Student perceptions of their doctoral programs: case study

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Abstract

The Investigator studied three Doctor of Philosophy program concentrations for a two year period, 2013-2015. The intent of the confidential study was to determine factors affecting program participants' perceptions most. A mixed methods embedded study was applied, with the quantitative portion representing the secondary data source and the qualitative portion primary. Questionnaires were provided to the doctoral students and 42 of 165 were completed and received. Quantitative results revealed average to above average program satisfaction, but a substantial range of perceptions regarding quality of the program, connectedness to advisors and other students, most useful courses, and least useful courses. Qualitative results revealed 27 areas of concern possessed by the study participants regarding their doctoral journeys. Of the 27, four were selected for further analysis: concerns regarding too few students completing the dissertation process, concerns with lack of meaningful formative and summative assessments occurring across courses, retribution among some faculty for students expressing opinions regarding courses and their programs, and faculty and advisor turnover. Follow up interviews of both study participants and program faculty, beyond the initial survey, provided greater illumination regarding the four selected items. Study results can be applied to the particular program, in the spirit of continuous improvement. The results can also be considered by others designing program evaluations of participant perceptions of education programs. The merit of using mixed-methods embedded study design in program evaluation became obvious.

Keywords: Doctoral Programs, Doctoral Students, Division I University, Minority Students, Graduate Records Examination, Open Enrollment, Student Perceptions, Program Evaluation, Retention, Persistence, Mixed Methods Research, Embedded Design, Confidential Studies

Student perceptions of their doctoral programs: case study

What are the perceptions of doctoral students regarding their programs? How do these perceptions affect them, and their potential success, in programs? Does it matter how students perceive their doctoral programs? Yes? No? Why? Why not?

From 2013 to 2015, the Investigator studied a Doctor of Philosophy degree program at a southern Division I university in the United States. The degree program houses three concentration majors and many minors. There are approximately 175 students enrolled. A majority of the students represent minority races.

The Students

While potential doctoral program students are required to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the test is used to determine if students admitted to the program must take remedial courses in writing and reasoning skills. They must also possess at least a 3.0 grade point average (g.p.a.) in their previously obtained Master's degree. Master's degrees, universally, have such a g.p.a. requirement, as a condition for receiving the degree.

Basically, the doctoral program is one where all students can be accepted, regardless of GRE normative percentile rankings. Students with the lowest possible 1 percentile GRE rankings have been admitted. The intent of admitting students across all GRE scores is to empower those student groups who have been disenfranchised historically. The university's undergraduate population is two-thirds minority as well. Comparable universities graduate three times as many undergraduate students.

The University and Doctoral Faculty

The university faced financial difficulties 30 years ago. A President was hired who focused on attracting local area minority students. Most of these students were first generation

college students. There was a substantial minority population from which to increase

enrollments. Using this model, the university experienced remarkable growth and financial

success. Today, the university continues to attract a majority minority student population, many

of whom are first generation college students. There is also a considerable international student

population. Several new programs and colleges have been added to the university, including the

Doctor of Philosophy program.

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program was begun 13 years ago. The leader of a

university affiliated organization identified a Professor to be hired. An offer was made by the

leader to the founding Professor, without a formal search, and the program began. Shortly

thereafter, the leader of the university affiliate who hired the founding Professor joined the

doctoral faculty. A Mathematics professor was also added to the doctoral faculty, for the sake of

ensuring coverage of the statistical side of the research courses and studies. Then, a former

colleague of the founding Professor was attracted to the program.

The university had campuses in three foreign countries. For political reasons, one of the

foreign countries removed many U.S. universities from its borders. As a result, two former

directors of that location were ultimately placed as faculty in the main campus-based PhD

program. One of the two had earned their doctoral degree, while directing the out of country

university program, from a branch campus of a midwestern regional comprehensive university.

The second person, upon return to the United States, entered the university's PhD program,

completed it, and was hired as faculty in it. Then, a sixth person was hired who had completed

their doctoral degree from a southern regional comprehensive university. Ultimately, a

qualitative expert was needed among the doctoral faculty. A person was attracted from another

doctoral program in the state to fill this need.

Two years prior to this study, the founding Professor suddenly died. The year prior to this study the leader of the university affiliated organization resigned to head another entity in the university. In the second year of this two year study, two of the aforementioned remaining faculty announced their retirements. A third professor, who was in their second year on faculty, replacing the deceased founding Professor, announced their resignation. A fourth member of the faculty of seven was named a Dean of another college within the university. Thus, four of seven doctoral faculty members departed at the end of the second year of this study.

A search for an additional doctoral faculty member was conducted in the second year of the study. However, the search failed. Two offers were made, but both declined. One new Professor was hired, beyond the failed search, who worked in another of the university's departments, without a formal search. At the beginning of the study there were seven doctoral faculty members. At the end of the study there were four. Obviously, there was considerable faculty turnover in the PhD program, in a short period of time.

With these student, university, and doctoral faculty contexts and realities in mind, what are the perceptions of the doctoral students in the programs? What prior studies have been done on doctoral student perceptions that can inform this one? What has been previously measured in these studies? What has been previously revealed regarding doctoral students' perceptions of their programs? What else needs to be revealed?

Literature Review

While prior studies of doctoral student perceptions of their programs are sparse, there are a few in the recent past. The study assumption is doctoral students' perceptions of their programs impact their performance in, and satisfaction with, their programs.

An early study on this topic focused on what level has the greatest impact on doctoral student perceptions most. Is it the university, the graduate school, or the particular programs? Apparently it is the program, rather than the university or graduate school. The particular department program, not the graduate school or university, contributes to doctoral students' perceptions of progress and success most (Ehrenberg, 2009).

With this in mind, further research was done that focused on perceptions of particular programs. What is it about particular doctoral programs that affect student perceptions most? The Ehrenberg study findings led to research regarding the satisfaction levels of doctoral students across various academic disciplines and different institutional types (Barnes & Randall, 2012). This study further affirmed that student perceptions are affected most by the particular program, instead of the college, school, or university. While doctoral students desire to be graduates of highly ranked doctoral programs, the greatest impact on the students' perceptions are the particular programs of which they are a part.

Doctoral student perceptions, informing satisfaction, also contribute to their completion of programs. Student retention, persistence, and graduation rates have become very high stakes for programs and universities, in the wake of tightening accreditation rules and decreases in potential student populations.

Low feelings of doctoral student-to- doctoral student and doctoral student-to-faculty connectedness in the learning environment may be predictive of departure from doctoral

programs (Terrell, Snyder & Dringus, 2009). In other words, if doctoral students feel connected to other students in their programs, as well as faculty, they are more apt to persist and remain in them.

The sense of relatedness to the doctoral student's advisor positively affects student perceptions regarding doctoral programs, as do students' autonomy (freedom to do one's own research) and competency (perceived ability to complete the doctoral program) (Mason, 2012).

Doctoral students' lives beyond their programs also have an effect on their perceptions of programs. Challenges faced by doctoral students outside of their programs can greatly impact their progress in them (Moffett, 2006). Historically, little attention has been paid to the life needs and realities of doctoral students beyond their programs. This lack of attention is especially detrimental to international doctoral students in the United States, especially those students who are culturally distant.

While prior studies included identification of institutional level affecting perceptions most, along with connectedness to faculty, advisor, and fellow students, they did not include students' perceptions of most and least effective courses in their programs, and most and least difficult courses. They also did not feature doctoral students' perceptions of effective and ineffective instruction in their courses and programs. Additionally, prior studies were not designed in a mixed methods embedded format.

In addition to foci of past studies incorporated in this study, it was determined by the Investigator that asking study participants to identify most useful and least useful courses, and most and least difficult courses, in their programs would be beneficial. Also, data regarding most and least effective instruction would be useful and included. Additionally, the Investigator

concluded, providing an open ended response prompt could yield perceptions beyond those from the focused prompts and questions from previous studies and this one.

As mentioned, prior studies did not utilize a mixed methods embedded design. Of the several mixed methods designs, an embedded design was most appropriate for this study. The embedded design is a mixed methods design in which one data set provides a supportive, secondary role in a study based primarily on the other data type (Creswell, et al, 2003). In this study's case the primary data would be the qualitative short answer responses, and follow up interviews of some study participants and program faculty, resulting from the short answer responses. The supportive, secondary portion of the study would be the quantitative portion of the survey instrument.

It was also determined that a confidential, rather than anonymous, survey response instrument be used. The confidential design would enable the Investigator to follow up with particular respondents as needed. This follow up would enhance the selected, primary qualitative portion of the study. Such follow up to respondents' short answer responses on the survey instrument had the potential to further illuminate participant perceptions of their doctoral programs. Interviewing some of the program faculty would enhance triangulation of study results, as well.

The current gaps in the research include doctoral students' perceptions of quality of particular courses in their program, the quality of instruction, open-ended, free-response opportunities for study respondents, and the mixed methods embedded study design.

Study Results

The Investigator distributed hard copy study questionnaires, Institutional Review Board

(IRB) disclosure statements, and self addressed stamp envelopes for same to study participants

across student meetings, in doctoral program classes, and via U.S. mail from May, 2014 through

August, 2014.   One hundred sixty-five study packets were distributed. Forty two study

questionnaires and signed copies of IRB disclosure forms were completed and mailed to the

Investigator. Therefore, the completed study questionnaire return rate was 25 percent.

The quantitative ranking results, serving as the secondary data source are as follows

(note: survey items 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, and 10 featured ranking opportunities for respondents):

1. **On a scale of 1 to 10 (with "1" feeling not connected whatsoever and "10" feeling completely connected), how connected do you feel to your program advisor?**

   Score Mean: 7.71 Score Range: 9 Standard Deviation: 2.50

2. **On a scale of 1 to 10 (with "1" feeling not connected to other students in the program and "10" feeling completely connected to other students in the program), how connected do you feel to other students in the program?**

   Score Mean: 7.15 Score Range: 9 Standard Deviation: 2.61

3. **On a scale of 1 to 10 (with "1" feeling not connected to the faculty in the program and "10" feeling completely connected to the faculty in the program), how connected do you feel to the faculty in the program?**

   Score Mean: 7.23 Score Range: 8 Standard Deviation: 2.26

8. **On a scale of 1 to 10 (with "1" feeling as though you have no "freedom" whatsoever to conduct your own research and "10" feeling as though you have total "freedom" to conduct your own research), how much "freedom" do you feel you have to conduct your own research?**

   Score Mean: 8.71 Score Range: 5 Standard Deviation: 1.59

9. **On a scale of 1 to 10 (with "1" feeling as though you are not competent whatsoever in completing your doctoral program and "10" feeling fully competent to complete your doctoral program), how competent do you feel in completing your doctoral program?**

   Score Mean: 8.79 Score Range: 9 Standard Deviation: 1.67

10. **One a scale of 1 to 10 (with "1" not feeling challenged whatsoever by other life responsibilities beyond your doctoral program and "10" feeling completely challenged by other life responsibilities beyond your doctoral program), how challenged do you feel by other life responsibilities beyond your doctoral program**?

    Score Mean: 8.04 Score Range: 9 Standard Deviation: 2.45

Quantitative Ranking Results Discussion

The mean score range across the six prompts was 7.15 to 8.79, suggesting average to above average participant perception satisfaction with the program concentrations. However, there was a substantial score range across the six prompts, with four of them exhibiting a range of 9, and a fifth with a range of 8. But, despite the substantial score ranges, overall quantitative results revealed average to above average perceived student satisfaction with the program concentrations. Historically, quantitative evaluations of programs have been utilized most. Had this study only used a traditional quantitative approach, the results would suggest satisfactory participant perception results.

Courses in the Programs

Survey questions 4, 5, 6, and 7 had to do with courses in the programs. Below are the quantitative results of doctoral students' opinions regarding most beneficial course, least beneficial course, most difficult course, and least difficult course (note: due to the large number of courses identified in response to each question, the courses with the largest frequency of responses in each category, along with the number of responses= "n" for each, are shared):

4. Of the courses you have taken in your doctoral program, which course has been most beneficial to you?

    Research Methods and Tools (n=7)

    History and Philosophy of Higher Education (n=5)

    Qualitative Research Design (n=5)

5. Of the courses you have taken in your doctoral program, which course has been least beneficial to you?

    Concepts of Leadership (n=4)

    Social Science Statistics with SPSS (n=4)

    Organizational Assessment and Survey Administration (n=3)

    Qualitative Research Design (n=3)

6. Of the courses in your doctoral program, which course has been the most difficult for you?

    Social Science Statistics with SPSS (n=14)

    Qualitative Research Methods (n=4)

    Concepts of Leadership (n=3)

    Research Methods and Tools (n=3)

7. Of the courses in your doctoral program, which course has been the least difficult for you?

    Ethics for the Professions (n=7)

    Belief Systems (n=4)

    Concepts of Leadership (n=4

Courses in the Program Discussion

Quantitative participant perception results regarding courses in the program revealed a variety of courses being most beneficial, least beneficial, most difficult, and least difficult. The

quantitative results merely show numbers of participants' perceptions about particular courses. Qualitative student responses regarding most/least beneficial and most/least difficult courses provide more particular details regarding the categories.

Interestingly, the course Concepts of Leadership appeared in both most difficult and least difficult courses. The course is one that has been taught by four of the seven doctoral faculty in the recent past. Perhaps the perceptions of it being both most and least difficult are the result of several different instructors teaching it across semesters. This could suggest different course designs, and expectations possessed across instructors, for the doctoral students. Further discussion regarding the program courses will be shared in the qualitative portion of the study results.

Qualitative Survey Results

The qualitative student response results, serving as the primary data source in the mixed methods embedded study design, are as follows:

For survey items 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, and 10 featured ranking opportunities for respondents (note: for these responses the most positive and most negative responses are shared):

Item #1 regarding connectedness to Program Advisor:

Positive Responses:

Dr. XXXXXXX is always available and provides support and guidance in an engaging and personal way. After our meetings I truly feel that all my concerns have been addressed with individual attention.

I have always had a great rapport with my advisor. They were supportive and offered the guidance I needed to complete my studies.

My advisor has been & is an amazing mentor, guide, & counselor. I have felt completely safe & comfortable discussing my challenges & concerns with them. More important they have always put my best interests first & ensured increased & enhanced opportunities for learning & growth!

Negative Responses:

About a year ago my advisor was changed. I have not had the opportunity to take a class with them yet, and they are primarily in a different concentration, so I do not feel very connected.

There have only been two brief meetings with my advisor; an insufficient amount of time to build any kind of rapport.

They're not exactly an "outreach" kind of person.

Item #2 regarding connectedness to other students in the program:

Positive Responses:

I feel extremely connected with other students in the program. The diversity with the doctoral students, age, ethnicity, occupations, & cultural background has led me to have friendships & academic learning experiences that have really enriched me.

I have built a tight knit group of friends in the program we've taken classes together, studied together, & shared a big part of lives with each other. I know that they will be a part of my life forever.

We work in teams; we care for each other genuinely (regardless of the concentration). Due to small classes, events, bringing food, working collaborative the students get to form strong friendships. I can truly say I have made friends for a lifetime (our friendship is strong) and I have friends from all over the world!

Negative Responses:

Prior to completing my course work, I had very few contacts with peers in the program. After completing course work on the program it was very hard to know where any one of us were. In fact, I don't even know if anyone of us has graduated since after the comprehensive exam was taken.

I have a real job & family that prevented me from playing school. In many ways, it was much like high school part two. Lots of in-group out-group dynamics.

There is very little connection with other students since most of them are working and also the structure of the program does not promote any connection or relationship among students. The courses should be offered according to whether one is 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year – that way students get to know each other as they are taking class together.

Item #3 regarding connectedness to faculty in the programs:

Positive Responses:

Overall I felt close to the faculty. The faculty I interacted with offered a great deal of support and assistance throughout the program.

I feel as if all faculty members are genuinely concerned for the doctoral students & are willing to go the extra mile to support students & their needs. The spirit of the institution fortifies feelings of connectedness to the faculty in the program. I have only had classes w/ about half of the faculty.

I feel that they are not only professors but also mentors. If we need any assistance with research they are always willing to help.

Negative Responses:

Meet with faculty only in necessary situations. (class, meeting, symposium…)

No "home" program affiliation. No doctoral mentoring. No outreach. I will be more aggressive in pursuit of support.

If I do not take any of their classes there is no connection whatsoever. There should be connection leading to growth or depth in the relationship of faculty and students from the application stage throughout the course of study. The dissertation writing should be part of the journey not the summit.

Item #8 regarding freedom to do one's own research:

Positive Responses:

I have found the faculty to be supportive in helping us find research that is a good fit for our skills, interests and resources as well as making a significant contribution to the global research community. I feel completely supported in my decision to explore a mathematics education construct.

I feel that I have full control on what I want to research.

My advisor has never curbed my research ideas. I think the transformative nature of this program/my concentration is evidenced in the fact that my dissertation has nothing to do with technology in education which is my experiential background!

Negative Responses (note: there was only one response to this question judged to be negative):

At the beginning of my dissertation, I was literally given to Dr. XXXXXXX. It's not their fault, but they threw my proposal away. We were not a good fit and now I'm with a different chair & 2 yrs were wasted.

Item #9 regarding feeling competent to complete the doctoral program:

Positive Responses:

I am certain that I will successfully complete the program. I have complete confidence in my instructors and my ability to do excellent work toward completion.

All tools & resources are available to complete my doctoral program. It is just simply a matter of time before it is completed.

I feel highly competent in completing my doctoral program because of the instructor's genuine care and concern for students. In short, instructors help students become self-directed and constructive by building on and expanding student's knowledge base.

Negative Responses:

I feel this way because this is the 3rd time I began my proposal, but I feel better about my situation.

Some days, I feel as though I'm in over my head while there are others when I feel as though I can accomplish anything.

I feel I have the competency, but am lacking connection to the program. Frankly, I'm floundering.

Item #10 regarding feeling challenged by other life challenges beyond the doctoral program:

Least Challenged Responses:

I was not employed during the time I was in the doctoral program. It was possible for me to give undivided attention to my studies.

I am an international student and full time student. I get financial assistance from sources without much conditions.

Most Challenged Responses:

This is by far the most difficult degree I've earned not only because of the time and financial investment but because it demands that I redefine myself. I'm a different person now. When faced with previously paralyzing challenges, I now build support teams and craft solutions – all with an amount of confidence and faith that I did not possess prior. I am a horribly shy person and the journey has shoved me completely out of my comfort zone. I'm incredible humbled to have the opportunity to work with and learn from amazing people from all over the world. I knew this would be difficult but I put in all into perspective. Working multiple jobs while raising my children was something I simply committed to with my whole heart. I approached this project in much the same way. Form an emotional perspective, it has been one of the very few mostly positive experiences I've had in my life.

I have other responsibilities apart from my doctoral studies. These other responsibilities limit the amount of focus I would love to give to my studies.

I choose to take one class a semester to help lessen those challenges; however, it is still difficult to take a class, raise a child, and work full time.

Analysis of Qualitative Responses for Survey Items 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, and 10

Qualitative narratives provided by the 42 study respondents were analyzed and organized by survey item. The most positive and negative responses for each survey were featured in the results, in the spirit of providing contrasts for each prompt.

Regarding connectedness to Advisor, positive responses included having concerns addressed with personalized attention, great rapport and support, amazing mentoring, guidance, and counseling. Negative responses included too many changes of Advisors, too few meetings with the Advisor, and the Advisor not being approachable.

Regarding connectedness to other students in the program, positive responses included being enriched by the friendships and learning experiences, building a tight knit group of friends in the program, and working in a team; as a result of small classes, events, and bringing in food to classes. Negative responses included not knowing where peers were in the dissertation process beyond the doctoral course work, having life obligations beyond the program that kept students from making the needed student-to-student connections, and the structure of the doctoral program being such that it does not promote meaningful peer connectedness; meaning, that the program should be more of a cohort model with students grouped together in year one, year two, year three, etc.

Regarding connectedness to faculty in the program, positive responses included a great deal of faculty support and assistance throughout the program, genuine concern displayed by some faculty members, and a feeling of some faculty being not only professors but also mentors.

Negative responses included only interacting with faculty during "necessary situations;" class,

meetings, symposiums, no "home" program concentration affiliation, no mentoring, and no

connection whatsoever with particular faculty members if classes are not taken with them.

Further:

> "There should be connection leading to growth or depth in the relationship
> of faculty and students from the application stage throughout the course of study.
> The dissertation writing should be part of the journey not the summit."

Regarding freedom to do, and conduct, one's own research, positive responses included

faculty being helpful in finding a good fit for student research skills, interests and resources,

possessing full control on what is researched, and never being curbed regarding research ideas.

The only negative response for this prompt discussed being assigned to a faculty dissertation

guide and their misplacing the students' proposal, resulting in a loss of two years work.

Regarding feeling competent to complete the doctoral program, positive responses

included feeling certain that the program can be successfully completed, having all tools and

resources necessary to complete the program, and some instructors causing students to become

self-directed by building the needed knowledge base. Negative responses included being in the

third attempt of beginning a dissertation proposal, feelings of being in over one's head, and

lacking needed connectedness to the program resulting in floundering.

Regarding feeling challenged by life issues beyond the program, least challenged

responses included not having other work responsibilities beyond the doctoral program, and

having needed financial assistance so energies could be entirely focused on the program. Most

challenged responses included challenges with the time and financial commitment to the

program, having other life responsibilities that adversely affect performance in the program, and

taking a half load in the program as a result of the life responsibilities beyond the program.

Most/Least Beneficial and Most/Least Difficult Courses Qualitative Results

Item #4 regarding most beneficial course (single selected responses):

Belief Systems (n=9)

The word culture only meant "cultural sensitivity" to me as taught in many work related seminars. Learning about cultural themes opened a new perspective to me & pointed me toward future research topics/questions.

Research Methods and Tools (n=7)

Research Methods & Tools gave me the academic overview of the research process necessary as a PhD student.

History and Philosophy of Higher Education (n=5)

This course, although intensive reading is required, allows ample time for the student-led discussions. That is doctoral quality work.

Qualitative Research Design (n=5)

Dr. XXXXXXX is an excellent professor who knows this subject and is very competent and motivating. They demand excellence and I appreciate their standards.

Item #5 regarding least beneficial course (single selected responses):

Concepts of Leadership (n=4)

The way the course was structured made it difficult to make course material applicable.

Social Science Statistics with SPSS (n=4)

I do not think that this course provided an adequate overview of introductory statistical methods. I also do not believe that it prepared me enough for the advanced statistics course.

Organizational Assessment and Survey Administration (n=3)

Not nearly enough instruction on survey development, administration, & analysis given that this is a MAJOR research tool.

Qualitative Research Design (n=3)

While I have taken away something from each course that the others could not have offered, I chose this course because we were given a special topic. I would have benefited more if I were allowed to choose my own research topic.

Item #6 regarding most difficult course (single selected responses):

Social Science Statistics with SPSS (n=14)

There are many quantifiable approaches to cover in class and not enough time to fully explain them. Once (I thought) I learned one it was time to move to the next. Only course where I needed and had a tutor.

Qualitative Research Methods (n=4)

The professor was not at all clear of what was expected of us in the course. Research strategies taught were not designed properly, student learning outcomes were not there at all.

Concepts of Leadership (n=3)

In any reading intensive course, interaction with my professor and classmates is critical. The classroom dynamic in this course was very negative. This was an environment where I felt that my professor had little respect for me and I did not like the activities they assigned the class as they created this exclusionary atmosphere. I just didn't have a strong sense of self-efficacy consequently still don't feel as if I've sufficiently learned the concepts.

Research Methods and Tools (n=3)

Because so much of the information was new. For example, I had never done a lit review before this class and the process was painful, not only because I wasn't sure of what I was doing but also because the review had to be written as part of a team and my partner was an ESL student.

Item #7 regarding least difficult course (single selected responses):

Ethics for the Professions (n=7)

I consider ethics for the professions a critical part & requirement for all employees, students, peers & collegial members. This class was something I embraced so fully that overall content seemed easy.

Belief Systems (n=4)

I think that this course could have challenged my way of thinking a bit more, especially since it was a course on culture. However, I did find the concepts I learned to be very beneficial to my program of study.

Concepts of Leadership (n=4)

I believe the structure of the class gave me that peaceful easy feeling

Analysis of Qualitative Results for Most/Least Beneficial and Most/Least Difficult Courses

The most beneficial results of courses included enhanced cultural sensitivity, an overview of the research process, an understanding of doctoral level course work, and an appreciation for high expectations and standards.

The least beneficial results of courses included lack of coherence of course materials, the lack of coherent instruction for the complexities of data analysis software, lack of needed instruction on survey development, administration, and analysis, and lack of freedom of selected research topics in a course.

The most difficult courses featured too much to cover in class and not enough time to fully explain it, lack of clarity of what was expected of students in the course, improper research design strategies on the part of the instructor, lack of identifiable course outcomes, negative classroom dynamics on the part of the instructor, lack of respect for students resulting in a weakened sense of student efficacy, and overemphasis on creating literature reviews as course product that were not related to student needs.

The least difficult courses featured being one with the course's content and naturally thriving in it, and the lack of being challenged in positive ways.

Open-Ended Response Item

  11. **Please provide any additional information you would like to share regarding your perceptions about the doctoral program:**

Positive Responses

This is a great program and I am delighted to associate with instructors, colleagues and the university. I feel very fortunate to be in the program.

It is a great program in general. The learning/teaching community is wonderful. Great full time faculty. It is hard work but I am competitive & enjoyed academia. I would certainly recommend it to other students. I love the university! The Department of Education is unique. I would want to see more teaching/research assistantships available & more scholarships/financial aid. The Graduate Research Office is super excellent support! For the most part I love it so far.

I appreciate the fact that the program is geared toward student success and degree completion.

Critical Responses

More emphasis should be placed on "writing for publication" & "Grants." I do not understand why the life blood of a researcher is not a core course. Knowing where funds come from & how they function is key. Publication goes without saying.

Generally the program is great & has challenged me to continue to grow as a scholar & person. One concern that I have is that a number of students are getting stuck in the proposal process. I'm not too sure where the disconnect is during this phase of the program.

A more directional degree plan should be developed. The degree plan itself should guide the students throughout the semesters – year-wise, semester-wise, a logical sequential and corresponding process of registering for courses. Present degree plan is only the list of courses, not helpful.

A rational and more sensible comprehensive examination methods need to be developed. After completing all course works, in doctoral level, students should be evaluated and assessed – on understanding of ideas, concepts, and philosophy; their application in context of reality & life; not how much and what they remembered!

In current practice, after completing 54 credit hours, in about three years time, testing a student for eight hours in one day does not justify assessment of understanding and applications; even, perhaps not fair to students.

Analysis of the Qualitative Open Response

Positive open responses included the program being great, the learning/teaching community being wonderful, the school being unique, and the program being geared toward student success and degree completion.

Negative open responses included the program needing to emphasize writing for publication and grant writing more, concerns with the number of students who are getting stuck in the dissertation proposal process, the need for a more directional degree program; meaning, "year-wise, semester-wise, a logical sequential and corresponding process of registering for courses", a more rational and logical doctoral comprehensive examination, and elimination of the "8 hour seat time comprehensive exam."

Final Analysis of Initial Qualitative Results

Without qualitative results, student perceptions regarding the program appeared to be satisfactory. Quantitatively, the program is rated by students as average to above average. Satisfactory program outcomes, while pleasing, do not provide the needed opportunities for program improvement. Continuous program improvement is becoming more high stakes, as accrediting bodies are emphasizing this type of program data-driven assessment design.

Opportunities for improving the program reside most in the students' negative feedback to survey questions. Therefore, the Investigator focused on areas of student concern. The areas of greatest student concern included:

- Too many changes of Advisors, too few meetings with the Advisor, and the Advisor not being an "outreach" kind of person.

-Not knowing where peers were in the dissertation process beyond the doctoral course work.

- Having life obligations beyond the program that kept students from making the needed student-to-student connections.

-The structure of the doctoral program being such that it does not promote meaningful peer connectedness.

- Being assigned to a dissertation guide and the guide misplacing the student's proposal, resulting in a loss of a year's work.

- Being in the third attempt of beginning a dissertation proposal.

- Feelings of being in over one's head.

-Lacking needed connectedness to the program resulting in floundering.

-Challenges with the time and financial commitment to the program.

-Having other life responsibilities that adversely affect performance in the program.

- Only being able to carry a half load in the program, as a result of the life responsibilities

beyond the program.

- Lack of coherence of course materials.

 -Lack of coherent instruction for the complexities of data analysis software.

-Lack of needed instruction on survey development, administration, and analysis.

-Lack of freedom of selected research topics in a course.

- Too much to cover in class and not enough time to fully explain it.

-Lack of clarity of what was expected of students in the course.

 -Improper research design strategies on the part of the instructor.

-Lack of identifiable course outcomes.

-Negative classroom dynamics on the part of the instructor.

-Lack of respect for students resulting in a weakened sense of student efficacy.

-Overemphasis on creating literature reviews as course product that were not related to student

needs.

- The lack of being challenged in courses in positive ways.

- The need to emphasize writing for publication and grant writing more.

- Concerns with the number of students who are getting stuck in the dissertation proposal

process.

-The need for a more directional degree program; meaning, "year-wise, semester-wise, a logical

sequential and corresponding process of registering for courses".

- The need for a more rational and logical doctoral comprehensive examination.

Follow up Interviews

Because the study was confidential, rather than anonymous, the Investigator was able to seek more clarity regarding the items of greatest concern from study participants. Several study participants were asked follow up questions in interviews, regarding the areas of greatest concern.

In the follow up interviews study participants expressed concerns about the number of students who successfully completed the doctoral program of studies, but were unable to succeed in the dissertation portion of the degree program.

Students also expressed concerns about the number of courses that merely featured a final course project literature review. They reported that literature reviews were turned in at the end of the semesters and no feedback regarding them were received. No other assessments were evident in the courses. Participants were not sure why they received the grades they did in these courses, since they received no feedback regarding what they had done. They would often receive the end of course literature review assignment with a grade but no feedback.

Several study participants reported many of the doctoral students shared that they did not complete the questionnaire for this study, due to a general mistrust of some doctoral faculty, and a commonly held belief that if they were honest about the program there would be retribution on the part of some of those faculty. Although the Investigator had informed potential respondents of the confidential nature of the study, along with providing the IRB disclosure, many students were concerned about the consequences of their sharing feelings about courses and the program. When asked further about this perceived lack of trust, several of the students shared incidences where students had spoken up about issues in courses and the program concentrations. They reported students who had expressed these concerns were subsequently punished in arbitrary ways by some of the doctoral faculty.

Students reported concerns about the number of advisors they had while in the program, the number of faculty who came and went during their time in the program, and the quality of product of some of the students in the program.

Follow up Interviews Results

Study participants expressed concerns about the number of students who were unable to successfully complete the degree program, the lack of formative and diagnostic assessments in, and across courses, the lack of feedback regarding summative assessments in, and across, courses, retribution among some of the doctoral faculty for students expressing concerns about courses and the program, and program advisor and faculty turnover.

Interviews With Program Faculty

As a result of the follow up student interview results, the Investigator opted to interview two of the seven doctoral faculty members. When the Investigator asked about study participants' perceptions regarding concerns about students being able to complete the doctoral program, and achieving candidacy, but unable to complete dissertations, the following was shared:

> "The doctoral program has basically been one with open enrollment. Students with GRE percentile rankings as low as 1 percentile have been admitted. There are competing interests between the university's faculty requirements for scholarship and service and meeting the needs of the doctoral students. Candidates are provided great liberty in selecting dissertation topics, and often their topics do not coincide with research interests and required scholarship needs of faculty."

When the Investigator asked about the doctoral students' perceptions of some faculty only assigning literature reviews, collected at the end of courses and not providing needed feedback, the following was shared:

"While the university claims the school is one where the emphasis is on teaching, the scholarship requirements and tenure process are such that requirements are more reflective of a high research university. There is an institutional disconnect between what is expressed and what is measured. In order for faculty to remain on successful tenure track, the first priority must be to produce publishable research and substantial service. If faculty expends the needed work energies to assess the doctoral students as they should in courses, there is simply not enough time to meet the scholarship and service requirements. It comes down to whether or not faculty can remain in employment, due to university demands, when they decide to only require an end of the course assignment. It is a survival technique."

When the Investigator asked about doctoral student perceptions regarding there being retribution

for students speaking out about courses and programs, the following was shared:

"There are some faculty members who are arbitrary with the students. It is unfortunate. In one case a faculty member's tenure nomination was voted down by the tenured faculty of the school, due in part to their treatment of students. The tenure process here includes tenured faculty within the school first voting on potential tenure for faculty. Then, the university council considers the vote and can either agree with the school's recommendation or not. In the case of this one professor, a high-ranking university official overrode the tenured school faculty's vote and convinced the university council to override the school's vote and tenure them. This decision was not in the best interest of the students and program. Additionally, two other faculty members worked for the university in other capacities prior to becoming professors in the doctoral program. They understand the university's emphasis from above is about getting students into the program to enjoy the needed revenue. Their perception is the revenue is more important than meeting student needs. Frankly, it is a business of dollars and cents. For these reasons, they know how things have always been done and perpetuate this status quo. They resist change. The revenue generated from the program is the priority. These are examples of the politics within the organization that ultimately negatively impact the students."

When the Investigator asked about the doctoral students' perception of there being turnover of

advisors and faculty in the program, the following was shared:

"There has been considerable faculty and advisor turnover in the doctoral program the past few years, as a result of a death, retirements, and now resignation. But the public commentary by the program leadership focuses on faculty retirements. There has been no public discussion regarding faculty resignation. I suppose this is to quash any potential discussions regarding faculty, or student, dissatisfaction with the courses, concentrations, and programs. The governance model has been one where the consensus model for making decisions has allegedly been in place. What has actually been in place was a particular faculty member with university-wide authority making the decisions. It was called a consensus model because other faculty knew to agree with that person. Other

faculty followed that person's lead due to their universal power and authority. However, when that faculty member left the program the so called consensus model continued. But there was no longer a faculty member with particular power and authority in the group. When a faculty member introduced a motion, utilizing Robert's Rules, in a meeting, there was shock and resistance by those who had been followers of the old model. Other faculty said they did not know Robert's Rules. Ironically, they all were participants in Robert's Rules in the larger School of Education monthly meetings. So, their feigned lack of knowledge of Robert's Rules was dishonest. They simply were resisting and blocking change. The faculty member who introduced it was surprised by fellow faculty's dishonesty and attempted deception. The faculty could not agree on shifting away from the alleged consensus model which impeded progress. There was great resistance to procedural and substantive change in any forms. Repeatedly, the old guard among the faculty stated, "We have always done it this way…" For this reason, and others, faculty departed from the program."

Conclusions, Summary, and Recommendations

The study revealed 27 areas of student perceived concerns. Four of the areas were selected for further research. The areas prompted follow up student and program faculty interviews. The four areas were: concerns with students completing the dissertation process of the degree program, lack of formative and summative assessments in courses, retribution for students speaking out about problems with courses and the program, and advisor and faculty turnover in the program.

The Investigator concluded the open enrollment nature of the doctoral program was related to the substantial numbers of Candidates who are unable to complete the dissertation portion of the degree. If the doctoral program admits anyone who possesses the minimum required grade point average for a completed Master's degree, and who simply takes the GRE, then it must meet the many unique needs of students entering, and traveling through, the program.

The inability to complete dissertations was exacerbated by the lack of formative and diagnostic assessments across courses, as well as the lack of feedback for the summative literature reviews. The faculty scholarship realities are such that they compete with meeting the

program's unique students' needs. Doctoral Candidates should be guided in their research areas so it better complements the university scholarship demands of the professors, while causing graduates of the doctoral program to select topics that enhance their employability. In other words, there is too much freedom in Candidate selection of dissertation research topics. Contemplating the control of freedom of doctoral student research, for students' sake, as well as faculty's, needs further research, as the Investigator previously did not consider student freedom to do research as a possible detriment.

Students not having their academic needs met was compounded by faculty being tenured by the university who did not receive a majority vote within the school to be tenured. Retribution on the part of some faculty is most likely connected to those who mistreat the students, and enjoy being tenured by the university against the will of others in the school who are tenured. The university should revisit the policy and honor the tenured faculty decision votes within the school.

Summary

Traditional quantitative evaluations of programs provide limited, and often desirable, results. In the case of this study, the quantitative portion of the mixed methods design, used as the secondary data source, yielded average to above average doctoral student perceptions of their program. This result suggested participant satisfaction with the program. However, when the qualitative portion of the embedded design was analyzed, a substantial number of areas of concern were discovered. These additional data results, featuring 27 areas of concern, provide opportunities for program improvement. Without the mixed methods embedded design approach, such opportunities for improvement would not have been discovered and be possible.

Recommendations

The Investigator recommends the people with power and authority in the doctoral program studied review the students' 27 areas of concern, address them in the spirit of continuous program improvement, and make the needed program changes and improvements.

Beyond the study results, the merit of the mixed methods embedded design, with the qualitative component providing the primary data, seems obvious. Further research involving the application of mixed methods embedded research, with the qualitative portion serving as the primary data source, is needed.

In this age of intensified data driven analyses of programs, provoked by enhanced accreditation rules; not to mention doing the right thing, the application of the mixed methods embedded study design seems appropriate for authentic program evaluation and improvement. As evidenced in this study, the design provides opportunities for program evaluators to discover participants' perceptions of areas of concerns, beyond ordinary satisfactory results.

There will be resistance to going beyond usual satisfactory data results. Great energies are expended in preserving programs as they are, by many parties involved in them. While continuous program improvement sounds like a positive thing, it can be painful to those responsible for the changes. Program changes can also be difficult for the students.

Utilization of study designs, that unearth traditionally hard to find areas of concern, should be prefaced with cautions to upper echelons of college administrations, so as to not cause the results to be misinterpreted as inadequacies on the part of administrators of those programs. But, first, the administrators of programs must be willing to buy in to uncovering concern areas. Again, for many reasons, this will be difficult. Life is easier for all concerned when programs are perceived to be satisfactory.

There can be a fine line between perceptions of poor performance by program directors, and coordinators, and mixed methods embedded design program evaluation assessment uncovering areas of concern. Mixed methods embedded study results can set off proverbial program quality alarms, unnecessarily. All parties concerned with continuous improvement of a program should understand that a program may well be satisfactory but still have many areas of concern. It is the areas of concern, and acknowledging and addressing them, which will take the programs to new places.

The discovered areas of concern are opportunities for program improvement. Program improvement has potential for making a program all it can be. However, acknowledging formerly hidden areas of concerns in programs are ripe with complex political issues, and therefore highly sensitive. There will be great resistance to this new program evaluation approach, for reasons mentioned.

More research is needed in how to best promote program readiness for the realities of discovering areas of concern, in seemingly satisfactory programs, to reduce potential tensions among program and institutional decision makers, when such results are realized and shared. It is vital for programs to go beyond merely producing desirable data results.

The goal can no longer be to deliver data results that merely suggest a satisfactory program. Programs can no longer afford to do things as they have always been done. Instead, efforts must be made in the area of utilizing program evaluation study designs, resulting in discoveries of program concerns that have been historically hidden; or, worse yet concerns that have been historically ignored.

In other words, we can no longer afford to apply study designs that merely yield satisfactory program results. It is no longer business as usual in higher education. Instead, we must do what is not customary and traditional, and do what is difficult.

We must apply study designs that yield areas of concern, in programs that otherwise appear to be satisfactory. As program evaluators, we must dare to seek and share the program concerns. Then, in the spirit of continuous program improvement, those with the power and authority to do so should address the program concerns and genuinely improve them.

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