DISSERTATION WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: ASSUMPTIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND PRACTICES OF DISSERTATION WRITERS AND THEIR SUPERVISORS

Paul M. Rogers PhD
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June 7th, 2012
Dive in or Die (Walvoord, 1996)

• Background of the problem of attrition and time to degree nationally
• Origins and overview of a study (in progress) of dissertation writing at Mason
• Some early sense making
• Questions going forward
At least 40% of the students who begin a doctoral program fail to complete it.
PhD completion rates vary by field of study, gender, and nation of origin.

Completion Rates
Overall 57%
Male 58%
Female 55%
International Students 67%
Figure 1. Cumulative Ten-Year Ph.D. Completion Rates by Gender and Broad Field

- **Engineering**: Female 56%, Male 65%
- **Life Sciences**: Female 56%, Male 64%
- **Math & Phys. Sci.**: Female 52%, Male 59%
- **Social Sciences**: Female 57%, Male 53%
- **Humanities**: Female 52%, Male 47%
- **All**: Female 55%, Male 58%

Completion Rate ( % )
20% of the students who complete Ph.D. degrees in ten years do so after year seven.
Six broad categories of institutional factors influence completion rates:

- selection processes
- *mentoring*
- financial support
- *processes and procedures*
- *program environment*
- research mode of field

The department is the “locus of control for doctoral education”

(Golde, 2005)
Data-driven (experience-based) interventions aimed at supporting students, faculty, and departments in this case, focused on increasing completion rates and lessening the time to degree.
Research Questions

What kind of supports do dissertation writers want? What are their struggles? What elements of the writing pose the greatest challenges? What are their understandings of the expectations of the dissertation?

What are the overlaps and mismatches between the attitudes, values, and beliefs of dissertation writers and dissertation supervisors?
The Paradox of Writing

On the one hand, the discursive knowledge-making practices research cultures develop over generations to accomplish their knowledge work become normalized, transparent, invisible, and indeed appear universal to long-term members of research cultures, rendering writing a non-question. On the other hand, for newcomers, these very practices constitute new territory and a vital site of inquiry into how knowledge and researcher identities are produced and negotiated in these research cultures.

Starke-Meyerring, 2011
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Department</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch/Incongruence</td>
<td>Does not fit with conventional ways of being researcher or scholar in the discipline</td>
<td>Does not fit with ways of being a student or junior scholar in the department</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Marginalized from the discipline</td>
<td>Marginalized from the departmental community</td>
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Methods

• 10 Question Survey of Dissertation Writers
• Interviews with 25 Faculty Members
• Interviews with 20 Dissertation Writers
• 6 Focus Groups with Dissertation Writers

• Especially interested in breaking out our results by field/program, and subfield, as well as looking closely at the experiences of non-native speakers
Early results from select fields

Responses from 206 Dissertation Writers at Mason 10% of the overall population of dissertation writers at Mason.

Majority Responses

• Biodefense
• Community College Education
• Computational Science and Informatics
• Conflict Analysis and Resolution
• Cultural Studies
• Education
• Environmental Science and Public Policy
• History
• Neuroscience
• Nursing
• Physics
• Political Science
• Psychology
Survey Questions

1. What PhD program are you enrolled in?
2. When (month and year) did you begin your PhD program?
3. Please list the languages in which you speak and write in the order that you learned them.
4. What sections of your dissertation have you written? Check all that apply.
5. What kinds of help have been beneficial in terms of writing your dissertation?
6. Rate the difficulty level of the sections you've written.
7. How familiar are you with the guidelines, expectations, norms, and standards for dissertation writers in your field?
8. Rate the difficulty level of the following elements of dissertation writing.
9. To what degree do your dissertation advisor and your dissertation committee members talk to you about the actual writing of your dissertation (e.g. elements described in question 8 or other)?
10. What kinds of writing support would you find most helpful as you write your dissertation?
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5. What kinds of help have been beneficial in terms of writing your dissertation? (Check all that apply)

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<th>Help Description</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
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<tr>
<td>One-on-one conversations with my dissertation advisor and/or committee members</td>
<td>84.8%</td>
<td>145</td>
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<td>Written feedback from my dissertation advisor and/or committee members</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
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<td>Conversations with or written comments from fellow PhD students in my program</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
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<td>Conversations with or written comments from individuals outside my program</td>
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<td>Reading books with advice for dissertation writers</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
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<td>Reading published dissertations</td>
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<td>Attending workshops offered by the Writing Center</td>
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<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
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answered question 171
skipped question 35
9. To what degree do your dissertation advisor and your dissertation committee members talk to you about the actual writing of your dissertation (e.g. elements described in question 8 or other)?

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answered question: 168
skipped question: 38
Rate the difficulty level of the following elements of dissertation writing.

- Finding the time to write: 4
- Planning and prewriting: 3
- Translating ideas into written form: 3
- Revising major sections: 3
- Organizing and structuring chapters and sections: 3
- Adapting my writing to the expectations of my audiences: 3
- Using the right tone: 3
- Crafting clear sentences: 3
- Editing and proofreading: 3
- Choosing the most appropriate words: 3
- Incorporating feedback: 3
- Summarizing and paraphrasing: 3
- Integrating source materials: 3
- Connecting sentences and paragraphs with effective transitions: 3
- Revising sentences: 3
- Knowing when to quote: 3
- Writing grammatically correct sentences: 2
- Using appropriate punctuation: 2
Finding the time to write

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<th>Overall</th>
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<th>Psychology</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Computational Sciences and Informatics</th>
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Organizing and structuring chapters and sections

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Clues from faculty interviews

The work of the dissertation matters “critical for future careers”.
Clues from faculty interviews

Error from L2 writers is unacceptable “get an editor”.

Clues from interviews

Emotions (fear, isolation) playing a role.
At the programmatic level does dissertation writing represent an opportunity or mission drift?

Does it dissipate already scarce human and other resources or does it open up opportunities for development?

To what degree should WAC take responsibility for writing at the institutional level? (What about the WC?)
Thank you for your attention