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A Qualitative Inquiry of the Counseling Dissertation Process

Stephen V. Flynn, Christine L. Chasek, Irene F. Harper, Katherine M. Murphy, and Maribeth F. Jorgensen

The authors in this consensual qualitative research study explored the dissertation experiences of 42 graduates (27 counselor educators, 13 counselors, 2 administrators) from 4 midwestern states. Identified domains included impact of environment, competing influences, personality traits, chair influence, committee function, and barriers to completion. An emergent theory reflected the interconnectedness of the dissertation process across internal, relational, and professional factors. Implications related to motivation, personal traits, and identification of barriers in the dissertation process are provided.

Keywords: counselors, dissertation, consensual qualitative research

The dissertation is viewed as an invaluable evaluative tool that encourages students to become active and self-directed in their learning, allowing for new insights into a field (Barratt, 2004). Many students, however, find themselves with the label “All But Dissertation” (ABD) because they fail to complete the dissertation. McAloon (2004) described ABD as a “special status—an incomplete, deficient state of ‘perpetual becoming,’ not of ‘being,’ a condition unconsciously used to torment the self and others, characterized by unrealized promise and a dogged inability or unwillingness to complete this final academic hurdle” (p. 229). Research reports a national doctoral attrition rate between 50% and 85%, with no evidence that this trend is declining (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; DiPierro, 2007). The combination of the terminal ABD status and high attrition can be seen as a loss of resources invested by both the student and the institution.

Previous research has examined necessary elements for the completion of the dissertation and development of a research agenda (DiPierro, 2007; Harsch, 2008). Several studies identified dissertation advising as a crucial element in dissertation timeliness, effectiveness, and completion (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; Harsch, 2008; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). In a national survey of
the research mentorship experiences of 139 pretenured counselor educators, 27% of respondents described their doctoral advisor as their primary research mentor (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). Nelson and Lovitts (2001) provided strategies for increasing doctoral student retention and indicated that students who have effective advising often have success in degree completion. In an exploratory qualitative inquiry of 141 counselor education doctoral students, Protivnak and Foss (2009) found that student advising was salient to dissertation completion. Previous research indicates that, in addition to advising, several internal and external factors contribute to successful dissertation completion. In a qualitative study of 33 current and former counselor education students, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) described the following factors as critical to dissertation completion in counselor education: student–program match, student expectations, relationships with faculty and peers, and personal desire. Scholars (Brunning, Schraw, Norby, & Ronning, 2004; Harsch, 2008) have also associated intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and internal locus of control with greater engagement in the dissertation process and greater likelihood of dissertation completion.

For some doctoral students, the dissertation looms as a larger-than-life task, and researchers have identified barriers to dissertation completion. In a nonexperimental survey of 243 counselor education dissertation completers and noncompleters, Harsch (2008) identified the following barriers: deficient writing skills, poor time management, procrastination, dependency, unrealistic thinking, poor balancing of responsibilities, life situations, low emotional support, multiple financial concerns, and social isolation. Others (e.g., Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008; McAloon, 2004) noted self-sabotaging behaviors that included overcommitment, appearance of being busy while less important tasks are being accomplished, perfectionism, procrastination, disorganization, low amounts of effort, and selection of performance-debilitating circumstances.

Several studies in counselor education have explored mentoring future researchers (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011), doctoral student experiences in training programs (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009), and status and social cognitive variables related to dissertation completers and noncompleters (Harsch, 2008). Whereas a modest amount of empirical research has centered on counseling research training and doctoral student experiences during graduate school, limited investigations illuminate the counseling dissertation process. In fact, an investigation into the counseling dissertation process has yet to be conducted. Given the importance of the dissertation process and the paucity of studies exploring
research development in counseling (Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011), an investigation exploring the dissertation process is well timed.

The purpose of this study was to develop a theory specifying the process in which counseling professionals experience the dissertation process. Using consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology (Hill et al., 2005), we propose a theory of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation process within counselor education. The following research questions guided this inquiry: (a) What is the dissertation process for counselor education students? (b) What are sources of support during the dissertation? (c) What are sources of need during the dissertation? and (d) How do interpersonal factors relate, if at all, to the dissertation process?

Method

According to Hill et al. (2005), CQR focuses on the use of multiple researchers, the practice of attaining consensus, and a systematic approach to examining the representativeness of findings across participants. The decision to use CQR was threefold. First, we sought a methodological analysis that would allow us to carefully define a homogeneous sample and collect data using the same protocol to ensure consistency of responses. Second, we desired an approach that would allow for the use of rotating teams to have an iterative approach to data analysis. Third, we sought a systematic way of examining the representativeness of results across all cases. To this end, CQR allowed for an inductive and collaborative process, which used an open dialogue and cooperation among researchers to arrive at a shared vision (i.e., the emergent theory).

Participants and Procedure

Using criterion-based and snowball sampling procedures, we identified and selected participants who graduated from counselor education programs, were currently working in either academic or clinical settings, and completed a dissertation. This study involved the lived experiences of 42 counselor education graduates who completed a dissertation in their respective programs (35 earning PhD and seven earning EdD degrees). Thirty-one (73.8%) participants graduated from programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Participants were located in the midwestern United States (South Dakota, n = 23; North Dakota, n = 11; Nebraska n = 4; and Michigan, n = 4). The
sample included 22 women and 20 men who ranged in age from 29 to 65 years ($M = 39.69$ years). The self-reported race/ethnicities of participants were as follows: White ($n = 37, 88.09\%$), African American ($n = 2, 4.76\%$), Asian American ($n = 1, 2.38\%$), Latino ($n = 1, 2.38\%$), and Jewish ($n = 1, 2.38\%$). (Percentages do not total 100 because of rounding.) The professional composition was 27 counselor educators, 13 clinical mental health clinicians, and two administrators at clinical mental health settings.

Data collection began after institutional review board approval. Team A recruited participants using four methods: (a) an e-mail message sent to a regional listserv to request participants; (b) a coconstructed solicitation e-mail (i.e., all Team A members reached consensus on the content of the solicitation) to potential participants; (c) an in-person verbal invitation; and (d) in-person or telephone contact, based on the recommendation of another professional. The team conducted one interview per participant, and each interview was conducted by telephone ($n = 29$), at an agreed-upon meeting place ($n = 8$), or in a conference room on the college campus ($n = 5$). Participants were provided the informed consent document and an opportunity to discuss any study-related questions and the purpose of the interview.

**Research Teams**

Two rotating teams were used in the present study to explore the counselor education dissertation process. The primary author (first author) was a faculty member in a counselor education program, and the other authors were doctoral students in the same program. Prior to initiation of the research, team members met with the primary author and discussed differences between researcher roles and roles traditionally used within the program. The primary author oversaw the entire project and provided feedback to Teams A and B. Team A comprised 12 researchers. The team received training in CQR from the primary author, explored dissertation literature, created semistructured interview questions (see the Appendix), interviewed participants, transcribed interviews, and analyzed the data. Team B comprised four researchers who reviewed transcripts and domains established by Team A and identified the overarching strategies that equated to the initial domains. Additionally, Team B developed the core ideas, conducted a cross-analysis, and established final categories.

**Data Analysis**
In accordance with the CQR tenets of data analysis, we followed three steps: (a) coding data and developing initial domains, (b) constructing core ideas from the data within domains, and (c) conducting a cross-analysis by categorizing the consistencies across all cases. The initial coding procedure produced approximately 4,634 open codes. A few examples of the open codes include the dissertation chair’s engagement of the candidate, dependence on the chair’s expert knowledge, and the chair’s indifference in student struggles. In addition, Team A produced approximately 105 memo notes. During the initial coding process, all transcripts were concurrently coded and recoded by two members of Team A. All dual-coded transcripts were analyzed by Team A members for discrepancies. Following the initial detection of discrepancies, all dual-coded transcripts were reanalyzed by the auditor for further divergences. Team A identified 47 domains from the initial coding procedure. Next, each member of Team B reformulated the domains into 21 core ideas (i.e., editing domains into concise and assumption-free ideas that closely match the participants’ words). Two members of Team B then created a table of domains and core ideas from the interviews. All members of Team B engaged in cross-analysis to identify six categories (i.e., impact of environment, competing influences, personal traits, chair influence, committee function, and barriers to completion). Team B followed Hill et al.’s (2005) recommendations of applying frequency labels to each category to identify occurrence across cases: general (G; 41 or 42 cases), typical (T; 22 to 40 cases), variant (V; three to 21 cases), and rare (R; one to 2 cases).

Trustworthiness Strategies

To maximize trustworthiness, we undertook the following procedures: researcher reflexivity, reflexive journaling, triangulation, member checking, thick description, data saturation, dependability audits (audit trail), and consensus meetings (Hill et al., 2005). Teams A and B created a researcher epoch. Common assumptions disclosed within Team A’s and Team B’s researcher epoch included (a) the dissertation is an overwhelming experience, (b) the dissertation is a final step toward the achievement of a doctoral degree, and (c) the dissertation is a fear-provoking experience because of underdeveloped research skills.

The credibility of the findings was established through recontextualizing and reconstructing the data by using triangulation (multiple interviewees and researchers), peer debriefing (research team members and auditor), and participant member checks. Transferability of the present research findings was enhanced by providing a thick description of the emergent
category and fully reflecting participant experiences through data saturation. To improve the dependability of the findings, the teams conducted frequent consensus meetings and dependability audits to determine if the thoughts, procedures, and strategies on particular domains, core ideas, and/or categories were both verifiable and dependable. Confirmability was maximized through member checking and triangulation of data sources.

Results

After synthesizing the data from 42 interviews, member checks, memo notes, and reflexive journals, we combined all transcribed data and conducted a combined analysis of the findings. The domains, associated quotes, and pictorial representation are presented in the following sections. Then, an emergent theory of the dissertation process is outlined.

Impact of Environment

Participants generally described the impact the environment had on their ability to feel motivated throughout the process and to finally complete the dissertation. Participants expressed emotions and stories about the consequences that work, home, and the school environment had on their ability to be productive throughout the dissertation process. The subdomains that provided meaningful interpretation to impact of environment included family support (T), child care (T), practical needs (e.g., adequate office space; V), career support of doctoral studies (V), and peer support (R). Participant 24 described the impact of her dissertation environment this way:

By the time I was in dissertation phase we had our first child, I was working full time, and you know, just sort of family things, so I mean for me it was just kind of keeping things in boxes. When I was at school I was at school and when I was at home I was at home. I had a pretty supportive work environment they were pretty flexible.

Participant 18 described her challenges in having a full-time career during her doctoral studies and switching to another full-time career while completing the dissertation. She stated,

When I started my dissertation, I was working full time with the [name of job] in [name of city] and when I finished I was working full time [at name of university], so it was a change of jobs in the middle of it. Both full time jobs, both . . . demanding in terms of having to
put a lot of work into them because they were new and I was [new], you know, and so work was heavy.

**Competing Influences**

Generally, participants expressed competing influences motivating them to complete the dissertation. The subdomains that described the competing influences included desire for prestige (V), the opportunity to teach at a higher level of education (V), chair-imposed deadlines (V), self-imposed deadlines (V), financial limitations (T), and a personal sense of accomplishment (V). Participant 36 described a personal sense of accomplishment:

I felt really proud about the topic, and I really wanted to learn as much as I could about that topic. I liked collecting the data, collecting articles, looking at what’s been done, and looking at where the gaps were. So I would get up at 4 in the morning and I would work on the dissertation from 4 until probably 6, 6:30. And then go to work.

Participant 13 described the influence of a self-imposed deadline in the context of a sabbatical that motivated her to complete the dissertation:

I took time off. Largely I mean I got to the proposal stage and, ah, then I was able to take a sabbatical, and that was really nice. I had time to get out to the schools and access to the kids [her participants] and all that was much easier, and I knew in terms of motivation, I knew I had a clock running. I had to finish. There was no way I wanted to drag it, take a year off and still not be done.

**Personality Traits**

Generally, participants expressed positive personality traits that affected the completion of their dissertation. Although we recognized that the words *personality trait* have a particular meaning in the counseling field, participants in this study used them in a more colloquial sense. The subdomains that described the personality traits included ambition (G), persistence (G), internal locus of control (V), internal sense of destiny (R), and motivation (G) that allowed them to continue through to completion. Participant 12 described her internal locus of control and persistence. She stated,

I loved the quiet and being able to work and think my own thoughts. I love being my own boss. I love the, the simpleness of life. I had one focus. There was only
one thing I had to get to, everything else was just, you know, everything else was organized by that.

Participant 42 described a sense of ambition in a narrative of his experience with the dissertation process. He explained,

I probably just barreled through it [the dissertation], and you know it [the dissertation] was just a problem that needed to be solved. So, hey it’s [the dissertation] not the end of the world, let’s just solve it [the dissertation] and go on.

Chair Influence

Participants typically had mixed interpersonal and professional experiences with their dissertation chair. The subdomains that encompassed chair influence included chair as mentor (T), chair motivation (V), chair as teacher (T), and chair involvement (T). Participants typically reported a positive and supportive relationship with their dissertation chairs; however, some participants expressed negative experiences from less enthusiastic chairs. Participants experienced obstacles with their chair, such as a chair’s struggle with physical ailments (R), a chair’s lack of involvement (V), or death of a chair (R). Participants rarely expressed the experience with their chair as a neutral experience. Participant 26 described his experience as follows:

I think mostly my support came from weekly meetings with my chair I was so fortunate to get hooked up with her and I say this . . . um in the true sense. She took me under her wing and mentored me through the entire process.

Participant 6 described his chair as providing a developmental context for his topic starting before comprehensive exams and ending with defending his dissertation. He stated,

I had tremendous support. Um and it all started with my chair [chair name]. He prepared me for my dissertation process well before even my written comps. Okay? Um . . . he really gave me an avenue. He knew I was interested in working with [the] sex offender population or treatment groups. And so in conjunction with that one of my comprehensive exam questions was in forensic counseling.

Committee Function
Committee members generally provided participants with varied experiences within the dissertation experience. The subdomains that described the nature of the interpersonal environment, personal and professional expectations/outcomes, and committee involvement included disappointment in committee responsiveness (T), the importance of committee choice (V), preplanning (V), and the importance of proficiency (T). Participants fluctuated between experiencing the committee as supportive and essential and experiencing the committee as nonexistent and more of a formality. Participant 3 noted,

I don’t remember the rest of my committee having a lot of input but they certainly read the draft before proposal and made some suggestions at the proposal itself and read the final draft and made some comments at the defense but other than the actual dissertation advisor, I don’t remember the rest of the committee members being overly involved.

Participant 11 described his personal and professional expectations in the context of presenting his research in front of his committee:

Remember your committee is your audience. If they don’t understand it, then you haven’t explained it very well. They’re smart you know. And they’ve done a dissertation and re-search. If they don’t understand what the hell you’re saying, the problem is you, not them. One of my committee members schooled me so well on what a canonical correlation is and when I wrote it up one of the . . . um committee members said, “May I use this in my class?” and I said, “Hell yeah.”

**Barriers to Completion**

Typically, participants described a variety of environmental barriers that impeded the completion of the dissertation with spontaneous events disrupting progress. Barrier was defined as an impediment to the dissertation process or a hardship. The subdomains that described barriers to completion included focus on nondissertation work to support basic needs (T), life distractions (e.g., divorce, unemployment; V), physical injuries (R), disappointing findings (V), and faculty relationships (with each other and with the student; T). Participant 33 explained her barrier as a lack of guidance that resulted in disappointing findings:

I created an instrument. I mean I ran a little pilot study but it was very disappointing to get to the end of the dissertation and not be able to interpret any of the findings because the instrument wasn’t valid or reliable so that was very disappointing.
Participant 40 described her experience with the life distraction of taking care of her mother and a problematic relationship with her advisor:

The summer that my mom was dying, my advisor told me that I needed to choose between my mom and my dissertation. So when he said that, that was a major roadblock, but I pretty much just sat down and wrote, and thought it through and said, “That’s not an option.” I’ve just got to go forward on both. My program was very high pressure, and there were a lot of people who would come out with psychological problems, and addiction issues, and all sort of divorces.

**Emergent Theory of the Initiation, Management, and Completion of the Dissertation**

Multiple factors contributed to the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation with counselor education and supervision. The present domains were further analyzed in an interactive, multidimensional representation (see Figure 1) that includes the interacting internal (inside of the individual), relational (interpersonal relationship or friendship), and professional (overt and covert professional) factors. The spheres in the figure represent overlapping experiences participants described during the dissertation initiation, management, and completion process. Each sphere contained unique properties, an area that intersected with one additional sphere (e.g., relational and professional), and an area common to all three spheres (e.g., internal, professional, and relational). Domains were placed in the area that represented the participants’ lived experience.

None of the categories were found to be solely related to one sphere. The categories that participants described as interconnected across all three spheres included competing influences and barriers to completion. For example, Participant 38 described an appreciation for the design of his program and the innate support he felt in relation to his fellow graduate students and faculty:

My graduate program, both in terms of the design of the program itself, my training, and the folks on faculty were incredible, and I felt supported the entire time by them as an institution and then by my fellow graduate student who I was close friends with.

Participants described two categories that intersected with another. The first was personality traits, which was a combination of internal and relational factors. Participant 35 described his personal attitude in relation to faculty expectations: “I just had a pragmatic attitude toward the whole thing. I needed to get it done within a year. If they gave me direction that is what I went
with.” The second set of categories that intersected was chair’s influence, impact of environment, and committee function. These categories seemed to be a combination of relational and professional factors. Participant 14 discussed his professional relationship with the committee and the closer relationship he had with his advisor:

It wasn’t a close relationship. Not with the whole committee but with the major advisor yes, it was a day-to-day . . . I had to balance that workload with the school, class workload, with the experiment, research workload, with the emotional girlfriend workload.

FIGURE 1

**Representation of the Emergent Theory of the Initiation, Management, and Completion of the Dissertation Within Counselor Education and Supervision**

The theory of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation is an integrated process. At the center of this theory is a clearer understanding of the experience many graduates have throughout the dissertation experience. All parties involved in the counseling dissertation process can use this theory to inform their experience, expectations, and responsibilities.

Discussion

The present findings add to the limited knowledge regarding counseling professionals’ experience with the various stages of the dissertation process. The theory of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation comprised six domains: impact of environment, competing influences,
personality traits, chair influence, committee function, and barriers to completion. The categories were organized across three interrelated factors, including relational factors (e.g., chair, committee members, family), professional factors (e.g., faculty relationships, financial resources), and internal factors (e.g., persistence, internal sense of destiny). These factors emerge throughout various stages of the dissertation experience (i.e., initiation, management, and completion) and culminate in an integrated and interactional theory of the counseling dissertation process. Counselor educators can use this theory as a framework for programmatic efforts (e.g., creation of dissertation study groups), resources (e.g., time and money reserved to aid students in the dissertation process), and as an underlying philosophy (e.g., faculty attitudes toward students while on their path to completing the dissertation). Understanding the essence of successfully completing the dissertation offers a process for students and faculty to design strategies to increase student success rates, decrease the number of students who do not complete the dissertation and remain ABD, and strengthen the research identity of future counselor educators.

Although research indicates that the dissertation portion of doctoral education is a less structured period designed for writing and research (e.g., Katz, 1997), the present study portrays successful dissertation candidates as engaging in a structured process. The dissertation process includes creating relationships with the dissertation chair and members of the dissertation committee, establishing self-directed goals, paying attention to the competing influences of work and family life, and collaborating with the chair in establishing deadlines. Implications center on motivation, personal traits, and identification of barriers in the dissertation process.

Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

The present investigation into the counseling dissertation process reveals five implications for counselor educators. First, the competing influences and the impact of the environment categories describe the motivation to initiate and complete the dissertation. The core ideas within these domains demonstrate that, when faculty work with counselor education doctoral students, it is imperative to explore the personal influences that are motivating or preventing students’ dissertation process. For our participants, these influences centered on family context, child-care options, support within their career (outside of academia), and the level of support provided by the students’ peers or cohort. Counselor education programs can provide students with information to help them with contextual issues (e.g., child-care issues and family context) during the dissertation process. For example,
programs can compile a list of university and community resources to help with child-care needs. Faculty can enhance peer and cohort relations through the creation of research groups and dissertation support groups and begin to foster peer collaboration with the implementation of group writing projects and peer editing.

A second implication centers on the importance of unique personality traits of dissertation completers. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Brunning et al., 2004), many participants in the present study reported that a high level of self-efficacy in scholarly writing and an internal motivation were key factors in the completion of their dissertations. Therefore, it is recommended that programs explore the presence and development of these traits within their students as they approach the dissertation. Following a colloquial assessment of the student, the faculty member and student can cocreate strategies to assist in the development of scholarly ability. For example, a student with low scholarly writing self-efficacy could meet with his or her dissertation chair to come up with tactics to aid the student in completing the dissertation (e.g., chair modeling appropriate study methods, cocreation of a detailed timeline).

A third point centers on faculty nurturing a sense of destiny and ambition within their advisees through mentoring and allowing autonomy. Faculty can demonstrate support to students by allowing them to explore their own ideas and creating a personalized research agenda. Most participants \(n = 36\) mentioned that their dissertation chairs provided an open atmosphere when cocreating a researchable topic. Only six participants mentioned that their chair was solely interested in supporting doctoral advisees in researching a topic in line with the chair’s own research track. If faculty support a student’s natural research interests, it could logically provide the inspiration that would aid the students in completing the project in a timely manner.

At the core of the emergent theory is a more accurate understanding of the various relationships during the dissertation. Previous research identified dissertation advising as one of the most essential elements to dissertation timeliness, effectiveness, and completion (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; Harsch, 2008; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Most participants \(n = 32\) identified the positive and supportive relationships with their dissertation chair as pivotal in aiding them in completing their dissertation successfully. The participants who had positive experiences with their chair generally described two significant factors that created an effective mentorship: (a) chair expertise in research and methodology and (b) chair-imposed deadlines cocreated with the doctoral student. Similarly, the committee function domain highlighted the importance of committee
member expert knowledge as beneficial during the dissertation process. A fourth implication, therefore, is that increased chair and committee involvement could counteract the isolation, lack of support, and a lack of shared sense of purpose that have been recognized as barriers to the completion of the dissertation (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Katz, 1997). For example, counselor education programs could start to enhance the overall wellness of doctoral students through the use of a wellness evaluation and a tailored plan to enhance the students’ wellness. A major issue that emerged was social isolation during the dissertation; this wellness plan could encourage prosocial behavior with individuals outside of the program.

The final implication was the range of issues that emerged as barriers to completing the dissertation. Participants had to overcome a variety of barriers throughout the dissertation process. We were surprised at the range of issues that emerged (e.g., divorce, physical injury, and faculty relationships).

Consistent with Harsch (2008), when a dissertation chair was in a supportive role, she or he helped the doctoral candidate successfully complete the dissertation. This further supports the finding of the critical role of an active and engaged chair in the development and successful completion of the dissertation (DiPierro, 2007; Katz, 1997; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Dissertation chairs can assist students with unexpected life crises (e.g., divorce, physical injury) by advising them in strategizing the postsecondary dissertation credits for which they enroll in a given semester. In addition, faculty should be familiar with institutional policies regarding a temporary leave of absence to ensure students are not penalized for unexpected life events. Lastly, participants who suffered from poor relationships with faculty were often placed in a situation in which they engaged in collusion against another faculty member or student. Given the salience of faculty relationships in dissertation work, counselor educators should be encouraged and/or mandated to work out personal issues outside of their relationship with doctoral students.

**Limitations**

Four potential limitations should be considered when examining the findings of the present research. First, during the time of this research, the primary author was a faculty member in a counselor education program and the other members were doctoral students in the same program. The primary author was intentional about cocreating an egalitarian relationship with the other researchers and differentiating this role with the other roles used throughout the program (e.g.,
professor, committee member). Team B broached this topic and reached consensus that all members could openly express their opinions. Although a conversation on openness in the creation of the theory was conducted, the primary author was aware that his roles within the university could jeopardize the consensus process within the research team. To address this issue, the primary author did not participate directly in the establishment of the final categorical descriptions, thereby limiting any potential unnecessary influence. A second limitation was the demographic homogeneity of the participants. All of the participants were currently living in the Midwest. Although qualitative research does not seek to generalize results, it is important to note that the needs of doctoral students in the Midwest and the norms of the midwestern lifestyle may be different from those in other geographical locations. Furthermore, a majority of the participants identified as White.

The present investigation used telephone (n = 29) and face-to-face (n = 13) interview formats. Within both interview formats, we attempted to create an atmosphere that encouraged in-depth discussion; however, there were no assurances that participants felt safe to fully disclose their experiences. Although telephone interviews come with benefits (e.g., decreased social pressure), there are also disadvantages (e.g., absence of visual cues). Similarly, face-to-face interviews have benefits (e.g., potential increase in rapport) and disadvantages (e.g., socially desirable answering; for a comprehensive review, see Novick, 2008).

A final limitation to the present investigation was the sole use of participants who have successfully completed a dissertation. We recognize that qualitative research focuses on the transferability of results and the present findings may not transfer to specific populations (e.g., dissertation noncompleters). It is plausible that a sample that included dissertation noncompleters may have yielded different results.

**Future Research Directions**

The present research offers insight for both doctoral candidates and counselor educators. Future studies could compare the dissertation experiences of recent graduates with those of more seasoned professionals. Although the general concept of a dissertation may be similar, the norms, rules, and student expectations have likely changed. Similar investigations can serve as antecedents to the creation of dissertation best practice standards. A second area of research is how to better prepare counselor educators in their role as dissertation committee member and chair. According to CACREP (2009), doctoral programs must effectively train future counselor educators in leadership
roles. Key areas of leadership include dissertation chair and committee membership.

The importance of understanding the successful completion of the dissertation is reflected in the statistic that only up to 50% of students who enroll in a PhD program actually complete their dissertation (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). The results of this study provided a detailed description of the domains and core ideas that contributed to the successful completion of a dissertation by counselor educators and provided an emergent representation of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation in counselor education.

References


APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. What was your dissertation topic?
2. Describe your process during the dissertation.
3. How did you stay motivated through the dissertation process?
4. How did you set up your research design?
5. How were you supported through the dissertation process?
6. In what ways were you challenged throughout the dissertation process?
7. What were your scholarly obligations during your dissertation process?
8. How did you choose your dissertation committee?
9. How did you choose your dissertation chair?
10. How did your dissertation impact your future publications and career?
11. What advice do you wish you had received when you started your dissertation?
12. How did you handle positive or negative experiences during the dissertation process?
13. Describe your feelings and thoughts following the completion of your dissertation.