Factors Contributing to Counselor Education Doctoral Students' Satisfaction with Their Dissertation Chairperson

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The relationship between doctoral students and their chairpersons has been linked to students' successful completion of their dissertations and programs of study. When students fail to complete their degrees, there is a rise in attrition rates, and both programs and students suffer. The current study, based on a survey developed by the first author, was based on previous literature and themes generalized from a qualitative pilot study of recent counseling doctoral graduates regarding the selection of a dissertation chairperson. The purpose of this study was to examine factors used by students to select their chairperson and behaviors exhibited by chairpersons as predictors of overall student satisfaction with their dissertation chairperson. One-hundred thirty-three counselor education doctoral students participated in this study. Results suggest that specific selection criteria and chairperson behavior components significantly predict counseling doctoral students' overall satisfaction with their dissertation chairpersons.

Keywords: counselor education, chairperson, attrition, dissertation, student satisfaction

The process of successfully completing a doctoral program depends upon a variety of factors. One key component of degree completion hinges on the dissertation process. Students, faculty, departments and the university as a whole are affected when doctoral students fail to complete their degrees (Council of Graduate Schools, n.d.-b; Garcia, Malott, & Brethower, 1988; Gardner, 2009; Goulden, 1991; Kritsonis & Marshall, 2008; Lenz, 1997; Lovitts, 2001). In the United States, doctoral attrition rates have been measured at 57% across disciplines (Council of Graduate Schools, n.d.-a). More recently, data have shown that attrition rates are declining in most doctoral programs; however, those in the field of humanities continue to stall (Jaschik, 2007). Many students fall short of completing the dissertation or take much longer than expected to complete the dissertation due to a lack of supervision or mentorship (Garcia et al., 1988). In a meta-synthesis of 118 studies on doctoral attrition, the most frequent finding was that degree completion is related to the amount and quality of contact between doctoral students and their chairperson (Bair & Haworth, 2004).

Mentoring Relationships

Mentoring relationships are essential to doctoral education and contribute to timely dissertation completion (Council of Graduate Schools, n.d.-b; Garcia et al., 1988; Lovitts, 2001). Casto, Caldwell, and Salazar (2005) examined the importance of mentoring relationships between counselor education students and faculty members. They discussed the benefits of having a counselor education mentor to assist with co-teaching, carrying out research activities, and enhancing professional competence and identity development. Kolbert, Morgan, and Brendel (2002) also noted that counselor education doctoral students benefit from faculty mentors who guide students through interactive tasks such as supervision, research, co-teaching, administration, advising

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and helping new graduates find employment. Although the types of interactions between doctoral students and their faculty chairperson have been documented, the relative influences of these interactions on the overall student–chairperson relationship remain unclear.

Selection and Behaviors

Chairperson behaviors and the criteria used by doctoral students to select their chairperson influence student relationship satisfaction and degree completion (Goulden, 1991; Lovitts, 2001). Lovitts (2001) found that the amount of time faculty spent interacting with students, the location of interactions (formal vs. informal settings), and the quantity of work and social interactions with students all influenced doctoral students' satisfaction with their chairperson. In addition, participants in the study who failed to complete their doctoral degree were six times more likely to have been assigned a chairperson rather than to have chosen a chairperson. Furthermore, students who completed their degrees were cited as feeling much more satisfied with their advisors than students who did not complete theirs.

Wallace (2000) researched meaningful student–chairperson relationships and the process by which students are assigned or select a chairperson, and found that previous interactions, personality matching and similar research interests were the three most common factors of meaningful relationships in the dyads. Smart and Conant (1990) conducted a qualitative study examining faculty members' perceptions of key factors that doctoral students should consider when selecting a chairperson. The top suggestions were for someone with similar research interests, someone with a thriving reputation for publishing and someone well educated in methodology (Smart & Conant, 1990). Although this combination can equal success for some doctoral students, researchers also have identified other variables that contribute to a successful student–chairperson relationship. For example, Bloom, Propst Cuevas, Hall, and Evans (2007) accumulated letters of nomination for outstanding advisors. Five overarching behaviors of outstanding advisors included the following: demonstrating genuine care for students, being accessible, acting as a role model in professional and personal matters, individually tailoring guidance, and proactively integrating students into the profession (Bloom et al., 2007). Emerging themes centered on the importance of support and nurturing rather than on the research background or reputation of the chairperson.

Zhao, Golde, and McCormick (2007) set out to examine how selection of a chairperson and chairpersons' behaviors affect doctoral student satisfaction, noting that the process by which students and chairpersons come together is relatively unexplored. Data for the study were gathered from a national survey of advanced doctoral students across 11 disciplines at 27 leading doctorate-producing universities with over 4,000 student participants. The four broad discipline areas included humanities, social sciences, physical sciences and biological sciences. Results revealed differences among disciplines for selection, behaviors and satisfaction. For the humanities and social sciences, categories under which counselor education falls, academic advising contributed most to student satisfaction. Cheap labor, which was more of a factor in physical and biological sciences, was least important for humanities and social science students. Further, humanities students noted that intellectual compatibility and advisor reputation were most influential in selecting a chairperson, while potential pragmatic benefit resulting from working with the chairperson was rated unfavorably. Results suggest that overall satisfaction with the advising relationship, especially in the humanities, is positively correlated with advisor choice and advisor behaviors (Zhao et al., 2007).

Research indicates that the relationship between the doctoral student and the chairperson is a key element in determining the student's success in completing his or her degree (Bloom et al., 2007). Much of the previous research in the area of assessing behaviors has been conducted in a qualitative manner in order to give voice to the participants. All of these studies have been informative across disciplines; however, researchers have

acknowledged that "a limited amount of research focusing on counselor education doctoral students has been conducted" (Protivnak & Foss, 2009, p. 240).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine which variables are most influential in predicting counseling doctoral students' and recent graduates' overall satisfaction with their dissertation chairperson. Throughout the literature, terms such as advisor, chair and chairperson have been utilized; for the purpose of this study, the term chairperson is used. The research questions for this study included the following: (a) What selection criteria, if any, predict doctoral students' and recent graduates' overall satisfaction with their chairperson? and (b) What chairperson behaviors, if any, predict doctoral students' and recent graduates' overall satisfaction with their chairperson?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Counselor education doctoral students who had successfully proposed their dissertation and counselor education graduates who had defended their dissertation within 24 months of the date of the study were invited to participate. A survey instrument, designed by the first author using previous literature and a qualitative grounded theory pilot study, was posted on SurveyMonkey. Emails were distributed to CACREP-accredited department chairs and an invitation to participate was posted on CESNET, the counselor education listserv. The number of potential participants who fit the above criteria is unknown. A priori power analysis was conducted to determine the number of participants needed. Assuming a medium effect size of .05 at Power = .80, 91 participants were needed to successfully complete the survey (Cohen, 1992). After an 8-week period, 133 participants completed the survey, with 122 protocols valid and used for analysis.

Participant characteristics. Demographic information from the 122 participants was summarized and examined. Ages ranged from 26–63 years, with a mean age of 37. Ninety-one participants identified as female, 29 as male and one as transgender, and one declined to answer. The majority of participants identified as White (72 %) or African American (18%), with a small percentage identifying as Asian American (1.6%), Hispanic (2.5%), Native American (1.6%), and biracial (1.6%). Of the 122 participants, 42% were counselor education graduates and 58% were counselor education doctoral candidates. Lastly, 107 (88%) participants indicated that they had selected their chairperson and 15 (12%) indicated that their chairperson had been assigned to them.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument, developed in a qualitative pilot study, consisted of four sections: demographic items, participant selection criteria (e.g., is doing research similar to my dissertation topic), chairperson behaviors (e.g. provided effective feedback on my dissertation work) and participants' overall satisfaction with their dissertation chairperson (e.g. overall, how satisfied were you with your dissertation chairperson?). An informed consent agreement appeared at the beginning of the survey and participants were required to confirm their consent in order to proceed to the overall survey.

Item generation. Survey items were developed based on the aforementioned qualitative pilot study. Grounded theory and axial coding were used to derive key themes used in conjunction with prominent themes from existing literature (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Gardner, 2009; Goulden, 1991; Kritsonis & Marshall, 2008; Lovitts, 2001; Zhao et al., 2007) in order to develop survey instrument items for the major constructs. These constructs were as follows: selection criteria used by doctoral students when choosing a dissertation chairperson (selection criteria); behaviors exhibited by the chairperson throughout the dissertation process (behaviors); and

doctoral students' satisfaction with their dissertation chairperson (satisfaction). Multiple survey questions were developed for each prominent theme in order to ensure comprehensiveness of each construct (DeVellis, 2003).

Content validity. The final instrument consisted of 62 items. The initial list of items was sent to a panel of counselor educators who had recently (within the last 5 years) completed their doctoral dissertation in a CACREP-accredited counseling program, for the purpose of ensuring the appropriateness of the items for the study. Changes were made, which included adding one demographic question, changing the wording on two selection items and removing one chairperson behavior item deemed redundant.

Data Analysis

Data screening. Surveys were assessed to identify incomplete responses. Eleven cases were removed, leaving a total of 122 valid surveys ($N = 122$). All variables showed less than 5% of missing values; therefore the listwise default was used. Linearity and normality were examined and variables did not violate assumptions.

A principal component analysis (PCA) was performed in order to appropriately group individual survey items into subscales for each of the constructs. Scree plots, eigenvalues and communalities were examined to determine the appropriate factor structure for the instrument's subscales. The final PCA for selection criteria revealed four components, with an alpha reliability of .79 and 53% of variance accounted for within the four components (success/reputation, research/methodology, collaborative style, obligation/cultural). Component titles were chosen based on the questions that loaded into each component (see Appendix A for selection criteria components, items and loadings within each component). The final PCA for chairperson behaviors revealed five components, with an alpha reliability of .94 and 67% of variance accounted for within the five components (work style, personal connection, academic assistance, mentoring abilities and professional development; see Appendix B for chairperson behavior components, items and loadings within each component).

Data Analysis

Separate multiple regression analyses were conducted in order to predict doctoral students' and recent graduates' overall satisfaction with their chairperson. Selection criteria and behavior components identified in the PCAs were used as the predictor variables. Multiple regressions were conducted to investigate which selection criteria and which chairperson behaviors were most influential in predicting participants' overall satisfaction with their chairperson. In regard to selection criteria, 15 participants stated that they were assigned to a chairperson and therefore were eliminated from this portion of the analysis, leaving 107 eligible participants. Prior to the regression, grouped quantitative variables were examined by testing Mahalanobis' distance to screen for multivariate outliers. Within selection criteria, three cases exceeded the chi-square critical value, and for satisfaction items, one case exceeded the chi-square critical value, leaving a valid pool of 103 participants. Within chairperson behaviors, seven cases exceeded the chi-square critical value, and for satisfaction items, one case was found that exceeded the chi-square critical value, leaving a valid pool of 114 participants.

Results

Analyses focused on selection criteria and chairperson behaviors as predictors of counselor education doctoral students' satisfaction with their dissertation chairperson. Regression results for selection criteria indicated that the overall model significantly predicted overall satisfaction, $R^2 = .251$, $R^2_{adj} = .219$, $F(4,98) = 7.87$, $p \leq .001$. This model accounted for 25.1% of the variance in overall satisfaction. Review of the regression coefficients indicated that only one component, collaborative style, significantly contributed to the final model ($\beta = .445$, $t(101) = 4.58$, $p \leq .001$; see Table 1).

Table 1

Rank Order for Selection Criteria

Component	Rank	b	SE	β	Partial r	t	p
Collaborative style	1	.376	.082	.445	0.43	4.56	.000*
Success/reputation	2	.058	.077	.084	0.08	0.75	.457
Research/methodology	3	.046	.078	.060	0.06	0.58	.560
Obligation/culture	4	-.027	.095	-.026	-0.03	-0.28	.779

$* p \leq .001$

Regression results for chairperson behaviors indicated that the overall model significantly predicted overall satisfaction, $R^2 = .720$, $R^2\text{adj} = .707$, $F(5,107) = 55.10$, $p \leq .001$. This model accounted for 72 % of the variance in overall satisfaction. Review of the regression coefficients indicated that two components, work style ($\beta = .390$, $t(111) = 4.96$, $p \leq .001$) and personal connection ($\beta = .456$, $t(111) = 6.19$, $p \leq .001$) significantly contributed to the final model. See Table 2.

Table 2

Rank Order for Chairperson Behaviors Criteria

Component	Rank	b	SE	β	Partial r	t	p
Personal connection	1	.498	.080	.456	0.51	6.19	.000*
Work style	2	.327	.075	.390	0.43	4.96	.000*
Mentoring abilities	3	.089	.082	.089	0.11	1.10	.276
Academic assistance	4	.029	.093	.020	0.03	0.31	.757
Professional development	5	.010	.053	.012	0.02	0.18	.856

$* p \leq .001$

Because both regression models in research questions one and two were significant, a third regression was conducted in order to assess both the selection criteria components and the behavior components in predicting overall satisfaction with the participants' chairperson. The intent of this analysis was to show a possible interaction between the two separate constructs when predicting overall satisfaction. For this analysis, stepwise regression was used based on the previous regression results. Components were entered based on significant contribution by assessing each component's beta value. The components were entered in the following order: personal connection, collaborative style, work style, mentoring abilities, success/reputation, research/methodology, obligatory, academic assistance and professional development. Results from the regression indicate that two behavior components, work style and personal connection, and one selection component, success/reputation, accounted for 72.7% of the variance for the dependent variable, overall satisfaction, and contributed significantly to the model. See Table 3.

Table 3

Chairperson Behaviors and Selection Criteria Model Summary

	R	R²	R²adj	ΔR²	F_{chg}	p	df_1	df_2
Model 1	.770	.593	.589	.593	138.52	.000	1	95
Model 2	.846	.715	.709	.122	40.14	.000	1	94
Model 3	.853	.727	.719	.012	4.23	.043	1	93

Note. Model 1 = work style; Model 2 = work style and personal connection; Model 3 = work style, personal connection and success/reputation.

Discussion

The present study was conducted in order to better understand which variables best predict satisfaction in the relationship between counseling doctoral students and their dissertation chairperson. Specifically, the study was designed to address gaps in the literature regarding selection criteria and chairperson behaviors as predictors of satisfaction among counselor education doctoral students.

The authors sought to understand the extent to which selection criteria predict doctoral students' overall satisfaction with their chairperson. Results from the regression analysis suggest that collaborative style significantly contributes to overall satisfaction with one's dissertation chairperson. There are four items within the component of collaborative style, which include the following: work ethic, personality match, previous work with faculty member and faculty member willing to serve as chairperson. Results suggest that doctoral students' perception of their ability to collaborate with their chairperson is most influential in predicting overall satisfaction in the relationship between the two. The items within this component seem to share a sense of alignment between the student and professor that focuses more on internal compatibilities, such as similar work ethic and similar personality styles, as opposed to external similarities and benefits, such as a focus on similar research interests or receiving a beneficial recommendation letter. Although there is limited research on how and why doctoral students select their dissertation chairperson, the findings from the present study support those of Wallace (2000), who found that both previous interactions and personality match are among the top themes for why doctoral students select their dissertation chairperson.

The second research question explored which chairperson behaviors best predict overall satisfaction with one's chairperson. Results from the regression suggest that two components, work style and personal connection, significantly predict overall satisfaction, and the model containing the two components contributed over 71% of the variance in overall satisfaction. Work style includes items such as the following: spoke in "we" vs. "you" statements, provided appropriate structure, held me accountable and on track, provided effective feedback, and discussed expectations prior to the working relationship. Items within the personal connection component included the following: personable and comfortable to be around, used humor in our interactions, advocated for me with others, was patient with my progress, and was invested in me as a professional. The chairperson behavior components that were found to significantly contribute to students' overall satisfaction with their chairperson seem to center on personal, mentoring and validating behaviors shown by chairpersons as perceived by students. The other components, which include more external assistance (such as building professional relationships, assisting with career possibilities, and providing articles and tips for conducting research), were not found to significantly predict overall satisfaction. Current findings support previous research indicating that students feel more comfortable and more satisfied when expectations are shared and discussed up front (Friedman, 1987; Golde, 2005; Goulden, 1991). In addition, the current findings uphold previous research showing that students are more satisfied with their chairperson when the chairperson displays genuine care and regard for the student (Bloom et al., 2007). However, results from the present study conflict with Zhao et al.'s (2007) findings, which showed that humanities and social science students identified academic advising as the most important factor in a satisfactory advising relationship. Although the current study's work style component includes some items that reflect academic advising functions, most academic advising roles fall under the present study's professional development and academic assistance components. Neither of these two components significantly predicted overall satisfaction in the present study.

As a follow-up to research questions one and two, a subsequent multiple regression analysis was conducted. The predictor variables included the four selection criteria components and the five chairperson behavior components. Results from the regression model suggest that three components, work style (behavior

component), personal connection (behavior component) and success/reputation (selection component) together contributed 72% of the variance explained in overall satisfaction. The same two components from chairperson behaviors (work style and personal connection) ended up in both the combined regression and the individual regression (research question two), but their beta weights were reversed, indicating that when selection criteria and behaviors are combined, work style contributes more to overall satisfaction than personal connection. For the selection criteria component, success/reputation did not prove to be significant in the individual regression analysis (research question one), but was significant in the combined regression analysis. This finding could be due to the fact that the items within the success/reputation component are more closely related to external behaviors, which seem to match more consistently with chairperson behaviors such as providing effective feedback and providing a good amount of structure. Interestingly, when the selection criteria components were entered without the chairperson behaviors components, only collaborative style seemed to predict overall satisfaction; however, success/reputation predicted overall satisfaction when combined with chairperson behaviors. Previous research (Smart & Conant, 1990; Zhao et al., 2007) indicated that several of the selection items included in the success/reputation component are valuable factors to consider when selecting a chairperson; however, in the findings of the current study, these selection criteria only seem to play a significant role when combined with chairperson behavior components. Further, although the success and reputation of one's chairperson may be an important factor for selecting a chairperson, it does not appear that the chairperson's success and reputation contributes to a satisfactory relationship between student and chairperson.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations of this study is the use of a researcher-developed survey instrument as the sole measure of selection criteria, chairperson behaviors and overall satisfaction. Because the purpose of the study was not to establish the psychometric properties of the survey, it is difficult to gauge the reliability and validity of the survey with any certainty. Although both the selection criteria construct and the chairperson behavior construct revealed high alpha reliabilities (.79 and .94, respectively), additional research would have to be conducted in order to establish the overall psychometric properties of the survey.

Another limitation was the inclusivity of the sample. Initially, participants were to be recruited using emails sent by CACREP-accredited department chairs to eligible past and present doctoral students; however, due to a lack of responses, the survey request was opened up to CESNET, a counselor educator listserv. Within both forms of participant recruiting, it is unknown how many eligible participants received the request for participation; therefore, the rate of return is unknown. Additionally, since the demographic composition of the counselor education doctoral student population is unknown, it is unclear whether the sample of participants who chose to complete the survey is representative of the broader population. Thus, results from this analysis may not be generalizable to the overall population of counselor education doctoral students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because the results from this study represent only the perspective of the doctoral student and not that of the dissertation chairperson, future studies might include the voice of the chairperson, allowing researchers to gain a greater level of understanding and broadening the perspective of what constitutes a satisfactory relationship between chairperson and doctoral student. Conducting a larger, more thorough qualitative study, which might include focus groups and perhaps even counselor education doctoral students who did not complete their program, also could add value to this topic. In order to construct a more robust survey, future researchers may want to allow participants an opportunity to share their own influential selection criteria or helpful chairperson behaviors, which may have been inadvertently excluded from the current list. Lastly, researchers might establish formal psychometric properties for the survey instrument.

Implications

Previous literature states that the relationship between a doctoral student and the dissertation chairperson is essential in determining the student's successful completion and defense of his or her dissertation (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). Findings from the current study reveal how counselor education doctoral students' selection of their chairperson and the behaviors that the chairperson exhibits are influential in predicting students' overall satisfaction with the student–chairperson relationship. Specifically, students who select their chairperson based on the chairperson's work style and the students' perceptions of their own abilities to collaborate with the chairperson appear to be more satisfied with their relationship with their chairperson than students who select their chairperson based on having a personal relationship. This knowledge can inform doctoral students and faculty members about the criteria and behaviors that contribute to good advising relationships and positive dissertation outcomes. Understanding the most influential selection criteria (similar work ethic, personality match, previous relationship) and chairperson behaviors (patience, investment in the relationship and the student, advocacy for the student, timely and effective feedback) can result in greater satisfaction in the student–chairperson relationship. This information has the potential to influence both students and faculty when making decisions about selection or behaviors that may lead to a favorable dissertation outcome.

Additionally, results from this study and future studies may provide information to programs on how to decrease doctoral student attrition. Being aware of potential behaviors displayed by faculty members in a myriad of roles throughout the program, such as chairperson, advisor, supervisor or professor, could assist in increasing doctoral students' overall satisfaction. By utilizing the current study's findings and understanding which selection criteria and chairperson behaviors are most likely to influence overall satisfaction, counselor educators can enhance their advising behaviors to best meet the needs of students, thereby increasing the likelihood that students will successfully defend their dissertations and graduate from the counselor education doctoral program.

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Appendix A

Component Loadings for Selection Criteria Construct

Items	S/R	R/M	CS	O/C
Has a good reputation as a researcher	.810			
Has a good reputation as a dissertation chairperson	.801			
Recommended by other colleagues or peers	.733			
Higher chance of publishing my dissertation study	.606			
Has excellent writing skills	.586			
For a beneficial recommendation letter	.537			
Number of chairpersons' previous publications	.460			
Is doing research similar to my dissertation topic		.727		
I was approached by the faculty member		.630		
Previously worked with this person on research projects		.518		.505
Has the ability to understand my methodology		.490		
Ability to use already collected data		.473		
We share a similar work ethic			.743	
Matches my personality style			.733	
Previously worked with this person as a professor			.598	
Willing to serve as my chair			.519	
Felt obligated to work with this person				-.684
Previously worked with this person in my assistantship				.572
Is the same race/ethnicity				-.493

Note. S/R = success/reputation; R/M = research/methodology; CS = collaborative style; O/C = obligation/cultural.

Appendix B

Component Loadings for Behavior Construct

Items	WS	PC	AA	MA	PD
Spoke in "we" versus "you" statements	.756				
Provided appropriate structure	.732				
Held me accountable and on track	.725				
Provided effective feedback on my dissertation work	.698				
Discussed expectations prior to the working relationship	.685				
Personable and comfortable to be around		.872			
Used humor in our interactions		.678			
Advocated for me with others		.670			
Was patient with my progress		.634			
Invested in me as a professional		.609			
Unwilling to see others' perspectives*			.711		
Did not involve me in methodological decisions*			.698		
Did not allow for flexibility and individuality*			.693		
Did not focus on my strengths*			.647		
Did my research for me*			.582		
Was difficult to schedule appointments*				.643	
Provided helpful edits	.518			.606	
Was accountable and dependable	.516			.582	
Was patient with me and the dissertation process		.519		.573	
Sent me helpful research articles				.521	
Helped me develop relationships in the field					.829
Assisted with career possibilities					.694
Taught me about research practices					.620

Note. WS = work style; PC = personal connection; AA = academic assistance; MA = mentoring abilities; PD = professional development
* reverse-coded items; all loadings below .5 were suppressed.

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