Students' Perceptions of the Efficacy of First-Year Courses toward Dissertation

Preparedness in a Non-Traditional, Cohort-Based Doctoral Education Program

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Abstract

Robert Morris University's Instructional Management and Leadership Ph.D. program is expanding to a dual-delivery system of continuing on-ground as well as new online doctoral courses. This study involved an examination of the critical first-year experiences along with the second- and third-year experiences of non-traditional doctoral students enrolled in the 3-year program. The study focused primarily on student perceptions of first-year coursework in the program and the extent to which it prepared them adequately for dissertation work. Results indicated that students generally believed that the program contained a good balance of on-campus and online coursework and that their first-year courses did prepare them for dissertation work. However, they did identify areas of concern and issues that needed to be addressed.

Keywords: non-traditional doctoral programs; action research; blended format

Robert Morris University's Instructional Management and Leadership Doctoral Program is a 3-year program that is entering its 11th year. During the summer of 2016, the university will begin a fully online version of the 3-year program in addition to continuing the existing on-ground format. The first year of the current program includes coursework involving qualitative research methods, quantitative research methods, and statistics. The following is the current course of study:

> Summer of First Year (6 credits):
> Critical Readings in Educational Research (3 credits)
> Applying Instructional Technology (3 credits)
>
> Fall of First Year (6 credits):
> Research I - Qualitative Methods (3 credits)
> Instructional Leadership in Curriculum Planning (3 credits)
>
> Spring of First Year (6 credits):
> Research II - Quantitative Methods (3 credits)
> Statistics I (3 credits)

The program begins in the summer with two courses: one related to educational research basics and one focused on building competence in the use of educational technology. Students are encouraged early in the program to begin considering a focus for their research toward dissertation completion. Primarily for this reason, all of the research courses are frontloaded at the beginning of the program.

A current growing trend among doctoral programs is the accelerated-program model that is expected to be completed during a 3-year period. To a degree, it does limit doctoral students' time to weigh and consider a research methodology shaped by extensive coursework and an exhaustive review of related literature. In the Robert Morris University Instructional Management and Leadership program, students identify and connect issue-based topics to their methodology course assignments in the first year. Their doing so may represent the compromise of educational research literacy that is so critical to the employment of

research methods toward the completion of the terminal degree program (Lin, Wang, Spalding, Klecka, & Odell, 2011).

Another concern for faculty members in the first-year methodology courses is how frontloading these courses may affect future online doctoral students, as some of the current face-to-face and after-class time will need to be transformed into online meeting time. Researchers (Cavanaugh & Dawson, 2010; Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013) have reported that, although distance and hybrid doctoral studies are a modern learning innovation, online teaching and learning are not novel and can be supported effectively.

Purpose of the Study

To gain a better personal understanding of how Robert Morris University's doctoral students view course planning related to the frontloading of the research methodology courses, a survey was conducted with a focus on the curriculum over the 3 years in the program. The goal

was to assess students' perceptions of the course sequence with an emphasis on students' perceptions of their first-year courses and the extent to which they prepared them for their dissertation work. An additional goal was to help to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the current course offerings and sequencing. Therefore, this research was undertaken to improve the program for future on-ground and online students. Two research questions guided the study: What were the students' perceptions related to the first-year courses offered in the program? Did the student believe that those courses prepared them for dissertation work?

Non-Traditional, Cohort-Based Doctoral Education Programs

The cohort model in doctoral education has added learning benefits for students and has been shown to contribute to the success of students who ultimately finished their dissertation (Varney, 2010). Doctoral students need to have supports in

place to feel prepared to begin the dissertation process (Holmes, Birds, Seay, Smith, & Wilson, 2010; Ismail & Hussain, 2010; Liechty, Liao, & Pegorraro-Schull, 2009). Support offered through the cohort model can help education doctoral students, a population known for higher attrition and time-to-degree rates, to complete their degree by facilitating the development of doctoral persistence (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). In an examination of non-traditional, cohort-based doctoral education students' perceptions of dissertation readiness, Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw investigated the efficacy of adding technology-based supports to assist students with doctoral studies (e.g., the use of technological supports, such as iPad recording for transcription; video interviewing using Skype and other video programs; and other various software applications for organizing, categorizing, and interpreting data). Additionally, these

authors explored the utility of using the cognitive apprenticeship model, a type of mentoring, as a framework for faculty members who are supporting novice researchers (Hineman & Semich, 2013). Cognitive apprenticeship is directed more toward ideas and information, rather than other tasks that are most commonly associated with traditional apprenticeships (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991). Doctoral faculty members can offer support by interacting and exchanging ideas with doctoral candidates as a means of nurturing them. This approach can generate more meaningful opportunities for learning than faculty members' providing a review and an evaluation of student work. Motivations of students enrolling with the hope of completing their doctoral degree vary and are beyond the scope of this study. However, to provide the best possible experience for the highest number of students who choose this type of program, it is important to try to

determine areas of weakness within the program and better facilitate future students' learning experiences leading up to and supporting throughout the dissertation process.

Upon examining the challenges associated with attaining a doctoral degree, Mujtaba, Scharff, Cavico, and Mujtaba (2008) concluded, "While there is no perfect institution, higher education and doctoral programs should have an infrastructure in place that ensures learning happens at a high-level consistently so their students can successfully achieve their academic dreams" (p. 24). Once again, the focus of this study was on program improvement in terms of curricular planning. Students were surveyed over several years. It was found that frontloading the research methods courses was not a major problem; however, a few students experienced difficulty. In Figures 1 and 2, the survey data showed that roughly 25% of on-ground doctoral students

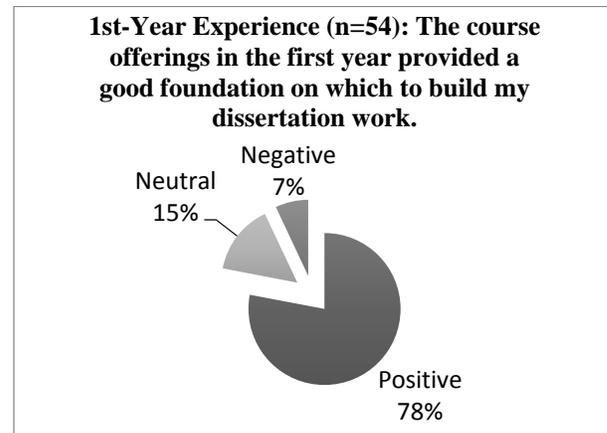remained neutral or had some degree of difficulty with these first-year courses.

1st-Year Experience (n=54): The course offerings in the first year provided a good foundation on which to build my dissertation work.

Negative 7%
Neutral 15%
Positive 78%

Figure 1. Course offerings' impact on the foundation of dissertation work.

1st -Experience (n=54): After the first year in the IML Program, I felt confident in my ability to complete the IML program including my dissertation.
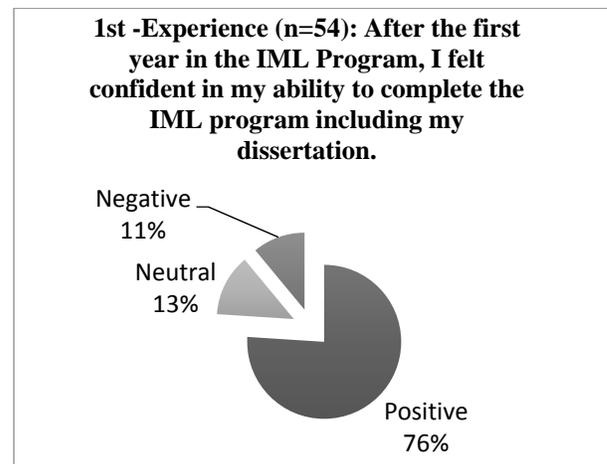
Negative 11%
Neutral 13%
Positive 76%

Figure 2. Confidence in the ability to complete the program after the first year.

Non-Traditional Cohort-Based Doctoral Curricular Planning

Based on a review of the relevant literature, there seems to be a lack of

research in the area of planning research methodology courses. Van-Eeden-Moorefield and Walsh (2010) argued that fear and apprehension are part of the challenge that doctoral students face when having to take statistics and research methodology courses. Coleman and Conrad (2007) added that satisfaction rates are lower among graduate students who take research methodology courses. Research courses require a unique skillset and involve a new way to apply knowledge. For some aspiring doctoral students, planning and designing a new method or strategy of gathering data can seem overwhelming. Some students may also have difficulty overcoming the challenge of using new software, such as SPSS or NVivo. Curricular planning seems to be one area that other researchers believe can be controlled more easily than barriers that are situational, institutional, and dispositional in nature (Ewing, Mathieson, Alexander, & Leafman, 2012).

Many universities that offer the fast-track, cohort-based executive doctoral programs adopt a curriculum sequence that invariably places research methods courses at the beginning of the program to address the 3-year completion timeline. Thus, it is more a question of necessity, rather than choice. Three-year doctoral programs in leadership found at the University of California, Loyola Marymount, University of Denver, and the University of Pennsylvania, all require three to four research methods courses in the first year. Yet, all of these programs still demonstrate success among their graduates.

Methodology

Action research was selected as the approach because the goal was to link academic knowledge creation with problem solving (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). As described by Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire (2003), "it [action research] is a

work in progress" (p. 11). The goal was to gather data on the research methodology courses as a way of planning for double cohorts to include traditional on-ground learners along with the new online learners in the doctoral program. A survey instrument consisting of questions related to various aspects of the doctoral program across all three years was designed using *Question Pro.* It was subsequently reviewed by members of the doctoral faculty. The instrument was then distributed via email to all 86 current doctoral students in the university's 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th cohorts who were exposed to the current curriculum structure. Fifty-four completed instruments were returned. Given that each of the cohorts surveyed were in different stages of the program, only the data related to student perceptions of the first year of the program were considered in this study, as all participants had completed that stage of the program. There was also an interest in the

perceptions of the students as they entered the program. The remaining data were archived for use as part of future studies that will examine the perceptions of students in all four cohorts of other aspects of the program, focusing on years 2 and 3. An action research approach was used to contribute to the effort to constantly adapt and improve the program to the needs of the students (Berg, 2007; Stake, 1995). The results of this study may offer those who are considering or already involved in similar programs some insight into student perceptions and possible courses of action in response to those perceptions.

Results

The data resulting from survey questions related to the first year of the 3-year program appear in the left of the columns in the table. The results to the survey questions reporting student perceptions from Cohort 11 students only

(n=16), the newest cohort enrolled in the program, appear in the right column in the table. Cohort 11 data were isolated because they were the most recent group to complete the first year of the program. This allowed for consideration of their perceptions separate from the other cohorts whose members have completed additional work in the program and have advanced further in the dissertation process.

Table 1

Cohorts' Survey Feedback

The course offerings in the first year provided a good foundation on which to build my dissertation work.			
Cohorts 8, 9, 10, and 11 Combined Results		Cohort 11 Survey Results	
Strongly Disagree	1	Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	3	Disagree	0
Neither Disagree nor Agree	8	Neither Disagree nor Agree	3
Agree	23	Agree	5
Strongly Agree	19	Strongly Agree	7
The times that courses were offered in the first year made it easier to balance home/work/academic responsibilities.			

Cohorts 8, 9, 10, and 11 Combined Results		Cohort 11 Survey Results	
Strongly Disagree	3	Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	3	Disagree	0
Neither Disagree nor Agree	8	Neither Disagree nor Agree	4
Agree	24	Agree	8
Strongly Agree	16	Strongly Agree	3
The days of the week that courses were offered in the first year made it easier to balance home/work/academic responsibilities.			
Cohorts 8, 9, 10, and 11 Combined Results		Cohort 11 Survey Results	
Strongly Disagree	5	Strongly Disagree	2
Disagree	1	Disagree	0
Neither Disagree nor Agree	6	Neither Disagree nor Agree	1
Agree	24	Agree	9
Strongly Agree	18	Strongly Agree	4
I would have preferred more totally online course offerings in the first year.			
Cohorts 8, 9, 10, and 11 Combined Results		Cohort 11 Survey Results	
Strongly Disagree	22	Strongly Disagree	4
Disagree	17	Disagree	6
Neither Disagree nor Agree	10	Neither Disagree nor Agree	3
Agree	4	Agree	2

Strongly Agree	1	Strongly Agree	1

I would have preferred more blended (online and on-ground) course offerings in the first year.

Cohorts 8, 9, 10, and 11 Combined Results		Cohort 11 Survey Results	
Strongly Disagree	9	Strongly Disagree	2
Disagree	18	Disagree	3
Neither Disagree nor Agree	6	Neither Disagree nor Agree	2
Agree	14	Agree	6
Strongly Agree	7	Strongly Agree	3

I would have preferred more weekend course offerings in the first year.

Cohorts 8, 9, 10, and 11 Combined Results		Cohort 11 Survey Results	
Strongly Disagree	23	Strongly Disagree	5
Disagree	21	Disagree	7
Neither Disagree nor Agree	6	Neither Disagree nor Agree	1
Agree	3	Agree	3
Strongly Agree	1	Strongly Agree	0

I received appropriate academic support in the first year.

Cohorts 8, 9, 10, and 11 Combined Results		Cohort 11 Survey Results	
Strongly Disagree	2	Strongly Disagree	0
Disagree	1	Disagree	0
Neither Disagree nor Agree	7	Neither Disagree nor Agree	3
Agree	24	Agree	8
Strongly Agree	20	Strongly Agree	5

Findings and Next Steps

Frequencies of responses related to first-year impressions of the program from students in all four cohorts, including specific results from the most recent cohort to complete that year of study in the program, suggest that students do feel prepared to handle the dissertation work required to complete the program. Additionally, the vast majority of students reported that the times and format of the courses are a good fit for them; moreover, they believed that the times, format, and content of the courses prepared them for dissertation work and completion. Considering that the majority of the respondents were engaged in, or even in the final stages of their dissertation work, this provided the researchers with data used to improve the program. Thus, the next stage of

the research was to discuss the survey findings with the doctoral faculty in the first doctoral faculty meeting of the year.

At the initial monthly doctoral faculty meeting, faculty members were given a summary of the findings of the survey from the spring of the prior semester. In the doctoral program, students are routinely surveyed each year as a means of reviewing the program. As this doctoral program supports a continuous improvement program model, concerns and issues are addressed as a measure of outcomes assessment in this program. The key findings are reported below, along with steps taken to address each issue.

1. More focused and applied coursework in the first and second years of the program that supports skills and applies information directly to the dissertation is needed.

To address this concern, the course entitled "Critical Readings" was rewritten to emphasize applied work for the dissertation. The qualitative and quantitative research

courses were combined to address methodological planning for students more effectively. The two instructors work together over a 16-week period, rather than two separate 8-week periods. Also, a course entitled "Introduction to the Dissertation" was added to help to bridge coursework with the dissertation.

2. Whereas most faculty members are supportive and recognized as a positive part of the student dissertation experience, some are not providing the necessary support to students.

To address this concern, doctoral faculty members were reminded of the importance of meeting times with students at the monthly doctoral meetings. In two instances, the program director met separately with faculty members to establish periodic meeting times with students. Faculty members were supportive in addressing this concern.

3. Future consideration should be given to offering more courses in a blended format during the second and third years of the program.

To address this concern, all of the dissertation seminar courses were modified to include a monthly Blackboard shell. This served two purposes: (1) to prepare for the online program this coming year, where the shells will become a necessity and (2) to offer additional support for cohort members, with each monthly seminar session becoming more individualized by focusing on the monthly seminar topic. Additionally, the doctoral faculty members currently are participating in training that is dedicated to online education in preparation for inclusion of the online-only cohort entering the program next year.

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