Lessons from the Assessment of a Summer Workshop for ABD Students

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Introduction

Since the 1960s, due in part to an in-depth review of graduate education in the United States by Berelson (1960), concern has been growing about the number of doctoral students caught in a lengthening time to degree completion within their particular graduate programs. Bereleson's (1960) recommendations were to keep doctoral studies to four years and to require a shorter dissertation to hasten time to degree completion. It was not until 40 years later, when Bowen and Rudenstein (1992) reported on issues related to the doctoral degree in their landmark study, *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.,* that attention by researchers and educators alike regarding rates of graduate student retention and doctoral degree completion took on greater salience. Numerous studies followed on the status and conditions of doctoral students working towards degree completion. Menand (1996) and Atwell (1996) echoed Berelson (1960) and suggested that less time be spent on the dissertation as a way to get more doctoral students to finish. In fact, Menand (1996) observed, "If all Ph.D. programs were three-year programs, with no teaching and no dissertation -- if getting a doctorate were like getting a law degree -- graduate education would immediately acquire focus and efficiency" (p. 81).

Neither of these suggestions has caught on nationally. What is still true today is that countless doctoral students continue to be caught in an "all but dissertation" or ABD (Sternberg, 1981) limbo with an ongoing institutional and public perception that these students themselves are responsible for their lengthening ABD status. A result of the

lengthening ABD status is that many doctoral students are relegated to the academic borders because they lack the completion of the dissertation, which is the cornerstone of the doctoral experience, and that which determines membership in an exclusive guild.

The lengthening ABD status has created a growing concern as to how to assess graduate studies' educational strategies so that good practices leading to degree completion can be indentified While there are several cross-institutional and innovative programmatic initiatives currently underway to develop assessment tools and standards, there is still no consensus about what constitutes standards or tools for assessment within graduate departments or programs (Golde, 2002). When one considers that the development of graduate students to perform critical roles ins society as researchers, scholars, scientists, and skilled practitioners in the worlds of policy and practice, the fact that ways of assisting them to complete their degrees in a shorter time span *remains under addressed* at the institutional level is particularly problematic.

What can we do at the program level to assess graduate students' development and progress? Are there certain practices – or lack of them – that contribute to the current conditions? Is there a specific set of answers to these questions? Can a toolbox be developed that holds all the solutions to problems and issues that crop up regarding graduate student development and progress toward degree completion? In sum, what must graduate level assessment confront in order to help students be on track to move from the ABD status to completion and to transition into their postdoctoral roles?

The data for this paper are drawn from a study of a doctoral program for working professional students that initially chose to address the ABD problem in their institution as a response to the findings of an external program evaluation. Of interest here are the

voices of the doctoral participants and what they revealed about the nature of their lived experiences (van Manen, 1997) following course completion as they prepared for qualifying examinations, undertook the dissertation process, and finished their degrees.

The ABD Condition

To reiterate, doctoral candidates are languishing in the ABD or "all but dissertation" stage of their degree for increasingly longer periods of time. Doctoral granting institutions such as the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of California at Berkeley conducted studies on their own programs on this phenomenon. According to Nerad (cited in Leatherman, 2000, p. A19), graduate education researchers "do not know the proportion of doctoral students who are ABD, how long they've been in that category, and how those figures would compare with the previous years." Nerad states that ABDs have not been studied as a distinct group partly because the description of whom they are varies so widely. Responses to the question of how long doctoral students have been working on their dissertations will vary depending on the tasks they are doing while in the ABD stage. Some ABD students may be involved with their major professors in research projects and see these commitments as connected to their scholarly development and dissertation progress. Yet, others may have to contend with personal commitments, financial needs, professional obligations, and family demands while working on the dissertation. In such instances, time to completion may stretch out longer than initially anticipated when the doctoral students began the process. Aside from such factors, time to completion also varies by disciplines. Baird (1990) found that time to degree completion is shortest in the sciences, longer in the

social sciences, and longest in the humanities, with an average of four years difference in completion time between the sciences and the humanities.

Defining the Term ABD

How the term ABD is defined is important in determining just who is relegated to this category. The literature offers a sketchy picture of this term and how it is defined. In his popular guide, *How to Complete and Survive a Dissertation,* Sternberg (1981) defines ABD simply as "all but the dissertation." Sternberg further notes that "the frequency of the ABD status has become so large that it has been legitimated in its own right" (p. 2). He offers the example of job announcements that state that individuals with an ABD status are acceptable applicants for teaching positions.

A common institutional definition typically centers on doctoral students who have passed their qualifying examinations, advanced to doctoral candidacy, and are officially ready to begin the dissertation phase. But in some institutions, the term ABD may also simply refer to doctoral candidates who need to complete some or all of the phases related to the dissertation. These phases can include taking the qualifying examination, selecting a research topic, writing the proposal, collecting the data, analyzing the data, writing up the study, having the oral defense, and submitting the dissertation to the institution (Kluever, 1997). As Golde (2001, private correspondence) makes clear, "the length of time writing and the nature of the dissertation varies a lot by discipline" can define who falls into an ABD status.

What remains clear is that there is no accepted definition of the term ABD other than in its broadest meaning and it continues to be used widely within academe. For the purposes of this paper, I will employ the definition used in the collaborative doctoral

program I studied. In that program, ABD students are doctoral students who have completed all course work. As ABD students, they may or may not have passed the qualifying examination and advanced to candidacy and they may or may not be working on some phase of the dissertation itself.

The ABD Stage: Product and Process

As asserted above, the dissertation – from the proposal to the oral defense – remains the cornerstone of doctoral studies and it is the final major requirement before the degree can be awarded. Berelson described the doctoral dissertation as "shifting from its traditional conception as an 'original and significant contribution to knowledge' to that of a training instrument" (1960, p. 230). Bowen and Rudenstein (1992), on the other hand, averred that the dissertation requires students to become independent scholars and researchers who produce original, creative work. Given that dissertation variations in the sciences, humanities, social sciences, and in the professional areas are now accepted, both descriptions are accurate. In fact, in a more democratic forum, the more traditional five-chapter dissertation format could be replaced by one to several articles as in the sciences, an evaluation report in a professional program, a novel, a recital, or a play in the humanities (Goodchild and Miller, 1997).

Typically, all doctoral students still undergo the same five stages in their programs although these may differ in order and some stages may vary or occur concurrently depending on the discipline. These stages include: (1) completing all course work; (2) preparing for and passing the qualifying examination that advances the student to candidacy and starts the candidacy clock, although the latter may vary by discipline or institution; (3) finding a dissertation topic, developing the proposal, and

selecting a dissertation chair and other committee members; (4) doing the dissertation research that includes data collection, analysis, and writing up the results; and (5) having the dissertation oral defense followed by revising and filing the completed dissertation with the institution (Katz, 1997; Nerad &Cerny, 1991).

The above said, certain faculty assumptions prevail about the various stages of doctoral studies that do not necessarily reflect reality for the graduate students themselves and that may in fact actually contribute to a lengthening of their ABD status. In effect, while graduate faculty may be well aware of what the stages of preparation for the dissertation are, they make the assumption that graduate students know them as well and that they will act as agents to serve their own interests. Reality, however, indicates that doctoral students are not necessarily as well informed as faculty might believe and that much of the process remains hidden to them. Golde and Dore (2001) found that many doctoral students "do not clearly understand what doctoral study entails, how the process works and how to navigate it effectively" (p. 3). This lack of a clear understanding among graduate students of what the doctoral process involves may contribute to a longer time to degree completion and greater attrition rates, with more students moving into a permanent ABD status. For working professional students, frequently Ed.D. students, who often attend evening or weekend classes when many faculty are gone and offices closed, obtaining this information and clearly understanding what each stage means, can significantly contribute to or inhibit their progress in the program. Confusion or lack of clarity can lead to a sense of marginalization and the perception that a hierarchy of first- and second-class doctoral students exists.

A second assumption fundamentally embedded in doctoral education is that the Ph.D. degree is a research degree with a primary purpose of teaching doctoral students how to conduct sound, rigorous research. On the other hand, it is assumed that the Ed.D. degree is a practitioner-based study with a less rigorous theoretical grounding – in effect, a "second-class degree" with less status and prestige.

A third assumption presumes that doctoral students learn the intricacies of research and how to become serious scholars by serving as apprentices to their professors (Golde and Dore, 2001), usually by working with them on their research. This assumption continues to have salience even as funding sources for conducting research continue to shrink and as a result less opportunities exist for doctoral students to serve as research assistants.

While the first assumption may be equally true for Ph.D. and working professional students, the third assumption may not be true for working professional students, mainly due to lack of opportunity and time for them to become involved. Most doctoral programs require Ph.D. students to be enrolled full-time, fulfill residency requirements, and be assigned as graduate assistants to faculty in exchange for funding their studies. These requirements give Ph.D. students opportunities to take advantage of available research projects that help develop their research skills and thus give them scholarly and apprenticeship advantages. On the other hand, most Ed.D. students are usually full-time working professionals, thus their programs are typically designed around their work schedules by offering evening and weekend classes. In light of their combined roles as doctoral students and full-time employees, Ed.D. students, especially, are marginalized to the academic borders where there are very few to no research

opportunities available. These students are seldom able to take advantage of or even be considered for opportunities to work on research projects with their thesis supervisors or other faculty. Yet, given these students' practical experiences and contacts in the field, a viable possibility for bringing about organizational reform would be enhanced by creating collaborative projects between these doctoral students and faculty that could lead to valuable research experiences for both.

Factors that Facilitate or Inhibit Doctoral Progress and Process

There are numerous factors that enhance or inhibit doctoral students' progress to degree completion. A study by Nerad and Cerny (1993) of humanities and social sciences ABD students led to the development of a working model of nine institutional factors. Although Nerad and Cerny focused only on Ph.D. students, these nine factors have implications for Ed.D. and working professional students with respect to time to degree completion and attrition.

All or some of these nine factors impact doctoral students' progress towards degree completion and the process itself. The *research mode* highlights the pronounced differences between the sciences and the social sciences and humanities in how the research is conducted. In the sciences doctoral students are usually involved with research teams while in other disciplines students often work individually. *Program structure* refers to whether a master's degree and qualifying exam are required for admission to the doctoral program. Students who need either or both of these take longer to finish. *Definition of the dissertation* refers to whether the dissertation is perceived primarily as a test of future ability to do research or whether the dissertation makes contribution to research or to practice. *Departmental advising* refers to general

departmental advising and individual faculty mentoring. The former generally leads to limited student knowledge of what to do regarding the dissertation while the latter is expected to lead to greater knowledge of and satisfaction in the program and progress in the dissertation, especially when working with the supervising professor. *Departmental environment* refers to academic support services and social activities for all students to assist them at every stage of the doctoral process. Ideally, activities for doctoral students integrate everyone into the fabric of the department and marginalize no one. *Availability of research money* refers to sources for financial support and research grants open to all students, typically more available to Ph.D. students than to Ed.D. and/or working professional students. *Type of financial support* refers to how much and how many years of funding are available to doctoral students, usually awarded to Ph.D. students over Ed.D. students. *Campus facilities* refers to services such as the quality of the library and computer labs, the hours academic and student services are available, graduate student offices and meeting spaces, campus transportation, graduate student housing, and child care facilities. Lastly, *job market* refers to career prospects related to actual openings, career mobility, and salary possibilities in academic, business and industry, and postdoctoral organizations. Related to this is the willingness of faculty to assist doctoral students with the job search at its various stages.

The sequence and effect of these nine factors can vary for doctoral students depending on which of the factors are relevant in a particular context and the degree to which they have a positive or a negative impact on individual students' motivation. Some institutions may pay greater attention to some of these factors than to others. This in turn impact students' progress in differential ways. Thus, it may be that some of these

factors may have greater salience for individual students, particularly for working professional students, in light of the institutions they attend, the programs they select, and the faculty who advise them.

Although Nerad and Cerny's (1993) nine factors are useful in alerting us to areas that should be considered when assessing the issues involved in the lengthening ABD status, they are problematic in that they depict a traditional doctoral paradigm that remains essentially unchallenged within academe. This paradigm of accepted organizational beliefs expects doctoral students to function as entrepreneurial agents, thus masking institutional practices that, in themselves, contribute to the lengthening ABD status. Students must seek out their advisors and/or supervisors, identify mentors and entice them to serve in these roles, find research projects to work on that may or may not lead to dissertation topics, stay current on funding sources to finance their studies, and so forth. Furthermore, for doctoral students who reach the all but dissertation stage, this unchallenged paradigm expects them to continue to function as independent agents in negotiating the most crucial stage of their program, the dissertation.

An elitist model, this paradigm essentially rewards doctoral students who actively and successfully seek out mentors and support on their own; who are sought out by faculty who value certain perceived qualities about them and that will help faculty advance their own work; or, who are sufficiently motivated and organized to persist on their own. In sum, these are the doctoral students faculty prefer to work with and, in fact, who presume rather matter-of-factly that these are the roles that all doctoral students should assume if they are to succeed in the entrepreneurial doctoral enterprise of the academy.

The discussion and relevancy of this traditional paradigm links to my study by contributing to the research design and a framework for analysis. As will be demonstrated next is that the lessons learned from the ABD participants actually challenged some of these assumptions and factors.

Background of the Study

The University of California at Davis and the California State University, Fresno, began a joint doctoral program in fall 1991 to meet the advanced degree needs of working educational professionals in the San Joaquin Valley, a large agricultural area in the central part of the state. The Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership (JDPEL) offers a professionally based research degree , the Ed.D. A faculty member from each campus serves as a program co-coordinator. All courses are co-taught by Davis and Fresno faculty at the University of California Educational Research Center (UCERC) in Fresno. As has become common in many universities, the courses are offered in the evenings and on weekends in a two-year sequence to accommodate full-time working professionals. The JDPEL began with 13 students known as cohort one and in the fall of 2002 it welcomed cohort twelve.

There had been a concern by JDPEL faculty about the rising time to degree completion of ABD students due to their balancing full-time work, family, and the doctoral program demands at the dissertation stage. An external review of the program in fall 1999 led to discussions with graduates and current doctoral students. They indicated that a workshop that would not only help students be better prepared to do the dissertation, but that it would also help increase their completion rates and decrease the number of those in a prolonged ABD state. Nearly 55 percent of all doctoral students in

cohorts one to seven had completed the degree as of then. In light of the evaluation and student input, program coordinators decided to offer a summer workshop for interested ABD students.

A weeklong workshop was held in July 2000, in Fresno, for 20 students. It was open to all doctoral students who had completed their course work and thus had ABD status. I served as the director. Eight invited faculty members from different institutions focused on the content and process of the dissertation throughout the week. The sessions were held at the UCERC. Most students lived near and commuted daily; several who lived further away stayed at nearby hotels.

With consent from the program coordinators and the participants themselves, I contacted the students in spring and fall 2001 and again in spring 2002 to assess their progress toward completing the dissertation and graduating. As agreed with participants, I plan to contact those who had not finished in early 2003.

Methodology

This paper reports on the findings from the most recent data collection, year two, conducted in spring 2002. An earlier paper (Laden, 2001) reported on the first year following the workshop.

A mixed methods approach of survey and telephone interviews was used to gather data. The JDPEL office provided student contact information and students' status within the program. An essay-response questionnaire submitted by electronic mail was used to gather most doctoral participants' input. Telephone interviews had been planned, however, I found that an electronically administered survey questionnaire was preferred overwhelmingly by the participants given their busy professional and personal schedules.

The questionnaire also gave them time to reflect on their experiences. Participants also had the option of a telephone interview. Electronic mail and telephone calls were used to remind some participants to get their survey responses in and these contacts often offered some additional data. . All 20 summer workshop participants were contacted and 18 (90%) responded. Fourteen (77%) responded to the electronic survey and four (23%) preferred telephone interviews. As the two non-participants offered some information as to their doctoral status when I communicated with them, they are included in the demographic profiles in Tables 1 and 2 only to show the status toward degree completion of all 20 individuals.

The nine factors identified by Nerad and Cerny (1993) that influence time to degree completion and attrition served as a conceptual guide for developing the questionnaire. I relied on the overall data to reveal emerging patterns, insights, and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) about the participating Ed.D. doctoral students' experiences leading to degree completion. The overarching research question that guided the study asked: What was the progress of the doctoral students toward degree completion in the second year following the summer workshop? For this paper, the focus is on lessons learned from the lived experiences (van Manaen, 1997) of the doctoral students in the ABD stage. It is important to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of the students' everyday experiences that may offer plausible insights and bring us into more direct contact with their world.

It is also important to consider how some graduate students in the academy are marginalized, silenced, and rendered virtually invisible while other students enjoy high profiles and are celebrated as the next generation of scholars (Tierney, 1991). We must

explore questions such as: Who are the doctoral students who get pushed to the academic borders and why? How might we understand their experiences that lead them to these borders and how might we bring them back into the center?

Lessons Learned from ABD Students

Three major lessons emerged from the graduate students' lived experiences that bear consideration in examining our own doctoral programs and our ABD students' progress toward degree completion. The three lessons salient to ABD students are: (1) having emotional support, (2) staying connected, and (3) staying committed. These lessons draw particular attention to and explicate further two of the factors identified by Nerad and Cerny (1993) – departmental advising and departmental environment – noting that these students gave primacy to relational factors of nurturing and caring. These findings also challenge the existing entrepreneurial paradigm that informs the structure and practices in many graduate studies programs.

To set a context for these three lessons, I begin with a demographic profile of the doctoral students in the study and what their progress was toward degree completion as of spring 2002. Then I present the three lessons and a brief discussion of each related to the study's findings. I conclude with some recommendations for how doctoral students' experiences in the dissertation stage can be enhanced in order to facilitate their progress to degree completion.

Doctoral Students' Profile

Twenty doctoral students who had completed all course work and thus were considered to be ABD participated in the summer workshop (Table 1). Among the 20 participants, there was an almost even distribution of gender and racial/ethnic diversity.

There were 11 women and nine men, and of these four identified themselves as African American, six as Latino/a, and one as Asian American while the other nine students identified themselves as White. All were employed in full-time positions, and all but one worked in a school, college, or university. The ABD students were from cohorts 3 to 8, with nine of them from cohort 8. Having just completed their coursework in the spring prior to the workshop, none of cohort 8 students had taken the qualifying examination.

Table 1: A Demographic Profile of the ABD Participants in the 2000 Summer Workshop

Gender		Race and Ethnicity		Cohort and Number From Each		
Female	11 (55%)	African American	4 (20%)	Cohort 3	2	(10%)
Male	9 (45%)	Latino/a	6 (30%)	Cohort 5	2	(10%)
		Asian American	1 (05%)	Cohort 6	4	(20%)
		White	9 (45%)	Cohort 7	3	(15%)
				Cohort 8	9	(45%)

What kind of progress had the participants made by spring 2002 (Table 2)? For at least six of the students, completing the qualifying examination was their goal following the summer workshop. Although most of these students stated they envisioned doing this within three months, the majority realized that with their full-time jobs and family commitments this was difficult. Nonetheless, four students from cohort 8 passed their qualifying examinations and advanced to candidacy, collected their data, and finished their dissertations in time to graduate in spring 2001. A year later, two more students, from cohorts 7 and 8, completed the dissertation and graduated in spring 2002. Two other students, from cohorts 7 and 8, passed the qualifying examination, turned in their proposals, and were waiting to hear from their committees. These two students anticipate finishing the dissertation and graduating in spring 2003.

In addition, two students, from cohorts 5 and 6, were awaiting the results of their qualifying examinations and notice of their advancement to doctoral candidacy. These

two stated they also anticipated being able to complete the dissertation and graduate in 2003. Another four students, from cohorts 3, 6, and 8, stated they were preparing for the qualifying examination. On the other hand, five students, from cohorts 5, 6, 7, and 8, stated they felt "stalled" and had not been able to get motivated. Nevertheless, they each said they still had every intention of finishing. Only one student, from cohort 8, declared that she did not plan to finish as the doctoral degree was no longer important to her career advancement in her new position.

Table 2: ABD Participants' Progress Toward Ed.D. Degree Completion as of Spring 2002

Completion Status	Number of Students (N=20)	Percentage	Cohort Member
Finished spring 2001	4	20%	Cohort 8
Finished spring 2002	2	10%	Cohort 7, 8
Awaiting proposal approval, plan to finish by 2003	2	10%	Cohort 7, 8
Advanced to candidacy	2	10%	Cohort 5, 6
Preparing for qualifying examination	4	20%	Cohort 3, 6, 8
"Feeling stalled"	5	25%	Cohort 5, 6, 7, 8
Not plan to complete doctoral degree	1	05%	Cohort 8

In summary, eight students had either completed the dissertation and graduated or made some progress toward this goal as of spring 2002. Two other students had advanced to candidacy and another four were preparing to complete this requirement. Another five students were feeling much more challenged and struggling to initiate some movement and one had intentionally left the program. The lessons cited below that emerged from the study stem from factors these students identified as having contributed to or inhibited their progress toward degree completion.

Lesson One: Having Emotional Support

Family and Friends. Encouragement from family and friends has been found to significantly facilitate or impede students' persistence behavior (Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1993). It was not surprisingly, then, that every doctoral student in the study expressed a strong need for emotional support from their family was crucial to their success. Moreover, they noted that having a caring and nurturing environment that supported them in a time when they felt most alone – the post course period leading to degree completion – was very important. For example, a student near completion of the dissertation at the time he was interviewed stated, "I couldn't have gotten this far without the incredible support from my wife." A single parent attributed her emotional support to her parents, noting, "I could never do this without them. They help me with my daughters, but it is really knowing how much they care and how they want to do everything they can to support me that makes the biggest difference for me."

Peers and Colleagues. The participants also revealed that support from their peers and work colleagues was also important in persisting toward degree completion. A student commented, "I'm single so I have to rely on myself, but I am also lucky that I

have friends and colleagues at work who care and encourage me. They remind me what I should be focusing on and just knowing they care inspires me to stay with the dissertation, to not give up." Another student mentioned how just having coffee occasionally with a supportive colleague who was also in the program reminded her of what she needed to do and why it was important to stay focused.

Faculty. The roles faculty members assume and the encouragement they offer – or withhold – also contribute heavily to doctoral students' success or attrition rates (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993). It was not surprising, then, that the faculty figured prominently in ABD students' need for emotional support, especially since they were no longer on campus and not seeing faculty often as they had while taking courses. At least half of the students stated they had positive experiences with their advisors. "I can call my advisor any time" was a common statement among them. Getting a prompt response on their writing was also cited as important, especially since they were working full-time and writing when they could in the evenings and weekends. Quick to praise his advisor, a student noted, "I get quick feedback whenever I give him something to read."

A lack of faculty support, however, had a continuing negative impact on at least five students. In each case, the students assumed it was their responsibility to contact faculty since faculty members were not reaching out to them, but they also did not know whom to contact for assistance. As they continued to struggle with their preparation to take the qualifying examination, these students remarked that they felt "adrift" and "isolated" with no advisors to guide them through the process. Factors such as recent faculty turnover, especially in a program that depends on faculty from two campuses (one 90 miles away), and "feeling disconnected" since completing coursework were noted as

contributing to their feelings of isolation. Two of these students voiced concern that because they knew very few faculty members now, they were uncertain who to approach for guidance. "I am not even sure who would be interested in working with me" lamented one of them. Another student stated that, when she took a new position at a university out-of-state, the strong support and encouragement she got from her new colleagues surprised her. "I am making so much more progress now than I did the last few years because they understand what my interests and issues are as a woman of color – something that most faculty in my program did not get – and they help me think things through." This student still had not identified a supervisor. She added, "If I could have the faculty I am working with here on my committee, I would be all set. And, just as important, I know they would continue to be supportive."

On the other hand, three of these five students stated optimistically that they felt they could "pick up the phone and call" a particular professor – interestingly, the same female professor was mentioned by all three. One student said, "I'm getting ready to call her soon. I know she will give me the help and motivation I need." Another thought this professor would be willing to be her advisor if asked. Nevertheless, the students clearly thought the onus to contact faculty rested with them, even with the female professor they thought of as supportive and potentially available to them.

For working professionals, managing a full-time position, family, and other obligations along with doctoral work, trying to attend to any or all of these requires a great deal of balancing and prioritizing as well as how to carve out time for the demands of the doctoral program post course work. Lenz (1995) found that doctoral "completers" were able to finish because of relational factors such as family and peer support and a

caring supervisor. Doctoral students who had finished or were making some progress toward degree completion, whether it was just having completed the qualifying examination and advanced to candidacy or at the dissertation writing stage, indicated that the support of family, significant others, and a caring advisor were crucial. They valued and derived strength from the "you can do it" messages these supportive individuals offered them repeatedly and in different ways.

Lesson Two: Staying Connected

Peer Effect. Staying connected to peers offered a different kind of support that was regarded as vital. Continued relationships with peers served several functions for ABD students. One of these functions was that peer connections continued to keep students' role identification as doctoral students alive and vibrant. Identifying as doctoral students in addition to all their other role identities encouraged these students to stay focused and move through the task of finishing as their peers were doing. Moreover, students felt that these connections allowed them to share problems with each other, gain new insights and perspectives, and generally just keep communications open with others who were going through the same experiences and understood their needs. "I don't know how I would have done it without my peers. They kept me focused and they wouldn't let me quit when I got discouraged and was ready to forget the whole thing," remarked a student who had completed the qualifying examination. How and if graduate students maintain a sense of connection with peers when they are in the ABD stage is seldom highlighted in the literature, yet it is these very connections that often serve as a 'window' into what is going on among students. In this instance, maintaining a focus,

continuing to be motivated, and making progress toward degree completion were attributed to their peers' support and interactions with them.

The Cohort Effect. The cohort model is frequently used as an organizational method to move students together through the doctoral process – or at least through courses. It is also an effective way to build and strengthen supportive bonds among peers. For most of the participants in the study, the cohort effect was described as being very strong during the two years they took courses together, but they noted that it diminished thereafter with each passing year. An exception was cohort eight perhaps because the nine participants had completed courses just prior to the summer workshop. Six of them formed a study group and prepared for the qualifying examination after the workshop. The members still maintained an e-mail exchange with each other two years later. Various members of this cohort shared that they often encouraged each other (via their listserv) and that this served to inspire and motivate them when "the going got tough." Notably, five of the six participants who completed the dissertation by spring 2002 were from cohort 8 and the sixth member was awaiting approval of her proposal at that time.

Isolated and Stalled. In contrast, almost all the other participants in the study – those who had not made progress – stated they had lost nearly all contact with anyone within their cohort or other students in the doctoral program. One student said that while she got e-mail notes infrequently from two other cohort members, she realized all three of them were struggling to stay motivated. Feeling disconnected from and marginalized within the program arose as issues for some students. A student said that she no longer attended any of the program events, such as those held to welcome new students, because

she did not know anyone, not even most of the faculty. "I felt out of place. The focus was on the new students, not on people like me" she remarked. Another student added, "It got to be embarrassing to go, to introduce myself, say when I started, and then feel like everyone was staring at me and wondering why I was not done yet. Finally, I just stopped going."

Overall, the students who felt alone remained silent to others about their feelings of isolation. In every case, comments about feeling alone, feeling a lack of motivation to "pick up the dissertation again", wondering if anyone would notice if they just "left the program and did not finish," came from those who were feeling "stalled." A sense of feeling marginalized, of not mattering, to the faculty and administrators in the program, even to doctoral peers, was evident in the students' remarks. Moreover, these students voiced feelings that they felt responsible for their lack of progress – this in spite of two salient facts. One, the program had undergone a number of faculty and administrative changes since these students had completed coursework and fewer remained whom they knew or vice versa. Two, administrative promises to hold writing workshops and other follow-up activities for workshop participants were not fulfilled. Lovitts (2001) and Golde (1994) found in their studies that students who feel alienated, alone, marginalized, and basically invisible are likely candidates for departure. On the other hand, both researchers also note that institutional solutions for facilitating students' success exist and can be implemented.

Lesson Three: Staying Committed

Coping with Competing Demands. The ability to stay committed – by setting goals, defining priorities, and getting started on the next phase of the doctoral process –

was expressed as difficult for students. No one mentioned that they felt intellectually challenged to the task; rather, a number of them observed that they felt time challenged due to balancing multiple demands in their daily lives. As working professionals with families and community commitments, the students stated that more often than not it was the daily demands that were more immediate and in their "face" that got their attention. Getting finished meant prioritizing their time and being committed to a plan. A student commented, "When I took courses, I knew the dates for when courses started and ended, I knew when papers were due, and I scheduled my time around these commitments. My family knew this too and everyone cooperated. I had a routine. But now, well, it's all up to me and I feel overwhelmed at times at the enormity of what I have to do."

Focused and Organized. Although they were working full-time and acknowledged they had many other responsibilities, all but six students stated they still felt committed to making progress toward degree completion. Making progress as defined by these students included preparing for the qualifying examination, waiting to hear from the human subjects committee at UC Davis in order to begin collecting data, or writing the dissertation, for example. "Staying focused and being organized were keys to making progress" was important according to one student who finished in 2001. Other students cited similar reasons for making progress, including developing an activity plan they stuck to and following a daily routine that helped keep them committed to the task of finishing.

For some doctoral students, the commitment to stay focused was attributed to their supportive work environment or to their spouse and family who reminded them how important it was to finish. The two students who were occasionally able to leave work

early or take a day off once a week said having that extra time to write made a huge difference to their progress – and indeed both finished.

Having a clearly defined workspace was also noted as being important to staying committed to finishing. One of students made progress sticking to a routine of going into his office at home, closing the door, and writing while his wife attended to the family needs. On the other hand, a single parent remarked that although she had a defined workspace, it was difficult to use it and ignore her young children as there was no one to care for them. A third student stated that while creating an office at home for him was important and something he did immediately after the summer workshop, he found that it was quickly taken over by his teenagers because he did not use it often. The loss of this space added to his diminishing sense of commitment and seemed to symbolize that with each passing year his chances of getting out of the ABD syndrome were increasing.

Feelings of isolation contributed to several students' diminished sense of commitment. One student said he feared he might not finish as he had "less and less incentive to do so" especially since he lived much further away and had lost the sense of commitment that had been rekindled being with doctoral peers during the summer workshop. Another shared, "I still have to do the quals. I am determined to finish, but it is hard having to depend on myself to do everything now. I need to get together with others and work with them in some kind of support group. It would help me to stay focused and committed."

Faculty-Related Activities. Students repeatedly expressed the need for continued faculty support following completion of the course work. Students offered various suggestions for activities that would help them make more timely progress. One

suggestion was to have monthly or periodic meetings with faculty to talk about common issues related to the dissertation process – "be almost forced to do this" – which would facilitate their progress. Another student suggested that the program administrators plan monthly Saturday workshops where students could come together to "just write with a faculty member there to read drafts and offer suggestions." The idea of "being forced " to reschedule their priorities and get together to write was repeated by a number of students. Perseverance and maintaining a positive "can do" attitude were seen as necessary in order to finish, but nearly half of the students were concerned that their slow progress would continue unless there was an external, systemic incentive provided by the program faculty to keep them motivated and working.

Lovitts (1996, 2001) states that graduate student attrition is due more to systemic than individual factors. She adds that it is not lack of academic ability or even the lack of money that lead to most student departures, rather it more often due to institutional structures that have not developed effective solutions for reducing the marginalization of doctoral students, especially once they begin the dissertation process. In fact, most administrators and faculty still place the onus of completion fully on ABD students themselves and thus they effectively relieve themselves of any responsibility for students, whether they remain stuck in the ABD stage ad infinitum or just quietly depart.

Conclusions

Offered here are three somewhat obvious but related lessons – or what might be described as strongly voiced doctoral student needs – that stem from a small, longitudinal study on doctoral students' lived experiences in the ABD stage. Prior studies on doctoral student persistence to degree completion have found that faculty and peer support, and

the added benefit of significant others, are not only relational but very important in assisting ABD students to complete the dissertation. The student comments shared here strongly suggest that having sustained emotional support from family and friends, maintaining contact with peers, getting and keeping faculty support, staying committed to their goal of finishing, were crucial to these doctoral students in progressing toward degree completion.

Could these lessons be implemented in doctoral programs to better assist ABD students in completing the degree? Certainly, the emotional needs presented here are not new, nevertheless, they are critical to students' continued development as they transition from the course-taking stage in their doctoral program to the dissertation stage and then move through it in a timely manner. Furthermore, if we were to imagine putting together a graduate education toolbox, certainly an emotional component of effective relational assessment strategies for helping doctoral students in the ABD stage should be seriously considered for inclusion.

Clearly, a paradigm shift to programmatic strategies that lead to a more democratic, equitable model benefiting all ABD students is called for in doctoral programs. Continued assessment by doctoral administrators and faculty of their ABD students is needed to do this. By continuing to periodically assess ABD students' progress to degree completion, the emotional support, experiences, habits, or skills that students need at this stage can be identified and strategies developed to address them. An ongoing assessment, for example, can reveal critical doctoral program strategies that can make a huge difference in facilitating students' progress. These strategies can include relational activities such as convening period meetings with faculty and ABD students,

facilitating weekly to monthly writing sessions evenings or weekends when working professionals can attend, encouraging the formation of peer support groups, staying connected through electronic communication, can facilitate ABD students' progress to degree completion. In this more democratic model, faculty can assess student progress through active involvement with them throughout the dissertation process. Moreover, tools and strategies can include assisting students to learn how to do their own self-assessment and how to draw on peers' assessments as well to facilitate their progress. What we know from the assessment literature on student success is that students want to feel competent and that their expenditure of effort be not only recognized but also assessed and that appropriate feedback given.

In sum, an implication from my research is that if doctoral students are regularly evaluated, that act of critical and compassionate feedback would, in fact, serve as a marker of caring, concern, and commitment from faculty. The net effect of this would be to not only facilitate but to enhance their students' progress toward the goal of degree completion. This study also revealed that a lack of literature dealing with the importance of relational aspects of completing a doctoral degree exists. It also highlighted problems with existing paradigms that shape the structure and practices in graduate studies such as to focus on the individual rather than on the institution in taking responsibility for degree progress.

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