Collaborative Advising:

How Faculty Advisors and Writing Center Professionals Help Online EdD Students Thrive Throughout the Dissertation Process

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a novel approach of integrating writing center professionals into online EdD dissertation committees to enhance student success and writing proficiency. Departing from the traditional "master-apprentice" model of doctoral studies, the study explores the rationale behind restructuring dissertation committees to better align with evolving programmatic outcomes and the diverse career trajectories of doctoral students. Drawing on existing scholarship and theoretical foundations, it clarifies the ambiguity surrounding the roles of committee members beyond the dissertation advisor and advocates for a coalition of experts approach to dissertation committees. We describe the establishment and functions of a Research and Writing Development Center (RWDC), highlighting its role in supporting students throughout the dissertation process. Emphasizing close collaboration between faculty advisors and RWDC professionals, the article shares the successful relationship forged to provide comprehensive feedback and guidance to scholarly practitioners writing dissertations of practice. Programmatic overviews and outcomes underscore the efficacy of this collaborative advising model in enhancing student completion rates and addressing the evolving landscape of EdD programs. This study offers valuable insight into reimagining dissertation committees to foster the holistic development of scholarly practitioners in EdD programs.

<u>**KEYWORDS**</u>

dissertation writing, doctoral education, dissertation advising, graduate student success, problem of practice dissertation.

Although many variations on the defense committee exist, one common strategy for advisors and students is to form a small coalition of experts who lend their expertise to guiding the doctoral student to produce quality research. Thus, a dissertation committee often consists of a combination of scholars who lend content matter or methodological expertise to the process (Janesick, 2021). However, in response to recent changes to the form, function, and purpose of doctoral education and its corresponding terminal degree thesis (Andrews & Grogan, 2005; Perry et al., 2020), some scholars have begun advocating for rethinking the composition of the dissertation committee as well. For example, Lueck and Boehm (2019) argue that dissertation committees should include committee members whose work is more oriented toward public engagement because many doctoral students pursue employment outside of the academy. Aligning the form of the dissertation and the composition of the dissertation committee with the intended programmatic outcomes seems remarkably valuable, though this shift can

introduce new complexities and uncertainties because different academics have different assumptions about what roles committee members should play (Wiest & Treacy, 2021).

Choosing to embrace this ambiguity and reconceptualize the dissertation defense committee composition, we recognized in our online, practitioner-focused EdD program that writing development was an important programmatic goal. Although the majority of our students do not go on to pursue academic careers, we saw clear and effective writing about complex problems of professional practice as an important skill for organizational and industry leaders to develop during their doctoral journey (Werse, 2021). As such, we reimagined the dissertation committee to include writing center professionals called graduate writing coordinators, and we imagined ways to include methodology experts on particular documents when needed. This committee structure, therefore, resulted in a highly collaborative system involving dissertation chairs, methodologists, and graduate

writing consultants working together to guide students to produce practical, actionable terminal degree studies presented with the clarity to speak to key target audiences and decision makers both inside and outside of the academy. In this article, we share the practical aspects related to how we build these collaborative relationships in our EdD in Learning and Organizational Change.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The roles of the defense committee members beyond the advisor remain ambiguous, which can often lead to misaligned expectations and committee conflict (Wiest & Treacy, 2021). Part of the challenge emerges from the fact that the dissertation writing process takes place in the "master-apprentice" model of doctoral work, in which a single expert "master" mentors a small number of "apprentice" doctoral students. This system allows for the faculty advisor, or dissertation chair, to invest substantive, personalized time into the research and writing development of emerging doctoral students as they write their dissertations. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the faculty advisor remains the most important influence in a doctoral student's journey through the process of writing a dissertation (Cockrell & Shelley, 2011; Creighton et al., 2010; Lunsford, 2012; Lyons et al., 1990; Pritchard, 2018; West et al., 2011). In fact, some graduate faculty even suggest that the purpose of a dissertation defense committee is not to educate the student or to give advice to improve the document. Rather, they say the purpose of the thesis examination or dissertation defense committee is only to "provide the department with a single score and brief summary report" (Gruba & Zobel, 2017, p. 28), and that education and advice are the responsibility of the thesis or dissertation supervisor.

The highly individualized "master-apprentice" model is not without its shortcomings (Boud & Lee, 2005; Johnson et al., 2000). It creates a system in which doctoral students become mentored and guided through the terminal degree research process by relatively few voices (Delamont et al., 2000). Given that many of the nuances of disciplinary expectation are unspoken (Gardner, 2007; Petre & Rugg, 2011), as are the expectations for the terminal degree dissertation within the discipline (Lovitts, 2007), the student experience throughout the doctoral process can become widely variable depending upon the approach of their advisor and their advisor's assumptions about the process (Lee, 2008). Most chairs have no formal training in how to chair a dissertation (Mirick et al., 2020).

To help remedy these shortcomings, many graduate faculty often approach the dissertation defense committee more like a coalition of experts that each draw upon their expertise in some way to help ensure the quality of each student's research (Oltman et al., 2019; Roberts, 2004). Thus, content matter experts may provide guidance on content-specific material related to their areas of expertise in just the same way methodologists provide methodology-related guidance, even when the dissertation topic falls outside of their research focus (Janesick, 2021).

This approach to forming a coalition of experts who all contribute to the development of the student's research in some way opens the door for graduate faculty to adjust the committee in light of the expertise that they think would benefit the student throughout their terminal degree research and into the beginning of their careers.

Thus, for students whose terminal degree will lead them to a vocation outside of the academy, Lueck and Boehm (2019) argue that their committees should include someone who can help the students think through public engagement with their research. Within this model, therefore, the committee composition reflects the desired skills and areas of expertise that students need to conduct and communicate their research to key target audiences.

Crafting the dissertation committee to create a coalition of experts to shape the student's research development and formation in light of their intended vocational goals allows for the inclusion of an expert on the committee to mentor the student in one of the most foundational skills needed to craft a dissertation: writing. However, the place of writing development support for doctoral students has an uneasy history alongside the traditional "master-apprentice" model of doctoral mentorship. On the one hand, the existence of writing development manuals for doctoral students reveals both the need and market for such support (Aliotta, 2018; Bell et al., 2019). One area of emerging interest is the potential value of graduate writing center support (Summers, 2016; Waring, 2005). On the other hand, some advisors have expressed distrust of supplement support of this nature (Behm, 1989; Clark, 1988; Healy, 1993). For example, Gruba and Zoebel (2017) warn graduate student writers against seeking writing center support under the heading "Plagiarism and Research Integrity." Such warnings against the use of a writing center for research work contribute to the recognized uncertainty among many writing center professionals about their institutional place within the university (Behm, 1989; Clark, 1988; Healy, 1993), especially when it comes to mentoring graduate student writers who have formal mentors in their advisors—each of whom may have widely different expectations and assumptions about writing development.

When designing our online EdD program for scholarly practitioners, we recognized that past scholarship has demonstrated the importance of writing support for not just graduate students in general, but also, more specifically, for online scholarly practitioners who are often farther removed from their last degrees and may feel out of practice when it comes to academic writing (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Nobles, 2019). We also recognized that in addition to equipping students to complete a terminal degree dissertation, this writing development support offered a very practical skill set that practitioners take with them into their industry leadership. While academic writing at the doctoral level is often complicated by the unique nuances and technicalities of discipline-specific discourse (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Hyland, 2009), at its core, academic writing aims to communicate clearly and concisely to a specifically identified (generally academic or disciplinary-specific) audience (VanAlstyne, 1999). While valuable for training future academics, however, the ability to clearly and concisely communicate about complex issues to a target audience is a skill that transfers across industries beyond the academy (Werse, 2021).

Thus, given the academic tradition of crafting dissertation committees to function like a coalition of experts and given the immense value of writing development expertise for equipping our EdD students to complete their dissertations and providing them with a transferable, communication skill that they will use in their industry leadership, we decided to reimagine the dissertation defense committee to include writing development specialists from our writing center. Thus, just as the dissertation chair brings content matter expertise and the methodologist brings methodology expertise, so does the writing development specialist bring a technical expertise in academic writing to help guide the student to producing a clear and

coherent dissertation. In the following sections, therefore, we provide the relevant programmatic information for contextualizing this innovation as well as the outcomes of this collaborative effort.

PROGRAM AND RWDC OVERVIEW

Our doctoral program is a three-year online EdD in Learning and Organizational Change. Students are in a cohort model (Lively et al., 2021), with a new cohort beginning the program each trimester. Each cohort includes 40–90 students, and we have nine active cohorts of students at any given time. We enroll more than 500 students, and typically about 300 of those students are working on their dissertations in any given term—with approximately half as doctoral students writing the first two chapters of their dissertations (literature review and methodology) and the other half as doctoral candidates collecting or analyzing data.

Almost all our students are working professionals, and as such, the program includes a problem of practice dissertation in which students conduct specifically defined and carefully crafted doctoral research on problems of professional practice in their organizations or industries (influenced by Archbald, 2008; Belzer & Ryan, 2013; Perry, 2013, 2016). Students complete 18 three-hour courses on a trimester schedule so that they can complete the program in a target time of three years. Four of these courses in the program are dedicated to the problem of practice dissertation, beginning in term five. During the first of these courses, students are assigned a faculty advisor to guide the dissertation process.

To meet this heavy advising need, advisors, who serve as dissertation chairs, typically supervise 10–12 students from a cohort, and advisors may work with two cohorts at a time. To advise this many doctoral students and candidates, we developed a partnership between faculty advisors and writing center professionals so that we could provide the feedback students need to make progress toward quality dissertations. We developed the Research and Writing Development Center (RWDC), a program-specific writing center, because we recognized that many students felt out of practice or unfamiliar with academic writing. At the same time, writing a dissertation at an R1 institution with very high research activity required meeting high standards and expectations. To empower our students to succeed throughout this writing process, we built a robust team of seven full-time graduate writing coordinators who hold terminal degrees in their fields and four graduate assistant writing development specialists enrolled in advanced PhD coursework. The RWDC team members work closely with faculty advisors across our program's curriculum sequence to support student writing.

The RWDC was designed to support our online EdD students throughout the dissertation writing process. We do this in three key ways. First, we offer students writing consultations in the manner of a more traditional writing center. Students can book a 30-minute appointment with the RWDC once every 21 days, subject to consultant availability, during which they seek help with class assignments, dissertation planning documents, or dissertation writing. The RWDC offers nearly 500 writing consultations per trimester and works closely with faculty advisors to craft individualized writing development plans that are uniquely tailored to students' different learning styles and language proficiencies.

Second, we develop and deliver course materials. The RWDC team is integrated into the literature review and methodology dissertation writing course in term five as well as the findings and implications dissertation writing course in term eight to facilitate students' writing growth across terms. In addition to this formal feedback, the RWDC team contributes materials to the construction of these courses including the oversight of an internal document called the Composition Resource Guide and teaching workshops during class time. The Composition Resource Guide is a document that we provide to students with guidance related to each chapter and the required sections in the chapter. It also includes support related to tense and formatting. Additionally, a member of the RWDC team meets with faculty advisors weekly to discuss their students' progress.

Third, we support students by providing iterative feedback on formal dissertation submissions, culminating in our membership on the students' dissertation defense committees. Any time that the student submits a dissertation chapter as part of their dissertation courses, it is collaboratively reviewed by both a member of the RWDC and the faculty advisor. When students submit their dissertation documents for review to their faculty advisors, the RWDC team first runs a turnitin.com report to look for potential plagiarism or parallels with existing literature and then provides preliminary feedback on the writing style, APA, and formatting before the advisor comments. This process allows them to carefully track statistics concerning student progress, such as the time spent with students, topics addressed, engagement with feedback, writing support needs, and research focus to inform program-level strategic planning. In term nine, when students defend, a member of the RWDC also serves as a dissertation committee member.

DISSERTATION AND DISSERTATION COMMITTEE OVERVIEW

In our cohort-model program, students begin thinking about their dissertation topic early and often. On their admission applications, they include a potential dissertation topic, and they begin writing about their dissertations in their first term. Students complete their methodology coursework, which includes Qualitative Research, Statistical Methods, and Mixed Methods, in addition to other courses in their first four terms. Students receive their faculty advisors in term five when they take their first two dissertation writing courses, which are focused on the literature review and methodology chapters of their dissertations. During this term, they work closely with their faculty advisors to develop their dissertation content, focus, and design, while concurrently meeting with the RWDC to develop the writing practices and conventions for dissertation writing success. At each formal submission of a dissertation chapter as part of this course, we recognized that both the faculty advisor and a member of the RWDC needed to review the students' documents and provide feedback (see Figure 1), thereby normalizing the expectation that the student will receive collaborative feedback from all members of the committee. In some cases when the faculty advisor requested additional methodological feedback, we decided to include a methodologist in this process. After successfully writing the first two dissertation chapters, the students advance to doctoral candidacy and receive their full committee, consisting of their faculty advisor, a second reader who may also serve as the methodologist, and a member of the RWDC. The full committee then reviews and provides feedback on the dissertation in the two remaining dissertation courses.

Figure 1. Collaborative Advising Model for the Dissertation
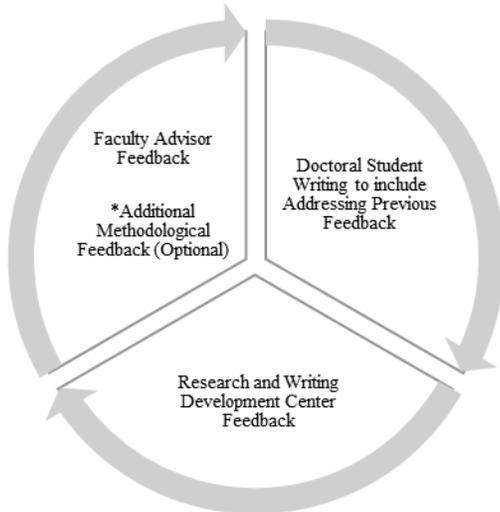
In this collaborative advising model, the faculty advisor and RWDC reader serve different roles. The faculty advisor focuses on discipline-specific content, methodological soundness, and alignment across the dissertation chapters. The advisor also serves as the primary student contact, providing mentorship and support through the dissertation writing process. Conversely, the RWDC team members primarily focus on quality writing, crafting an argument, mechanics, organization, formatting, clarity, and conciseness when providing student feedback, both for consultations as well as for formal dissertation feedback. The RWDC team member's role in the dissertation defense is two-fold: they serve on the committee mentoring that graduate student's scholarship and fill the role of the university graduate school to review for university-required formatting and facilitate university-required processes, such as ProQuest submissions.

OUR CLOSE COLLABORATION

Based on our experience, a positive working relationship between the faculty advisor and writing center professionals is vital to a successful student writing experience. Because the RWDC team reads every problem of practice dissertation across advisors, cohorts, and courses, they have a broad perspective from which to support both students and faculty advisors throughout the writing process. The RWDC team can point to areas of writing concern in documents, share with advisors how previous cohorts and advising teams handled certain situations in the advising experience, and can help an advisor determine when a document is ready to move forward to the next stage in the writing process.

By building collaboration throughout the writing process, the faculty advisors and RWDC team form an important synergistic force that provides a solid foundation for students to improve their writing skills while completing their dissertations. We highlight our close collaboration with three key points. First, we have frequent formal and informal timely communication about specific students or questions, which includes open communication by email and phone. Faculty advisors and a RWDC team member meet weekly while students in that cohort are enrolled in Problem of Practice courses, in

terms five and eight, to plan for courses and discuss student support. We communicate deliberately, particularly about course preparation, course resources, dissertation review expectations, our processes, and student progress. We also engage in continued communication through frequent follow-up emails. When students have an RWDC consultation, the RWDC team member sends a follow-up email and copies the faculty advisor on the email. We work diligently to remain on the same page through our continued communication.

Second, we have the same goal in that we want students to succeed, so we work as a united front with complementary responsibilities. In class, faculty advisors often encourage students to meet with the RWDC, and we remind students that we are on the same team, emphasizing that our common goal is student success. In terms five, eight, and nine, we provide students with a joint review of their documents. The RWDC reviews the draft to provide an initial evaluation of the writing with a focus on writing alignment across the dissertation, adherence to expectations set forth in the Composition Resource Guide, writing quality and clarity, APA, and formatting. These comments often include links to embedded video tutorials. The faculty advisor provides feedback in terms of content, methodological soundness, and alignment. When we provide this feedback, we communicate with one another based on our areas of expertise, and we support and reiterate feedback from one another. Meanwhile, the RWDC uses Annotate Pro, a free system that allows us to create a shared database of comments and logs key notes for each review or student meeting to provide consistency for students. We send this feedback to students in a joint document to show our support between faculty advisors and RWDC staff. In this same way, we make committee decisions taking together the faculty advisor and RWDC writing professionals' feedback to determine candidacy and defense decisions, communicating to students that these decisions are not made solely by the faculty advisor. We also work together to provide students with two on-campus immersion experiences in terms three and five. In this same vein of wanting our students to succeed, many of us conduct research together, always seeking ways to improve the student experience. We share our research in professional conference presentations and in co-authoring publications such as this one. We work together, making student success and quality dissertations our priority.

Third, we are flexible in working with one another. We learn from one another and often have discussions about different components of the dissertation process, working with flexibility to meet our students' writing needs. Further, we work in conjunction with our evolving program. When new faculty advisors or RWDC team members are hired, we agreeably support one another to learn from one another. We include the graduate school and the library in our processes, and we work to ensure we are meeting department and institutional expectations. This includes a tailored technical review and the oversight of the defense process, including the required paperwork and communications with the university's graduate school. The RWDC takes on this work to support the faculty advisors and provide consistency across cohorts. We support one another in our roles.

CONCLUSION

Reconceptualizing the committee structure in response to program needs and shifts in doctoral education at large represents a hallmark of our program. Creativity within policy rather than student product marks a turn from the typical conversations surrounding

doctoral provision. The results of this highly integrated student support system into our course sequence have been successful. University leadership has supported our scholarly-practitioner problem of practice dissertation and advising model. Further, the four-year completion rate has been consistently between 60–80%, while the attrition rate from doctoral programs has been reported at or slightly above 50% for decades (Buss & Allen, 2020; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Cassuto, 2013; Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Lovitts, 2001).

We recognize that this model represents a significant shift in the traditional composition and role of dissertation committees in doctoral education. While the conventional "master-apprentice" model has long been the norm, recent developments in doctoral programs, including the recognition of the importance of practical skills for non-academic career paths and the increased size of doctoral programs as online education has blossomed, prompted a rethinking of the dissertation committee's composition. This shift towards forming a coalition of experts tailored to students' specific needs and intended career trajectories reflects a more flexible and student-centric approach. The close collaboration between faculty advisors and RWDC professionals emerges as a key element in this model's success. Effective communication, shared goals of student success, and flexibility in working together have been instrumental in creating a synergistic relationship that benefits both students and advisors.

Our reimagined dissertation committee represents another option for doctoral education and acknowledges the significance of strong writing skills for all doctoral students, regardless of their future career paths. Overall, this structure offers valuable insights into the evolving landscape of doctoral education and the potential benefits of adapting the composition of dissertation committees to better align with the changing needs of students. It underscores the importance of nurturing collaborative relationships among all stakeholders involved in the doctoral process to ensure the successful development of future scholars and professionals.

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