Mentoring Through the Structured-Seminars: Student Progression in the Online Ed.D. Program

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Abstract

Retention and graduation continue to be topics of discussion for online doctoral programs within academia. Focusing on the post-coursework, dissertation proposal stage, this study examines whether students progress differently with two different mentoring approaches: the innovative structured-seminars versus the traditional unstructured mentoring. This study, using a quantitative approach and an extant data of 116 doctoral students, measures students' progression by the number of years enrolled in the program and number of credit hours earned while engaged with the two different mentorings. The results indicate that students engaged in the new structured-seminars on average spent significantly less time and needed significantly fewer credits than their peers in the unstructured mentoring. The innovative structured-seminar approach shows potential as an effective curriculum for online doctoral programs.

Keywords: online Ed.D. program, structured-seminars, online Ed.D. students, retention and graduation, doctoral post-coursework phase

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Introduction

The online Ed.D. program (the Program) under discussion offered by a gulf coast university in Florida is a terminal and the highest degree in the discipline of Education. As only 1.77% of the American adult population holds a doctorate degree (U. S. Census Bureau, 2014), students in the program are pursuing membership into a small elite class. The doctorate degree carries with it both a sense of intellectual mastery and of moral responsibility (Shulman, 2008). However, retention and graduation continue to be concerns for online doctoral programs within academia. High attrition rates in Ed.D. programs have negative consequences for stakeholders of higher education (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) and lead to concerns among college educators and administrators. In educational institutions where high rates of attrition occur, students suffer from emotional and financial losses while affected institutions lose funding, ranking among peers, and prestige (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Vaughn, 2018). Attrition is defined here as the complete departure from an educational institution without the successful completion of a degree program (Stallone, 2011 as cited in Vaughn, 2018).

Numerous factors contribute to the 50% attrition of doctoral candidates internationally (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Holmes et al., 2010). The Ed.D. program under discussion is no exception and experiences similar challenges. Thus, there is an urgence to explore effective strategies that will address the common challenges of program completion for doctoral programs. In 2016, to enhance the opportunity for student success in the online doctoral journey, the Program designed and implemented an innovative practice, the systematic and structured doctoral seminars to mentor students. The structured online doctoral seminars include a series of credit-bearing seminars, i.e. doctoral seminars I, II, III, and IV. Students enroll into these seminars and work with professors and peers starting from the end of their second year in coursework through the comprehensive examination to pre-proposal, proposal, and dissertation fieldwork and write up.

In this study, the unstructured mentoring refers to the traditional face-to-face, student with a professor or with a committee one-on-one mentoring. The unstructured traditional mentoring program differs from the structured doctoral mentoring seminars as it does not provide the formal credit-bearing cohort class meeting structure nor the peer group support that the structured doctoral seminars provide.

This study seeks to determine whether