

Identifying Dissertation Challenges of Hispanic Graduate Students

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Abstract

Writing and research assistance for doctoral students writing dissertations via one-on-one tutoring sessions was implemented at an HSI in the southeastern United States. This exploratory sequential mixed methods study aimed to inform the specific challenges of Hispanic graduate students completing dissertations at HSIs and identify the next steps for student support. Data were collected through an online survey completed by tutors (n=3) upon completion of each tutoring session. A total of 398 responses were analyzed and coded. Results demonstrated three major themes: writing skills (n=324), research skills (n=125), and general graduate student skills (n=20). Writing challenges included implementing APA style correctly, effectively summarizing articles, beginning chapter outlines, organizing information in dissertation drafts, and writing the literature review chapter. Research challenges included conducting a systematic literature review, analyzing data and finding themes, organizing results, going through the IRB process, locating articles using databases, and interpreting literature.

Keywords: Dissertation Writing, HSI, Writing Skills, Research Skills, Doctoral Student

As of 2020, the Hispanic population is the largest minority population in the United States, with 18.5% of the U.S. identifying as Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census, 2020). This population growth will continue, impacting the number of Hispanic students in higher education. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the number of Hispanic students in higher education will reach 4.4 million by 2025 (HACU, 2021). Parallel to this population growth, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) have also increased, making up 17% of non-profit colleges and universities. Despite the increasing numbers, Hispanic students are still underrepresented in doctoral-level programs (Okahana et al., 2020; Quintanilla et al., 2007). Those in doctoral programs face unique challenges in higher education, such as social inequality, language barrier, imposter syndrome, and limited knowledge of academic rigor (Espino, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2015).

To offset these barriers, HSIs create support structures to ensure student success. One common method of student support found in the literature is a mentoring system. Mentoring students one-on-one promotes self-confidence and belonging, leading to better student performance (Holloway-Friesen, 2021; Ruecker, 2015). Mentoring is especially important regarding writing skills and developing students as scholars within their disciplines. Participating in activities such as conducting research and writing publications correlates with research and writing self-efficacy (Lambie et al., 2014).

To address the obstacles noted in the literature, writing and research assistance for doctoral students writing dissertations via one-on-one tutoring sessions was implemented at an HSI in the southeastern United States. As part of ongoing formative evaluation efforts, an online tutoring form was created to track primary student challenges and progress. This paper aims to

inform the specific challenges of Hispanic graduate students completing dissertations at a predominantly Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) and identify the next steps for student support.

Method

Research Design

This study utilized an explanatory-sequential mixed method design where quantitative data were analyzed first, and qualitative data were used to expand upon and clarify the results of the quantitative analysis (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Mixed methods studies allow for additional insight into numbers, building a richer picture of the data (O'Leary, 2021). Specifically, using both methods in this study provided insight into student challenges that were not immediately evident from the descriptive statistics. The quantitative phase utilized a descriptive design to provide systematic information (i.e., frequency data) about the graduate student challenges. The qualitative phase used open-ended short answer questions to supplement and describe the quantitative data. For example, a written explanation of student challenges tallied as "creating outlines" provided further insight into what occurred in the session. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from an online tutoring form which is described hereafter.

Data Collection & Instrumentation

Data were collected using an online tutoring form on the SurveyMonkey website upon receiving IRB approval from the university in June 2020. The data collection process began on October 1, 2020 and ended on October 1, 2022. After each tutoring session, the tutors (n=3) filled out the online tutoring form via a SurveyMonkey link. The online tutoring form included a total of 17 questions that varied in type (e.g., fill in the blank, rating scale, and checklist) and

four main sections: 1) General Student Information, 2) Student Observations, 3) Supporting Materials, and 4) Outcomes and Follow Up. For this study, only the Student Observations section was analyzed. The Student Observations section included a multiple-answer checklist question about identifying student challenges and one open-ended written response question about specific student challenges. The multiple checklist question included 20 possible selections (e.g., Creating Outlines, Collecting Data), one labeled Other, and auto-populated a space to write in the answer when selected.

Format of Tutoring Sessions

A total of 398 online tutoring forms were completed on 161 graduate students. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of sessions (98.5%) took place through the Zoom platform. Six sessions (1.5%) were held face-to-face on campus per the students' request. Each session was one-hour in length and included an initial intake, a response to the immediate needs, and a discussion about future appointments. Data input via the tutoring form occurred immediately after each session.

University Setting

The research occurred at a private, non-profit Hispanic-serving university in the southeastern United States. The university is relatively small, with only 24 full-time professors, 79 adjunct professors, and a student-teacher ratio of 12 to 1. The programs offered at the university include social sciences (e.g., Education, Psychology) and health professions (e.g., Speech-Language Pathology). Though the university offers undergraduate education (i.e. Associate's & Bachelor's degree programs), the majority (81.7%) of the student body comprises

graduate students. As of November 2021, there were approximately 657 graduate students, 81% reported as Hispanic.

There are two doctoral programs at the university; one requiring a traditional dissertation and one requiring a doctoral project. Both types of documents utilize a four-chapter approach and adhere to the standards set forth by the American Psychological Association (2020). The first chapter encompasses the introduction and literature review, the second chapter includes the method, the third chapter covers the results, and the fourth chapter consists of the discussion. Both documents are rigorous; the main difference is that the doctoral project can be a systematic literature review or an in-depth program review.

Data Analysis

There were three phases of data analysis as part of this mixed methods study. The first phase was an analysis of the quantitative data from the online tutoring form. Data were extracted from the SurveyMonkey platform, de-identified, and uploaded into the IBM SPSS program (v. 26.0). Upon inspection, no missing data points were reported; thus, no responses were removed. The data cleaning process also included examining and coding the nominal data from the Other selection of the online tutoring form. Following data cleaning, descriptive statistics were run on student challenges to examine frequency data.

The second data analysis phase was the qualitative analysis of the open-ended question regarding student challenges. Data were extracted from the SurveyMonkey platform, de-identified, and coded through a two-phase process as outlined by Saldaña (2016). In the first phase, single words and longer phrases were highlighted. In the second phase, additional words

and phrases were highlighted, analytic memos were recorded for codes, and some codes were recategorized.

The third and final data analysis stage included analyzing the quantitative frequency data and qualitative codes. The data were examined first for patterns regarding the frequency of occurrence in both lists. Next, the data were analyzed to create categories. Categorizing data combines several codes under a heading to create meaning (Saldaña, 2016). The analytic memos were reviewed once more, and data were recategorized and organized into major themes and subthemes.

Results

The results revealed three major themes in the student challenges reported in tutoring sessions: writing skills (n=324), research skills (n=125), and general graduate student skills (n=20). Within writing skills, three subthemes emerged: writing strategies (n=172), pre-writing (n=172), and writing dissertation chapters (n=32). Within research skills, two subthemes emerged: planning and conducting research (n=109) and finding and using research articles (n=16). Two subthemes emerged within general graduate student skills: achieving milestones (n=18) and general student assistance (n=2). The frequencies of specific topics of sessions organized by themes are in Table 1.

Table 1***Frequency of Student Challenges Reported in Tutoring Sessions***

Student Challenges	Frequency
Writing Skills	324
Writing Strategies	172
APA Style/Formatting	85
Summarizing Literature	74
Grammar/Professional Voice	10
Vocabulary/Terminology	3
Pre-Writing	172
Organizing Thoughts	50
Developing Outlines	49
Forming Research Questions	11
Identifying Research Topics	10
Writing Dissertation Sections	32
Literature Review	21
Methodology	5
Theoretical Framework	3
Limitations	2
Discussion	1
Research Skills	125
Planning & Conducting Research	109
Systematic Literature Reviews	38
Completing the IRB	35
Collecting Research	21
Data Analysis	15
Finding & Using Research Articles	16
Using Research Databases	11
Interpreting Research Articles	5
General Graduate Student Skills	20
Achieving Milestones	18
Colloquium/Proposal Defense	15
Final Defense Presentation	3
General Student Assistance	4
Contacting Chair	2
Tips for New Students	1
Addressing Committee Feedback	1

Note. More than one challenge could be tallied per tutoring session (n=398).

Writing Skills

The most frequently noted challenge was writing skills, specifically writing strategies and pre-writing. The results also demonstrated that the literature review was the most frequent dissertation section reported as a writing challenge.

Writing Strategies

The two most frequent challenges in writing strategies were APA format and summarizing literature. APA formatting topics covered in sessions included using proper headings, creating tables, citing sources, importing references, and using concise language. Students had completed in-text citations and references and wanted the tutor to review them for correctness. For example, "[Student] brought a list of references to the session and wanted to ensure they were all in proper APA format." Other sessions reported APA issues arising when reviewing the document for grammar. One tutor stated, "We reviewed the student's final doctoral project for grammar and ended up fixing some APA style related concerns."

The concept of summarizing literature arose in sessions as summarizing articles, writing the literature review portion of a dissertation, and completing the results section of a systematic literature review. Students needed assistance with citing articles using their voices. For example, one tutor noted, "[Student] cited issues understanding research articles and putting them in [their] own words." Other students struggled to summarize multiple articles simultaneously as a data analysis strategy. One tutor stated, "[The student] needed help finding themes by summarizing literature for a systematic literature review."

Pre-Writing

Pre-writing refers to the discovery phase, where the student thinks, plans, and outlines what to write (Rohman, 1964). The two most frequent pre-writing topics in tutoring sessions were organizing information and creating outlines. Organizing information took many forms ranging from discussing ideas to reviewing entire drafts. Tutors noted that some students brought in their initial notes from reading the literature and discussed organizing them in a paper with a tutor. Students frequently brought in a draft of a dissertation chapter that needed reorganization. For example, one tutor noted that a student completing a systematic literature review brought their results section to inquire how to organize it.

The pre-writing topic of creating outlines highlighted the challenge of putting ideas in order, especially when summarizing literature in the first dissertation chapter. Data demonstrated that students wanted to discuss a potential outline for each dissertation chapter or section in tutoring sessions. One tutor stated, "We worked on an outline of the revised introduction together." Similarly, another noted, "[The student] requested help creating an outline for the beginning of [their] literature review."

Though not as frequently reported, the data revealed that some students used tutoring sessions to identify research topics, narrow those topics to a purpose statement, and draft research questions. These topics primarily occurred with students coming to tutoring for the first time. For example, "We brainstormed topics for [the student's] dissertation/doctoral project." Another tutor stated, "Student is trying to choose between two different topics. [The student] wanted some advice on which direction to go."

Writing Dissertation Chapters

Results demonstrated that students required assistance writing an entire dissertation chapter. These chapters were brought to a tutor to review in several sessions, beginning with a discussion of what should be included, then creating an initial outline, and ending with a review of a complete draft. This challenge was most common among students writing their literature reviews. For example, one tutor wrote, "We discussed creating an outline of the literature review." Of the same student, the tutor later wrote, "We reviewed the changes [the student] made to the literature review since our last session."

Overall, the primary writing challenges in tutoring sessions encompassed implementing APA style correctly, effectively summarizing articles, beginning chapter outlines, organizing information in dissertation drafts, and writing the literature review chapter.

Research Skills

The second most frequently noted challenge was research skills, specifically planning for data collection using the IRB process, using research databases to search for literature, and conducting research using a systematic literature review.

Planning & Conducting Research

The most frequently cited area of research assistance was learning about a systematic literature review process. Results demonstrated that students requested help locating and organizing articles. Several sessions revolved around determining whether articles met inclusion criteria. In addition, results indicated that students requested assistance organizing literature using software or creating a table. One tutor stated, "Student requested help working the

[software] program to organize the articles. [The student] also needed some assistance determining if articles collected met the eligibility criteria."

Results also showed that students struggled to analyze articles for themes, organize a results section, and use the PRISMA guidelines for systematic literature reviews (Page et al., 2021). As one tutor stated, "[The student] needed guidance on how to analyze data and develop themes in a systematic literature review." Similarly, another commented, "Student had challenges with using the PRISMA flowchart and narrowing down articles for a systematic literature review. [The student] also wanted to know how to analyze data for this type of project." Once students analyzed the articles, they sought assistance organizing information into the dissertation. One example stated, "The student needed direction on how to set up the results and discussion sections of their systematic literature review."

Another common challenge in sessions included preparing for the IRB process, clarifying the different steps, developing consent forms, gathering proper documentation, and filling out the online application. Tutors reported assisting students with preparation by guiding them through each step. For example, "The student needed assistance with gaining access to the [IRB] portal so we filled out the form together." Other reports demonstrated students bringing drafts of IRB-related documents for review. One tutor stated, "[Student] brought a draft of the consent form to review and revise."

Finding & Using Research Articles

Results demonstrated that students requested help finding and interpreting research articles to use in dissertations. Students needed assistance using the library website to locate articles. One tutor noted, "The student wanted to know how to locate research articles." Students

also reportedly brought articles to sessions, and a tutor assisted with understanding critical takeaways of the findings. For example, "[Student] cited issues understanding research articles to summarize them in their own words and wanted to go through the research articles together." Others brought articles to sessions to determine the usability in their dissertation. One tutor stated, "Student has switched topics and wanted some feedback on a few articles to see if they fit with the new topic."

Overall, the primary research challenges included conducting a systematic literature review, analyzing data and finding themes, organizing results, going through the IRB process, locating articles using databases, and interpreting literature.

General Graduate Student Skills

The least frequently cited challenges related to general graduate student skills. These skills included achieving milestones in the dissertation process (e.g., proposal, final defense), contacting the chairperson with questions, and addressing committee feedback. Students inquired about what information to include in proposal and defense presentations, with some wanting to practice a walk-through. One tutor noted, "Student wanted feedback on the PowerPoint for her upcoming proposal and then practiced presenting her proposal." Students also inquired about the proposal process, including the length of the presentation and the types of questions asked.

In a few cases, students requested assistance drafting an e-mail to a dissertation chair or sought advice about a situation. One tutor noted that a student had not received feedback from the chair after an extended period and sought advice on contacting them. Another wanted to use a different theoretical framework than the chair suggested and requested advice on opening a

dialogue. Overall, the primary challenges in general skills were related to achieving milestones, what to expect at each milestone, and seeking general advice.

Discussion

The current study provided insight into the challenges of Hispanic graduate students completing dissertations at an HSI. The key takeaways revealed that most tutoring sessions focused on writing and research topics such as pre-writing strategies, organizing and summarizing literature, preparing for data collection and analysis, conducting systematic literature reviews, and preparing an IRB. The results of this study aligned with previous literature, which noted that non-native language speakers at universities might struggle with grammar, organization, paraphrasing, and the overall writing process (Cennetkuşu, 2017; Hartshorn & Evans, 2019). Students in this study demonstrated challenges with organizing dissertation chapters, putting information in their own words, and beginning the writing process using pre-writing strategies.

This study found that only a few students (approximately 5% of tutoring sessions) sought resources regarding the dissertation processes (e.g., proposal, defense, contacting a chair). However, students in this study utilized tutoring sessions to find resources for writing and research (e.g., how to conduct systematic literature reviews, interpret articles, and complete the IRB process). These findings align with previous research on Hispanic students, which suggested that faculty members must use support and mentorship to direct students to resources and encourage them to utilize those resources (Santa-Ramirez, 2021).

The results of this study also demonstrated similarities between Hispanic and non-Hispanic graduate students in psychology doctoral programs regarding non-writing-focused dissertation challenges. For example, Splinter et al. (2022) noted that graduate students

completing dissertations in a counseling program struggled with identifying research topics, the IRB process, and formatting. The results showed that students in this study needed assistance with identifying research topics, the IRB process, and APA formatting in a dissertation. This finding suggests that some research-based dissertation challenges are not non-native language specific.

Implications for Faculty at HSIs

The results of this study can inform other institutions serving Hispanic graduate-level students writing dissertations. In this study, many students were challenged by pre-writing processes. Students utilized tutoring sessions to figure out where to begin when writing a dissertation and talked through ideas and feedback with a tutor. These results highlight the need for HSIs to offer resources to encourage students to begin the pre-writing process. In this specific study, the primary resource was professional tutoring; however, resources in other institutions can include workshops or other small writing groups where students work collaboratively on strategies for drafting ideas, creating outlines, and brainstorming.

Students came to tutoring seeking resources and information on research, writing, and, in some cases, general graduate school processes. This finding highlights the importance of institutions having writing and research resources readily accessible to students (e.g., writing examples, completed dissertations, proposal presentation examples, IRB examples). The location of the current study has several free resources for graduate students, highlighting the importance of faculty and staff reminding students of the resources available to them. Previous research has found that mentoring is crucial for Hispanic students to feel self-efficacy in graduate programs

(Holloway-Friesen, 2021). In this study, students could see tutors as mentors, seeking out questions and discussing challenges freely. Thus, setting up a mentoring program where students are assigned to a faculty mentor who guides them through processes and resources may also be a strategy for HSIs.

Understanding research methods (e.g., systematic literature reviews) and other dissertation processes were identified as challenges in this study. Even though students had taken courses that covered research methods and dissertation topics, more clarification was needed in tutoring sessions. A best practice in the literature suggests having students prepare their dissertations while taking their coursework (Jiang et al., 2021). Universities could encourage students to begin writing dissertations while taking courses to apply newly acquired skills. Alternatively, universities may offer recurring refresher workshops covering topics like basic research methods, dissertation formatting, and parts of each chapter. Students could access these workshops after completion of coursework to review material before continuing work on their dissertation.

Limitations & Future Research

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the sample was small and relatively homogenous. For this study, only one HSI was examined. The population of students at the HSI in the current study may differ from those at HSIs in other regions of the United States. Future research should consider using larger sample sizes, preferably in groups of doctoral students receiving the same services across HSIs, and examine similarities and differences in levels of effectiveness of support. Next, the results of this study were not reported directly by the students but rather by those providing services to the students, leading to some

potential bias and missing information. Conducting research in which students also self-report could provide additional information, specifically demographic variables (e.g., ethnicity, country of origin, primary language) that were not included in the current study. Finally, the present study only examined the challenges of students seeking tutoring services. Many students do not seek tutoring services for various reasons; thus, additional challenges could exist that were not reflected in the results.

The current study was an initial study conducted as new services were implemented. Future studies could include a control group of students receiving services and those not receiving tutoring services to examine the outcomes via propensity score matching. In addition, a longitudinal study examining the long-term effects of one-on-one assistance (e.g., graduation time, graduation rate) would be valuable. Furthermore, a focus group inquiring about the main challenges faced by doctoral students could add validity to the current study.

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