape, 2020). One of the ways to begin on this journey is for the advisor to listen to and support an advisee's scholarly and professional goals (Brown University, 2022). Jaeger et al. (2011) have two suggestions for faculty advisors: "(1) be sensitive to, and learn from, the community experience of one's advisees, and (2) intentionally model mutuality and reciprocity" (p. 5). Doctoral advisors should understand and respect that each graduate advisee brings different perspectives, experience, and interests (Brown University, 2022).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of recent graduates of a three-year doctoral program in regard to working with their doctoral advisor on dissertation research. There has been a great deal of research showing the importance of the relationship between the doctoral student and advisor for student success and degree completion (George et al., 2018; Devos et al., 2017; Jones, 2013; Barnes, 2010; Lovitts, 2001), as well as for producing quality research (Taylor & Francis, 2015).

The task of advising doctoral students is very complex, involving elements of both advising and mentoring (Titus & Ballou, 2013; Lunsford, 2012). Doctoral advisors are expected to manage a variety of tasks including: keeping the student to a timeline, guiding the development of the student's research topic, providing guidance for the writing process, managing the student's dissertation committee, fostering the student's intellectual development, aiding the student with problems and challenges, and mentoring the student to become a scholar in the academic field. To add to the challenge, doctoral advisors at many academic institutions perform all of these functions with little to no guidance or training beyond their own experiences of being advised (Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Doctoral advisors in accelerated or executive-style doctoral programs must face all of the challenges that other advisors face but with the added stress of a condensed timeframe.

This case study explored the following central research question:
RQ: *What are student experiences with doctoral advisors in a three-year doctoral program?*

Methodology

This research utilized a case study strategy to collect qualitative data to answer the research question. Yin (2018) defines a case study as "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 15). The case selected for this study was one three-year doctoral program at a mid-Atlantic university.

This study followed a constructivist approach and used a qualitative survey that was distributed to participants through an online survey tool. Fully qualitative surveys prioritize qualitative research values and allow the researcher to take advantage of rich data sets, especially when participants are geographically distributed and can be best accessed online (Braun et al., 2020). The sample included 60 recent graduates from the selected program who completed their doctoral degree between 2017 and 2022.

The qualitative survey consisted of 13 open-ended questions that asked about graduates' experiences in working with their faculty dissertation advisor while they were doctoral students writing their dissertation. The questions were derived from the literature review. The survey was created in the online software QuestionPro and distributed via email to the participants after receiving approval for the study from the university's Institutional Review Board. Data was collected in May 2022. Survey responses were anonymous; no identifying or demographic data was collected. The researchers received 12 completed surveys (n=12), which constituted a 20% response rate. Responses were analyzed using Creswell's (2013) process of thematic data analysis which includes: organizing and preparing the data for analysis, familiarization of the data, coding, reviewing codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and interpreting the findings.

Results

Participant experiences with doctoral advising while they were students in a three-year doctoral program were first reviewed and then analyzed. The first pass of analysis resulted in 24 codes. These codes were then reviewed and reorganized and condensed in the second pass of analysis, which resulted in 18 codes. Next, the list of codes was thoroughly reviewed, and the researchers developed 14 themes, which are shown in Table 1 and then discussed individually.

Table 1: Themes Developed from Doctoral Student Experiences with Advising

Number	Theme
1	Primarily asynchronous communication
2	Communication only on an as-needed basis
3	Clear expectations set
4	Availability
5	No writing guidance
6	Emphasis on writing
7	Timely feedback
8	Handwritten feedback
9	Constructive feedback
10	Positive reinforcement
11	Lack of motivation and support
12	Fostering intellectual development
13	Trust and mutual respect
14	Interpersonal vs. instructional relationship balance

Primarily Asynchronous Communication

The Primarily Asynchronous Communication theme encapsulates the communication methods that were described by participants, which were primarily asynchronous in nature and focused on email and text messaging. Though the tone of a number of the participants' comments was not negative in nature, the comments still portrayed a low level of richness in the communication between advisor and advisee. Some example quotes include:

"We communicated primarily via email during the course of my research. When necessary we would meet in person or via google meet to discuss issues face to face."

"Text first, phone 2nd."

"We communicated by text, email, and in person. Texting was the best option for us."

Two example quotes by participants described the same types of communication between advisor and advisee, but notably mentioned that more face-to-face time was desired or expected:

"I expected to meet with my advisor several times a week in person as well as communication via email."

"We should probably have had more frequent in-person interactions (face-face, phone, or zoom) rather than by email. Most of our communication was by email, which often was abbreviated and often out of context."

Communication Only on an As-Needed Basis

The Communication Only on an As-Needed Basis theme represents a style of communication that some participants reported where the doctoral advisor did not clearly set any guidelines for either regular communication with the student or regular meetings with the student. These comments do not have a negative tone, but again portray a low level of richness in communication between advisor and advisee. Some example quotes for this theme include:

"There were no clear guidelines regarding frequency of our interactions or communication; our interactions happened organically."

"We collectively decided to proceed with communications and deadlines on an 'as needed' basis."

"He didn't say much and provided little direction except to understand what I wanted to do. I didn't mind this approach."

Clear Expectations Set

The Clear Expectations Set theme captures elements of communication style and expectation setting. Participants reported establishing plans, deadlines, and meeting regimens that speak to a well-defined advisor-advisee relationship. The communication styles mentioned include appreciation for direct communication and dependable communication. Example quotes for this theme include:

"My advisor laid out a plan that I should stick to so I could stay on track."

"We established a meeting regimen together based upon both of our work loads and the deadlines required."

"Her communication style was direct which I found helpful… was assertive in communicating her expectations and very detailed in her opinion of my dissertation progress."

Availability

The Availability theme encapsulated participants' opinions about the availability of their dissertation advisor for meetings, answering questions, and having discussions during residency sessions. Most of the responses in this category were positive, but there was one response that was negative in nature. Example quotes for this theme include:

"Overall, I found my advisor was very accessible whenever I needed assistance."

"My advisor was available to me throughout the dissertation process."

"I tried a few times to contact him and was not able to. He took a vacation and was not reachable for a month or so. Outside of that little mishap, he was not too bad."

No Writing Guidance

The No Writing Guidance theme encapsulated participant's experiences with dissertation advisors who did not provide any type of guidance in regard to writing. Some of the comments mentioned that guidance was given for a variety of other research-related topics but no attention was given to the writing process itself. Some example quotes include:

"My advisor did not provide specific guidance… Writing guidance from the advisor was largely focused on missing 'gaps' in the narrative or questionable content and references."

"I was not given specific guidance for the writing process."

"Most of his mentoring related to data capture and representation (less on writing, style, and structure)."

Emphasis on Writing

The Emphasis on Writing theme encapsulated opposite experiences from the No Writing Guidance theme. This theme described participant experiences with advisors who did provide guidance with writing, including outlining techniques and writing style. Some example quotes for this theme include:

"She helped me develop an outline to make my dissertation flow more smoothly"

"I was given alot of guidance… I would write about each point of interest in detail and we would meet to go over the main points and where within the disseration each point would fit."

"She gave me great tips to improve my writing style."

Timely Feedback

The Timely Feedback theme is the first of three themes dedicated to the concept of feedback. Feedback in this context refers to comments provided by the dissertation advisor on drafts of the dissertation document written by the student. This theme captured the experiences of participants who received timely feedback. Responses in regard to timeliness are very positive; students clearly valued receiving timely feedback. Some example quotes include:

"His feedback was prompt and very focused."

"My advisor provided feedback on my draft submissions in a timely fashion, then we would discuss them."

"Provided very helpful and detailed feedback… At no point did I experience a delay in feedback."

Handwritten Feedback

The Handwritten Feedback theme describes the experiences of some participants who received feedback from their advisor on their dissertation draft in the form of handwritten comments on paper. The implication of these comments is that a form of digital commenting would have been preferred; this could be due to an inability for students to read some handwriting which could make it difficult to understand the feedback. Some example quotes for this theme include:

"Use any electronic word processor for draft comments vs handwritten notes."

"Handwriting was atrocious on annotated products."

"If had questions on… written notes/feedback I would email her for clarification and would receive a fast response."

Constructive Feedback

The final theme related to feedback, the Constructive Feedback theme, encapsulates the concept of constructive criticism. This theme describes experiences of participants who did receive feedback and felt that the feedback received was constructive in nature. Some example quotes include:

"I feel that all the feedback was constructive, but occasionally there were stylistic differences we needed to work through."

"The feedback and suggestions were always in an effort to make my dissertation the best it could possibly be. One major suggestion from my advisor was to conduct interviews versus sending surveys to participants. I was hesitant because I am an introvert, however, that proved to be the best advice I could have received."

Positive Reinforcement

The Positive Reinforcement theme represents the idea that participants felt that encouragement and other forms of positive reinforcement were of utmost importance in motivating and inspiring them to continue in the program and to gain confidence in themselves. Example quotes include:

"My advisor coached me through the process with words of encouragement."

"Provided academic and mental support. There were many times I felt overwhelmed and she was quick to reassure me to 'trust the process'."

"My advisor motivated me by presenting any challenge I encountered as a positive factor that would improve the research. By focusing on the positive she helped me stay positive throughout the process."

"She was always positive. That alone had the greatest impact on my overall experience."

"As mentioned above, the most significant things my advisor provided me was her confidence and belief in me that I would do well, provided excellent advice regarding the method to use to gather my data, repeatedly told me that I was an excellent writer, and just overall belief that my topic was adding to the body of knowledge! I LOVE my advisor!!"

Lack of Motivation and Support

Conversely, the Lack of Motivation and Support theme describes the experiences of some participants who felt that their advisor did not provide motivation, inspiration, or support for them during their time in the doctoral program. Some example quotes include:

"Be a bit more dedicated, perhaps compassionate. This process is scary and for many of us, that is a hard thing to say or accept."

"I admired him for who he was, and I got the feeling that I was just another student."

Fostering Intellectual Development

The Fostering Intellectual Development theme highlights the ways in which advisors helped to promote intellectual growth for the participants. Some of the concepts discussed in this category could also be considered mentoring, but as the majority were focused on learning, the theme was named in relation to intellectual development. Some example quotes include:

"She encouraged me to look beyond my narrow research topic to identify linkages between my research and other similar phenomena in other aspects of government and media communications."

"Allowed me to explore fist and seek advice second."

"Allowed me room to make mistakes and learn from them."

Trust and Mutual Respect

The Trust and Mutual Respect theme encapsulates the idea that an advisor-advisee relationship was characterized by trust and/or mutual respect. A number of participants included comments that indicated both trust and mutual respect. Example quotes include:

"He had quite a few years experience as an advisor, mentor, professor, and academic, which gains a significant amount of trust and respect from me. I feel that he must have recognized that my work was quality, and showed his mutual respect in a way that allowed me to explore writing until he felt it was straying, and would "nudge" me back into focus."

"My advisor always treated me as a trusted colleague not simply a student."

"My advisor believed in my dissertation topic and was as enthusiastic as I was on what we would learn together while developing my dissertation. I felt like we were taking this educational journey together and with mutual respect."

Interpersonal vs. Instructional Relationship Balance

The final theme, Interpersonal vs. Instructional Relationship Balance, respresents the idea that some advisor-advisee relationships included more personal and social aspects, while others did not. Some example quotes for participants who felt there were personal aspects to their advising relationship include:

"We always began our conversations with simply catching up and discussing what was going on in life. This helped me feel more relaxed in our relationship and feel that I could discuss, and push back on, recommendations if necessary."

"My advisor and I had a good rapport with each other, both interpersonal and instructional. My advisor provided a good balance between these 2 elements."

Example quotes for participants who did not have any personal aspects to their advising relationship include:

"We were both really focused on the work. I think that may be that we both are more introverted."

"My relationship with… was very professional and solely academic. We did not develop an outside interpersonal relationship."

Discussion

The researchers were interested in exploring the advising experiences of doctoral students in a three-year doctoral program. Findings from the research included 14 themes related to doctoral advising.

One of the more interesting themes was Primarily Asynchronous Communication. This theme indicates that in this sample, there was a great deal of low richness communication, such as email and text messaging, between doctoral advisor and doctoral advisee. This is not something that has been reported often in the body of literature about doctoral advising and is actually quite surprising. However, some of the recent graduates who were surveyed in this study did experience approximately two years of primarily online education as the university was dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. This could explain some of the comments, but this theme clearly shows that a higher level of communication richness for advising could be beneficial in accelerated doctoral programs.

Another surprising theme that emerged from the study was Handwritten Feedback. Participants noted that feedback was often provided by their dissertation advisor in the form of handwritten notes on paper, and electronic feedback is clearly preferred. This could be simply for convenience or it could be due to difficulty reading some advisors' handwriting. Two other themes related to feedback were also found: Timely Feedback and Constructive Feedback. Timely feedback is consistent with literature that indicates that receiving timely feedback on dissertation drafts is one of the most important issues for doctoral students (Lunenberg & Irby, 2008). The Constructive Feedback encapsulated the concept that dissertation advisors were providing helpful and constructive notes on dissertation drafts.

Two themes addressed communication and expectation setting. Communication Only on an As-Needed Basis indicated that expectations were not clearly set for some participants, while the Clear Expectations Set theme found that others had the opposite experience. The literature indicates that advisors should establish clear expectations and meet regularly with advisees (Brown University, 2022; Esterman, 2020; Storms et al., 2011). This study found mixed results in regard to setting expectations. The Availability theme that emerged was consistent with previous literature (Lunenberg & Irby, 2008; Bloom et al., 2007) noting that advisors' accessibility is one of the most important factors for student success. In terms of writing guidance, two themes emerged showing opposite experiences within the sample: No Writing Guidance and Emphasis on Writing. This is consistent with literature; Kamler and Thomson (2014) note that many doctoral advisors are not well-prepared or trained to provide writing assistance to students even though writing should be considered a central pillar of the research process.

Positive Reinforcement was a theme that was not overly surprising, but that emerged very strongly in this sample. There were many participants who made comments noting that different types of positive reinforcement were given that provided motivation or inspiration for them to continue in their research with confidence. Conversely, the Lack of Motivation and Support theme did also emerge, but not as strongly in this sample. This theme represented the experiences of some participants who did not feel that their advisor

was motivating or supportive for them. The Fostering Intellectual Development theme showed how participants in the sample felt that their advisors aided them in their scholarly and intellectual growth. The Trust and Mutual Respect theme captured the experiences of participants who felt a high level of trust and respect for their advisor, and noted that this trust and respect was reciprocated. Both of these elements are considered to be important for mentoring doctoral students (Spaulding, 2019; Brill et al., 2014). Finally, the Interpersonal vs. Instructional Relationship Balance theme noted contrasting experiences of participants; some experienced personal relationships with their advisors with social interactions while others did not.

Conclusion

Effective doctoral advising and mentoring encompasses a variety of strategies. There is no script to follow; however, there are some ways to make the process more positive for both the advisor and the advisee. After reviewing the literature about best practices for advising doctoral students, and analyzing the findings from this study's sample of recent graduates from a three-year doctoral program, several best practices for advising doctoral students in three-year doctoral programs were developed:

1. Setting clear expectations for the doctoral advisor-advisee relationship,
2. Being available and meeting and communicating regularly,
3. Making an effort to meet face-to-face (in person or via Zoom, etc.),
4. Providing timely and constructive feedback on written drafts, preferably in digital form,
5. Providing support, guidance, and positive reinforcement for the research process,
6. Treating the writing process as an important part of the research,
7. Fostering the intellectual development of the student through mentoring, and
8. Fostering an advisor-advisee relationship that includes trust and mutual respect.

By improving the student-advisor relationship in doctoral advising, the high attrition rates of doctoral programs may decrease.

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