The Dissertation Process and Mentor Relationships for African American and Latina/o Students in an Online Program

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To cite this article: Gary A. Berg (2016) The Dissertation Process and Mentor Relationships for African American and Latina/o Students in an Online Program, American Journal of Distance Education, 30:4, 225-236, DOI: 10.1080/08923647.2016.1227191

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2016.1227191
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ABSTRACT

To examine the problem of underrepresentation of minority students in doctoral programs, the author utilized a mixed-methods case study of an online doctoral program in which large numbers of African American and Latina/o students were enrolled. Themes uncovered in the study centered on specific academic and nonacademic challenges, the important role of mentors, and the impact of degree completion on students. Recommendations include effective mentor–mentee matching and increased sensitivity to particular challenges for underrepresented minority students in doctoral programs.

Introduction

Research on higher education in America tends to focus more on undergraduate programs than on graduate programs. There is a clear gap in understanding underrepresented minority (URM) student participation at the postbaccalaureate level (Pascarella et al., 2004; Perna, 2004).

The current research project was developed within the context of Berg and Tollefson’s (2014) recent large study conducted on Hispanic student attitudes in graduate school. Also, Berg’s (2010) book provided a conceptual basis for the current study. In this mixed-methods study the researcher attempts to better understand student experience of the overall doctoral program process at a large university. Additionally, the key mentor–mentee relationship, which is a hallmark of all doctoral programs, was analyzed. The university in this study serves an unusually number of URM doctoral students, with 9,330 enrolled between 2011 and 2015. As a result, the university has played a unique role in American higher education by opening access to doctoral degrees to traditionally underserved populations and has a wealth of data available from which researchers can learn about specific obstacles for students, best practices, and potential directions for doctoral programs that seek to better serve students.

Research literature review

The research on undergraduate underrepresented minority students focuses on how institutions are serving increasingly diverse undergraduate populations and possible best practices. For example, Martínez (2010) suggests that university approaches such as bridge programs, student organizations, and faculty advisers positively influence retention, whereas poor advising services and challenging academic standards present barriers.

The relevant research on the experience of ethnic minority students in graduate and doctoral programs falls into three main categories:
Patterns of participation and completion

Latina/o and African American participation in doctoral programs nationally is lower than the proportional overall representation of the population in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education 2014), from the academic year 1976–77 through 2012–13, the graduation rate among white doctoral students decreased from 91.9% to 71.6%, whereas completion rates increased for blacks (4.1% to 7.8%) and Hispanics (1.8% to 6.5%). Comparatively, in the United States the African American population is 13.2% and the Latina/o population is 17.4% (U.S. Census 2013). Although rates are improving, the lack of diversity in graduate programs nationally continues to be a significant problem, especially for the growing Latina/o population. In the important science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, overall degree completion for African American doctoral students is 50%, 4% lower than for whites (Sowell, Allum, and Okahana 2015).

Another primary area of research has been the ethnic diversity of university faculty members. Latina/os in particular are significantly underrepresented as faculty in higher education. In fall 2013, Hispanics represented just 5% of faculty compared with whites (79%) and African Americans (6%) (U.S. Department of Education 2015). One indicator of future faculty representation is the proportion of graduate assistants in 2011 by ethnicity: Latina/os (3.9%), African Americans (3.8%), and whites (50%) (U.S. Department of Education 2012).

The research literature on doctoral education has often focused on time-to-degree and completion rates. Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) found that only half of all students entering doctoral programs completed their degrees in twelve years. This statistic compares poorly with completion rates in top professional schools of business, law, and medicine, which typically exceed 90%. Bowen and Rudenstine noted great variety in graduate programs on five issues: scale, quality, selectivity, financial support of graduate students, and curricular designs. One finding is that smaller graduate programs tend to have better graduation rates and lower time-to-degree figures.

Although rates of attrition in doctoral programs are similar to undergraduate programs (around 50%), the problem is perhaps more serious because students come in with more preparation and invest a great deal in doctoral programs. Vaquera (2007) noted the lack of empirical research on Latina/o doctoral student retention. In a study of four groups of students at a Hispanic-serving institution, the author found that social and academic integration has the strongest impact on persistence. Gardner (2009) argued that faculty attributed lack of ability and drive as the primary reasons for discontinuation, whereas students identified family issues, bad advising, and departmental politics as primary reasons for stopping out. In a later publication, Gardner (2010) contended that student experiences regarding social support, self-efficacy, ambiguity, and transitions varied based on the program completion rates of different departments.

Sowell et al. (2009) found that survey respondents indicated that the most important factor in degree completion at the graduate level was financial support, followed by mentoring/advising, family nonfinancial support, and social environmental/peer group support. King (1994), in a study of black female doctoral students, discovered that personal qualities such as faith, determination, and political savvy were essential to persistence, enabling the students to function successfully in a predominantly white environment.

Some previous research has been conducted on minority students and the achievement gap in online education at the undergraduate level (Kaupp 2012; Kuo 2014; Okwumabua et al. 2011). In one mixed-methods study (Ivankova and Stick 2007) of a distributed doctoral program, which may be
closest to the current study, researchers learned that variables impacting retention included quality of academic experiences, the online learning environment, support and assistance, and student self-motivation. Other studies of online doctoral programs (Kumar and Dawson 2014; Sutton 2014) established that applied learning approaches were effective and that analytical writing assessments were highly predictive of student retention.

**Student experiences in doctoral programs**

Ellis (2001) considered the experiences of black and white doctoral students at a predominantly white research institution and discovered there were differences in student socialization, satisfaction with doctoral study, and commitment to degree completion based on race or gender. Black women were more affected by race than black men, white men, and white women. Scholars have pointed to doctoral programs as a kind of developmental socialization that requires students to adapt to a new culture and to work in isolation with large amounts of ambiguity about the future (Austin 2002). Gonzalez et al. (2001) studied Latina/os in doctoral programs and found depictions of students as fragile and vulnerable. This context included a lack of family understanding of doctoral programs, entering a new and unfamiliar world, the lack of an adequate Latina/o presence as students and faculty in their programs, and experiencing enduring conflicts between two different worlds.

A large research project (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Heuvelman-Hutchinson, and Spaulding 2014) of doctoral student experiences in an online program discovered differences in building a sense of community/connectedness with technology types: candidates who used social networking technologies to interact with peers outside of the classroom reported a higher sense of connectedness than those who did not. Candidates who used web-based communication technologies such as Skype, Facebook, and Twitter demonstrated a stronger sense of connectedness with their peers than those who chose to interact with peers via the phone or e-mail.

**Doctoral mentoring**

Scholars have noted that in many ways doctoral programs take the form of an apprenticeship, and success is largely linked to a positive adviser relationship (Campbell and Campbell 1997; Lovitts 2001). Erickson, McDonald, and Elder (2009) employed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health as well as from the Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement to examine the impact of mentoring on educational achievement. The results showed the likely benefit to more students from having a mentor. Another study (Stassun, Burger, and Lange 2010) of underrepresented groups in the physical sciences found that students who are deliberately groomed by active involvement in research experiences with faculty advisers are more successful.

Early research literature on URM students in doctoral programs reveals a sense that subtle forms of racism were at work explaining low admission, retention, and graduate rates (Pruitt and Isaac 1985). Such research argued that many URM students did not experience the intense mentor–mentee relationship often described and so had to rely on lesser relationships with sponsors, which is amplified by the lack of diversity among faculty. One scholar (Joseph 2013) pointed to the example of success at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in producing doctoral candidates. He argued that this success illustrated the unique cultural environment of HBCUs and how those advantages, especially the key student–faculty mentorship, benefit minority students as they move into a doctoral program. Another study (Holland 1993) of black doctoral students and mentors argued that quasi-apprenticeship mentoring and career mentoring had the most significant impact on African American doctoral students seeking careers in higher education. Welch (1996) also learned that quasi-apprenticeship, academic mentoring, and career mentoring relationships of African American doctoral students had the most significant impact. Hooker, Nakamura, and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) contended that the extending of cultural capital is a key component of exemplary mentoring. This takes the form of increased reputation by association, access to a professional network, and access to a critical peer group. The granting of
trust by the mentor to the mentee builds self-confidence and expertise in the mentee. Mentors are often in positions of being gatekeepers who can either provide or close off connections to other professionals and the domain. Nakamura and Shernoff (2009) found in some mentors a focus on developing strong self-esteem. A qualitative study (Felder 2010) found that the African American doctoral degree completion is complicated by students’ perceptions of faculty advising, faculty behavior, and the lack of diverse faculty leadership. Smith (2009) noted that a great deal has been written about expectations of mentoring assisting in serving URM without sufficient documentation of effectiveness.

Mentoring online has become an emerging field in the research literature (Barczyk et al. 2011; Berg 2009; Khan and Gogos 2013). The core of learning at the graduate level is one-to-one dialogue between a mentor and a learner, and in general, face-to-face mentoring forms often translate well online. For example, at California State University, San Bernardino, the online community of practice provides opportunities for ongoing formal and informal interaction among full-time doctoral students and faculty (Berg 2009). Similarly, Columbaro (2009) found that online mentoring could be effective in assisting online doctoral students to transition to the work world.

Research questions and method

The research questions posed for this study were as follows:

(1) What are common challenges in and outside the classroom for African American and Latina/o doctoral students in an online program?

(2) What are the characteristics and patterns observed in the mentor–mentee African American Latina/o doctoral student relationships?

(3) How do Latina/o and African American doctoral students evaluate the “value” of their degree?

The general methodology for this mixed-methods study consisted of three parts: an in-depth review of the relevant research literature, an examination of institutional and national data, and an online survey. The strategy was to triangulate the views of experts, statistics, and the individual experiences of students.

Study setting

The rationale for the study setting was that the university serves a large percentage of traditionally underserved students, many online, and is therefore a very good resource and setting for such a study. The overall self-reported composition of the student body including undergraduates is 29% African American and 14.3% Hispanic. With university permission obtained, current and past Latina/o and African American doctoral students were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate.

The university studied has three unique qualities in overall structure and organization that need to be noted with regard to this study. First, there is no tenure system. Except for faculty members serving in administrative positions, all faculty members teach under course-by-course contracts. Doctoral students contact faculty members to serve as chair (called “mentor”) and committee members. Second, in addition to approval by the committee through the proposal and defense stages, the university requires a centralized approval as a form of quality control. This “quality review” focuses on key criteria that are shared with candidates early so that all required elements are properly addressed. The central approval must be granted before a study takes place (Quality Review—Methods), and before the oral defense (Quality Review—Final). Students are repeatedly reminded of the process both in person (during residency periods) and in online documents. Finally, although the doctoral program is primarily taught online, there are required in-person residency requirements: in the first year the requirement is five days, in the second it is three days, and in the third year eight days in-person coursework is necessary.
Research instrument

The instrument was based on previous research done by the author on low-income and ethnic minority students. The survey was first tested in a pilot phase with a small subset (110 students), and then adjustments made to clarify questions (pilot and survey data combined). The survey was then distributed broadly to a random selection of 3,200 from 9,883 current and past doctoral program students. Two hundred twenty-eight surveys were at least partially completed, for a response rate of 6.88% (including pilot surveys).

Findings

The findings from this study focus on describing the special characteristics of the population studied and the university setting, patterns found in challenges throughout the doctoral degree process, mentoring relationships, best practices, and how students evaluate the value of their degree.

Demographics and completion rates

At the university studied in this project, graduation rates were consistently higher for white students. Over the five-year period, the graduation rate for white students was almost 8% higher than black or African American students and over 9% higher than that of Hispanic students.

The demographics of the student population studied are important to consider in evaluating the completion rate in comparison with other doctoral programs and are somewhat unique. First, the average age of the student respondents was unusually high with 75% forty years old and older (Table 1).

Sixty-six percent of respondents were female. Table 2 shows that the large majority of students (83.2%) identified themselves as African American (note: an e-mail list was created attempting to identify African American and Latina/o students for the survey).

In considering family influence on the pursuit of a doctoral degree, respondents were asked about parental educational level. Figure 1 shows a stratified response to this question, with 32.6% of parents having education at the high school or lower level and 55.1% with college and graduate-level degrees. The 45.8% reported parental graduate school completion rate is especially noteworthy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Age of student respondents.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What is your age?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Answer options</td>
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<tr>
<td>21–29</td>
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<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
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<td>40–49</td>
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<td>50–59</td>
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<td>60 or older</td>
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<tr>
<td>Answered question</td>
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<th>Table 2. Race/Ethnicity of respondents.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Answer options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic American</td>
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<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Answered question</td>
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Common challenges

Doctoral students were surveyed about specific variables derived from the research literature that may impact their retention rates. Table 3 displays the comparative weight students gave to these common challenges of students in doctoral programs.

One can see that financial pressures and feelings of self-doubt were the strongest concerns, although still not concerns by the larger majority. Fifty-three percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that “financial pressures have significantly impacted my progress towards a doctoral degree.” An example of what was found in the open-ended questions in the survey is what one student wrote: “The one thing that has been a major problem that prevented me from completing my dissertation is financial issues.” Some respondents commented on not fully understanding the total cost of the doctoral program. Said one, “Just having a more realistic understanding of the cost of the degree would have been helpful. I’m saddled with a huge debt, now . . . I’m struggling to make ends meet.”

Almost 70% of respondents indicated that they had taken an unscheduled break in studies. Reasons cited for the break in studies included prominently financial issues, family responsibilities, and academic performance (in that order). One student summarized, “I lost a job, moved, got married, started a new job.” Many commented on a combination of personal, administrative, and financial problems. One student stated, “First—complications with my pregnancy. Second—issues with the advising staff related to registration/withdrawal/financial aid.” Similarly, another student responded, “I took two breaks. The first was due to family issues. The second was I felt there is not enough support in the dissertation process.”

Student respondents also noted challenges in the committee process that forced a temporary leave. Comments such as the following are representative of this trend:

Dissertation Committee members were unsupportive, offered resistance instead of guidance, and repeatedly antagonized my committee chair. I decided to take a break from my study, as the stress (in addition to personal obligations) overwhelmed my motivation to continue. I am currently looking to re-enroll with a new committee.
The link between the difficulties of the dissertation process to breaks in study is consistent with what is found in the research literature.

Some saw an advantage in the online format, especially for URM students, as exemplified by one student:

As the majority of this educational journey has been online and therefore demographically blind, I do not believe my doctoral experience has been any different than most of my co-hort. I find that I am a student far more often than an “ethic minority” student.

In a similar vein, students wrote about the large cultural diversity of the online classroom, which often includes international students, as a positive characteristic: “... meeting other learners from all nations.”

One of the most repeated comments by respondents had to do with the general struggle of working in isolation as a doctoral student. Thirty-six percent of doctoral students in this study responded that they strongly agree or agree with the statement, “I have been hindered by feelings of isolation in working on my dissertation.” Typical comments were simply, “I feel very alone at times.” This feeling of isolation may be amplified by the hybrid format of the doctoral program at this particular university.

In general, respondents to the survey related that they felt supported by their families in pursuing their doctoral degrees. Only 28% of the doctoral students surveyed strongly agreed and agreed with the remark, “My family responsibilities have significantly conflicted with my progress towards a doctoral degree.” Nevertheless, students did describe some anxiety about revealing their studies to their families. A current doctoral student admitted that she did not inform most of her family about her participation in a doctoral program: “Most of my family does not know I am in school. It's a decision that I made not to share until I am more than three quarters done. I know that they will be extremely excited for me.” One student similarly wrote, “I did not share with my family until I learned I was a doctor.”

A common perception about adult learners is that there is an ongoing challenge to juggle the demands of a degree program with various work responsibilities. However, only 34% of respondents indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “Outside of class work/employment responsibilities have significantly conflicted with my progress towards a doctoral degree.” Numerous students commented on the positive synergy of studying in an applied field directly related to their current work positions. Respondents commented, “Employment outside of class positively impacted my doctoral college experience,” and “I was able to pull a lot of examples from my various places of employment and apply what I’ve learned in the classroom to real life.” One student summarized the relationship between work and learning this way:

Employment outside of the doctoral college experience is critical to the success of students in the doctoral program. I don’t believe a student can grasp concepts covered in the doctoral program in-depth or know how to apply their knowledge in the real world without having employment outside of class.

One characteristic of the university studied is that all of the doctoral degrees offered are applied in nature, and therefore the responses to the question of the work–study relationship are more likely to be positively affirmed. Nevertheless, the student’s understanding of the role that work experience plays in the educational process is clearly a success here.

*Impactful practices*

Survey respondents commented on specific approaches used by the institution that seem to be especially impactful for doctoral students, including affirmation of student perspectives and challenges, providing a good mentor match, regular communication and attentiveness, setting clear expectations, and providing encouragement.
Doctoral student respondents indicated that exemplary faculty demonstrated consistent respect for student points of view and purposefully found ways to integrate the course material and research with student professional work experience. The university requires that students participate in online discussions, which forces students to engage: “I had to respond online to receive participation points. During my entire educational career, I always sat in the back and did not participate unless I was called upon.” The in-person residency experiences also seem to provide an opportunity for community building and peer-to-peer networking: “Did not expect the level of shared learning that I experienced in residency especially in the first year.” Only 18% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement, “I feel my personal experiences and points of view have been appropriately valued throughout the doctoral program.” “This is the only environment in which I realized that my voice is valued with working twice as hard for recognition,” one student commented.

The research literature consistently points to the mentor relationship as being a key to success in doctoral programs. Table 4 displays how the student respondents viewed their mentoring experience. In the current study, a slight majority experienced very positive mentoring arrangements in terms of understanding student challenges, attentiveness, encouragement, and setting clear expectations.

Clearly the effective matching of the mentor to the doctoral student is crucial. Fifty-five percent of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “the match with my mentor was successful and productive.” Respondents often made very positive comments about their mentors/chairs: “My chair/mentor was an extraordinary professional that was able to support my questions and needs for developing my dissertation. I can’t think of anything that would change.” Fifty-six percent also indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “My mentor understood challenges I faced in the program.”

In terms of the frequency and nature of communication between mentor and mentee, 54% responded they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “My mentor gave me an appropriate level of attention when needed, yet also encouraged independent thinking.” Doctoral students responded similarly to the statement about support: “My mentor was encouraging and supportive of my progress.” Furthermore, 72% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that “when I started the doctoral program I was clear on academic workload and degree requirement expectations.” It should be noted, however, that this response is not consistent with some of the written reactions that reveal confusion for some students about the complex process.

Survey responses to questions about mentors reveal a mixed bag of experiences, from very positive to very negative, with degrees in between. The matching process was repeatedly identified as a central challenge: “Trying to obtain committee members was a nightmare” and “Obtaining chairs and committee persons was daunting and painful.” Students also related stories of faculty chairs and committee members needing to be replaced or not being sufficiently responsive to student needs: “The dissertation process has been a nightmare.”

**Evaluating the “Value” of their degree**

When students perform a return-on-investment (ROI) calculation on their graduate school experience, they typically consider personal, social, and economic factors. Understandably, those who ultimately successfully earn a degree speak of a very different experience from those who don’t complete their degree. The student respondents in this study continually talk about the personal meaning of pursuing and earning a doctoral degree. “It means everything” that “I am not a static,” were comments that briefly express the deep meaning of the personal accomplishment. Respondents routinely link their accomplishment with their families:

<table>
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<th>Table 4. Mentor–mentee characteristics: Strongly agreed or agreed.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Good mentor match</td>
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<tr>
<td>55%</td>
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*Note. Represents percentage of respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with respective statements about these issues.*
It meant I accomplished something my father couldn’t complete because he passed at an early age. It meant I was achieving something my mother never had the chance to pursue because she was a single parent who passed at an early age. So I did it for my parents and I did it to make a difference in the world!

Some URM students link their experience directly to the social context:

While I am able to experience an educational opportunity that my great-grandparents were not able to experience because of their race, it is important that I pursue this opportunity to change my family pattern.

One respondent wrote about the perceived negative reaction to her doctoral degree achievement:

Earning a doctoral degree has caused more harm than help for me. Instead of individuals having a positive attitude towards my accomplishment, for instance, many Caucasians ask questions which they will not ask their similar counterparts. For example, I am always asked by a Caucasian person what my degree is in, what school I earned my degree, and when I earned my degree.

One of the most important benefits of attending a doctoral program is to develop a professional network with scholars with similar interests that may be useful in building a career. However, in this study only 39% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “My professional network has grown greatly as a result of this doctoral program.” Thirty-eight percent strongly agreed that “I have developed a strong peer network in my doctoral program.” Career advancement was a typical reason given by students in this study for pursuing a doctoral degree. There were mixed responses to whether or not earning the doctoral degree had a positive impact on salaries and career options. Some noted directly, “I have achieved my career salary aspirations” and that the degree led to promotion in their current position. Others commented on a lack of career impact after earning the degree, as noted by one student:

In the end, I found that my degree was insignificant to the workplace. Some of my peers fell into the same situation. [University] was not considered sufficient education for many of the jobs I applied for. This also affected my decision to fight for the completion of my dissertation. I ended up in a worse situation after [University].

Another student commented on a layoff after completion:

In fact, directly after the completion of the degree I was laid off. While I was not able to draw a direct correlation between my layoff and the degree, it sure seemed to not make any sense to me for a company to lay off a doctoral prepared Latino. That just didn’t make any sense to me. I believe that my direct supervisors were very threatened by my academic interests and pursuits.

Finally, students did comment on the lack of university assistance in finding appropriate employment subsequent to graduation: Said one, “The University like many others should help its own in securing good employment. The mentor-ship program does not work.”

Analysis

Study limitations

The setting for this study in a large university with high rates of African American and Latina/o students provided a wealth of important data, but the generalizability of the findings in this study need to be carefully considered. First, the focus of the institution on serving adult learners in applied doctoral programs needs to be taken into account and undoubtedly partly explains the high average age of students. Second, the unusually large percentage of students with graduate school experience points to a doctoral student population that may already have some advantages in cultural capital. Finally, the extensive use of part-time faculty in the doctoral program likely impacts the mentor–mentee relationship. It may be that part-time appointments lead to a lessened commitment and availability of faculty acting as chairs in the dissertation process and in providing entrance to professional networks. As one student put it, “The relationship ended once the dissertation was complete. No contact after that point.” With only 39% of respondents strongly agreeing that their professional network has grown as a result of this doctoral
program, this is an area that requires attention. Yet it may be tied to embedded institutional structures in the use of part-time faculty and the online delivery of the program that are difficult to change.

**Challenges in mentoring online doctoral students**

Clearly, students surveyed appreciated the importance of the key mentoring relationship with their dissertation chair, and they often commented directly on their experiences:

I strongly believe a large part of my success was to have a chair that encouraged me to do my best work, took time to provide feedback, and took a personal interest in me. It was a challenging experience, I worked very hard… but I was always supported. I feel extremely grateful for my chair’s phenomenal coaching throughout my doctoral journey.

Conversely, for those students who did not complete their degree, the unsuccessful matching with a mentor was often mentioned. One said, “I take ownership of not completing the program; however, my mentor played a great part for my lack of progress.”

Many surveyed wrote about the desire for a more thoughtful matching process. In addition to students researching the background of the faculty member, it was suggested that faculty consider if the student match is a good one. As one student put it, “The mentor needs to research the student just like the student researched him/her.” Some saw this matching as an additional obstacle in the online program format. Said one, “I believe that the process of selecting a mentor should be refined to allow face-to-face interaction on multiple occasions. There should be a vested interest between mentor/mentee to accomplish the research goals.”

In terms of URM students, it was suggested that in addition to having a diverse faculty, it is important for mentors to appreciate the challenges of minority students and those with second-language backgrounds: “Professors to become better mentors towards minorities, and students for which English is their second language.”

Peer mentors were suggested by some students as an additional way of assisting doctoral students through the long process; for example, “Having peers that are at a higher level helped to prepare me for the classes to come, and gives me a refreshed direction towards my dissertation.”

Although there are clearly special qualities in the doctoral program studied, there are some generalizable observations that can be made about URM students in doctoral programs. First, the effective matching of doctoral students with chairs and committee members needs to be facilitated. Although students report that the university studied did a good job in setting student expectations for degree road maps, the actual linking of faculty to students seems to succeed only half the time. The size of doctoral programs and lack of faculty of color may work against effective matchmaking.

Second, a key component and value of a doctoral education is providing entrance for students into the professional domain and is traditionally directly linked to university and faculty reputation. Second- and third-tier institutions need to work especially hard to overcome weaknesses in providing professional connections because of the use of part-time faculty or lack of commitment to share cultural capital. Third, although the online environment provides advantages in convenience and access for working adult doctoral students, it adds a further barrier to effective mentor–mentee bonding.

**Conclusion: Increasing the value of online doctoral degrees**

The challenges of African American and Latina/o doctoral students are complex, and it is often unclear where there is divergence from the typical experience. The university studied has been especially successful in enrolling traditionally underserved students in doctoral programs and thus was an important setting for research on this access topic. Two main challenges from the findings of this study may have wider applicability to underrepresented minority students in doctoral programs: (1) the impact of financial burden on completion and (2) the importance of successful mentoring.

Analysis from the researcher’s previous study on Latina/o students at public universities indicated that students are making increasingly sophisticated analyses of the practical value of a
postbaccalaureate program. Students know from their undergraduate experience that financial investment in a degree program is a high-risk and potentially high-reward proposition. It may be that the root of the problem of low attendance of traditional underrepresented students in graduate programs is the failure of higher education institutions to provide sensible risk and real value that encourage doctoral degree completion and satisfaction among graduates.

Given the findings of this study, how does a doctoral program increase value? Clearly, traditional metrics of completion rates, time-to-degree, and cost are variables that student respondents in this study found meaningful. Clear advisement on financial obligations and increased aid are actions that would lessen the burden and stress on students. Furthermore, effective mentor relationships and the accompanying entrance to professional networks are an especially important metric. Universities should build formal support and rewards for mentoring by faculty of students. The personal meaning and sense of accomplishment for themselves and their families is a crucial value that doctoral students in this study continually pointed to in evaluating the value of their degree. It should be noted that the author has observed in many students at this university a religious belief system that informs how some viewed the doctoral degree process, linking their pursuit of a doctoral degree to a personal journey and roadblocks along the way as spiritual tests of a kind. Success or failure in the pursuit of a doctoral degree may in this way have added significance. Finally, many students were also very much aware of the social significance of their pursuit of a doctoral degree as African American or Latina/o. As one student said, “I have broken the cycle of lack of education in my family, and with my doctoral degree, I have changed my personal and professional life’s outcome for the best.”

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