

2020

## Aspects Contributing to Dissertation Chair Success: Consensus Among Counselor Educators

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### Recommended Citation

Jorgensen, M. F., & Wester, K. L. (2020). Aspects Contributing to Dissertation Chair Success: Consensus Among Counselor Educators. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 13(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.7729/42.1404>

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## Aspects Contributing to Dissertation Chair Success: Consensus Among Counselor Educators

### Abstract

Students frequently attribute completion of their dissertation to having a successful dissertation chair. Yet, a successful dissertation chair has primarily been defined from the student viewpoint. Through the process of a Delphi study, a panel of dissertation chair experts in counselor education conceded on 37 items that contributed to their success. These items included a combination of instrumental and relational aspects of working with doctoral students on their dissertation. Implications for dissertation chairs to navigate self, others, and the structure are explored.

### Keywords

dissertation chair practices, dissertation, research mentorship, dissertation committee

### Author's Notes

The authors would like to express gratitude to the panel of experts for their contribution to our research and informing dissertation chair practices.

The dissertation is a major conduit to developing students into scholars (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). In fact, the completion of a dissertation is not only a vehicle for researcher development (Lamar & Helm, 2017), but is also a requirement of students prior to being granted a PhD. Alarming, 40-50% of doctoral candidates never complete their dissertations (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). While these percentages span across disciplines, students and faculty in counselor education (CE) programs have reported that CE students often struggle to finish their dissertations and leave their doctoral program before completion (i.e., attrition) (Flynn, Chasek, Harper, Murphy, & Jorgensen, 2012). The high rate of attrition has motivated researchers to explore both the dissertation process and the impact of those involved (e.g., student, dissertation chair, dissertation committee members) (Burkard et al., 2014; Flynn, et al., 2012; Tengberg, 2015). Researchers have found that doctoral students often attribute the completion of their dissertation to having a successful dissertation chair (Bloom, Propst Cuevas, Hall, & Evans, 2007; Burkard, et al., 2014; Flynn et al., 2012). However, there is a gap in the literature as previous researchers have primarily focused on the student viewpoint on this topic (Burkard et al., 2014; Flynn, et al., 2012; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). This gap presents a problem as dissertation chairs may have a different perspective of their internal thoughts and external actions than students.

Gaining understanding from dissertation chairs about what makes them successful in that role may better support the overall research training environment (RTE; Gelso, 1993) and research mentoring practices (Gelso, 1993; Gelso, Baumann, Chui, & Savelle, 2013). The RTE encourages faculty to be intentional with their research attitudes, skills, knowledge, modeling, and behaviors and reflect on how those impact the research training environment and student research experiences and outcomes (Gelso, 1993; Gelso et al., 2013). The RTE theory provides faculty a

framework to think about their internal thoughts and external actions within research mentorship relationships such as dissertation chair-advisee. Relatedly, Borders and colleagues (2012) put forth guidelines for research mentorship. The committee provided recommendations for both mentees and mentors, highlighting that successful research outcomes occur when both parties (e.g., dissertation chair and advisee) within the research mentorship relationship clearly define and understand aspects of their roles and responsibilities. Both Gelso's RTE (Gelso, 1993; Gelso et al., 2013) and the research mentorship guidelines (Borders et al., 2012) shed light on the importance of considering both student and faculty perspectives regarding what makes research mentors (e.g., dissertation chairs) successful.

In previous studies (Cornér, Löfström, & Pyhältö, 2017; Lamar & Helm, 2017), students have described research mentors as key to their researcher identity development. Cornér et al. (2017) found statistically significant, inverse relationships between aspects related to supervision support and burnout for doctoral students across multiple disciplines. Specifically, their findings indicated that students report less burnout when they have more meetings with their supervisors and multiple sources of research mentorship (Cornér et al., 2017). Their participants indicated a need for a strong "research community", which seems to relate with the RTE (Gelso, 1993) that several "players" are involved in developing students into researchers. This is also supported by recent findings that the doctoral research training environment directly impacts the research self-efficacy reported by counselor educators early in their career, showing the impact that research training and mentoring can have on students for years to come (Wester, Borders, Gonzalez, & Waalkes, 2019).

Lamar and Helm (2017) found that counselor education doctoral students described their research mentors as pivotal throughout their doctoral training and in various contexts (e.g., classes,

research projects, dissertations). They significantly benefited from research mentors being supportive, available, encouraging, and open about their own experiences with research. In fact, some students who had absent and non-transparent research mentors struggled to effectively navigate their research and take ownership of their researcher identity. Lamar and Helm (2017) suggested that students consider working with research mentors (e.g., dissertation chairs) whom they had connected with previously and trusted in order to meet their relational needs in the research mentoring relationship. Although previous studies (Cornér et al., 2017; Lamar & Helm, 2017) have found that that research mentorship does occur for students throughout their doctoral studies, other researchers (Borders, Wester, Fickling, & Adamson, 2015) have found that students in counselor education programs often do not get hands on, mentored research experiences until their dissertations.

When exploring factors that relate to successful dissertation completion, students continually highlight the relationship and mentorship provided by their faculty dissertation chair. Specifically, the quality and quantity of the interactions with the faculty chairperson, with relational behaviors being described as more important than knowledge, skills, and reputation (Flynn et al., 2012; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). Students described successful dissertation chairs as having open and regular communication, being caring, nurturing, trustworthy, available and present, connected both personally and professionally, and even protective at times (Bloom et al., 2007; Flynn et al., 2012; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015). While these studies have provided insight on what equates successful research mentorship by dissertation chairs, they are only coming from the perspective of students.

There are currently no studies within the field of counselor education that have examined what dissertation chairs consider as facilitators of their success. And a literature search revealed

only one related study, which suggests this topic area is underdeveloped in a scholarly context. Roberts et al. (2019) recruited dissertation chairs from multiple disciplines (e.g., school psychology, educational leadership, educational policy and evaluation) to qualitatively explore their perspectives on what makes them successful in that role. They found that dissertation chair participants shared a view that, “An effective doctoral student mentor wears many hats and asks many questions” (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 146). Of the “many hats”, some included providing overall support, managerial support, and logistical support related to writing and research methodology and analysis. Additionally, providing emotional support was described as one of the most key aspects of their practices as dissertation chairs. Their participants also acknowledged that part of being a successful dissertation chair is understanding the magnitude of their research mentorship and influence on students’ completion of their dissertation and, ultimately, their doctoral degree (Roberts et al., 2019).

Purgason, Lloyd-Hazlett, and Avent Harris (2018) conducted a Delphi study to examine counselor educators’ perceptions of the impact of mentorship in a broad context. Their participants reached agreement that one important outcome of mentoring is “dissertation success” (Purgason et al., 2018, p. 129). Their finding links with previous studies (Burkard et al., 2014; Cornér et al., 2017; Flynn, et al., 2012; Lamar & Helm, 2017; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015; Roberts et al., 2019) by supporting the idea that faculty mentors have certain knowledge and practices that can promote student research success within the dissertation process. However, what is still not known are the precise behaviors, knowledge, and skills that faculty consider as facilitators of their mentoring producing “dissertation success” (Purgason et al., 2018, p. 129) in the field of counselor education.

Mentoring as a dissertation chair is a role that many counselor educators in doctoral programs fulfill at one point or time during their careers, and typically are expected to do so as

part of their job; yet, little is known about what faculty dissertation chairs believe are factors that result in a successful dissertation process and experience. At this time, the dissertation chairperson role and practices are primarily informed by the *Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Research Mentorship Guidelines* (Borders et al., 2012), applying research on the student viewpoint (Bloom, et al., 2007; Burkland et al., 2013; Flynn et al., 2012; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015), as well as potentially personal dissertation experiences and communication with other faculty. These resources give a foundation for dissertation chairs, but more empirical support may be needed to enhance intentional practices. The purpose of this study was to empirically explore the dissertation chairpersons' viewpoint on facilitators of their success. The research question that guided this study was: "What do a group of expert dissertation chairpersons in the field of counselor education consider as aspects that are necessary to their success in that role?"

### **Method**

The Delphi method is a repetitive process that is used when researchers want to gather knowledge from a panel of participants who have been identified as "expert" in relation to the phenomenon under study (Iqbal & Pison-Young, 2009). The Delphi method typically involves 3 to 4 phases of participants responding to open-ended questions and Likert-scale format questions (Higgins et al., 2013). During all phases, participants are given the opportunity to reflect on, rerate, and explain their ratings on items that were not conceded during previous phases. Data gathering occurs until consensus is reached on items or it is determined that consensus will not be reached despite multiple phases (i.e., stability of items across each phase) (Iqbal & Pison-Young, 2009). The Delphi method was selected given these researchers wanted to know what *expert* dissertation chairs in the field of counselor education consider as necessary to their success in that role.

## **Participants**

**Criteria and selection.** When using Delphi methodology, participant selection is guided by first determining what qualifications, skills, knowledge, and characteristics constitute expertise on the topic being studied (Clayton, 1997; Doughty, 2009; Hsu & Sandford, 2009; Iqbal & Pison-Young, 2009; Powell, 2003). The authors utilized the following strategies to create the participant criteria: (1) the first author examined literature about the dissertation process and research mentorship practices (Borders et al, 2012; Burkard et al., 2014; Flynn et al., 2012; McNeale & Ward, 2015; Roberts et al. 2019; Wester & Borders, 2014); (2) the second author reviewed the initial criteria and recommended suggestions; (3) both authors had conversations with other counselor educators about the criteria for participation; and (4) both authors then finalized the criteria by integrating information from all previous steps. To be considered an “expert”, participants were required to (a) currently be working as a counselor educator in a CACREP accredited doctoral program, (b) have had been a chair to a minimum of four students who successfully defended their dissertations, with at least one student successfully defending within the last two years, and (c) have had mentored at least one junior faculty (formally or informally) in their process of becoming a dissertation chair. The last criterion was included to identify an additional level of “expertness” as mentoring typically displays advanced stages of development, skill, or knowledge in a particular role (Borders et al., 2012).

Once the participant criteria were determined, these authors independently created a list of counselor educators who they believed had the potential to meet the criteria based on years in their current position and exploring their publications. These authors additionally considered variables such as gender identity, race, years in the field, and region of program. The finalized list included a total of 43 counselor educators.



**Demographics.** Of the 43 counselor educators who were contacted, nine enrolled in the study. The majority of participants were female ( $n = 6$ ; 67%), with the remainder identifying as male; and the majority were Caucasian ( $n = 5$ , 55%), with two faculty self-reporting as Black/African American, one self-reporting as Asian, and one self-reporting as biracial. All nine participants reported their primary professional identity as counselor educators in CACREP accredited program. The average age of the participants was 52.44 ( $SD = 11.46$ ; range 39-67 years). The average years in the field of counselor education was 19.89 ( $SD = 6.83$ ; range 11-30). The average number of dissertations chaired to completion was 20.67 ( $SD = 15.19$ ; range 5-45). Of the nine participants, 3 (33%) reported working in programs that admit 0-5 doctoral students each year and 6 (67%) reported working in programs that admit 5 or more doctoral students each year. The majority ( $n = 8$ , 89%) of participants reported their students as primarily full-time and 1 (11%) participant reported having an equal split of full and part time students. Eight (89%) participants reported their students primarily intend to go in to counselor education upon graduation with their degree, while 1 (11%) reported an equal split of those who intend to enter counselor education or clinical practice upon graduation with their degree. In regards to program location, 8 (89%) participants reported working as a counselor educator in a CACREP accredited program in the southeast region and 1 (11%) reported working as a counselor educator in a CACREP accredited program in the north central region.

**Response rate.** In Phase 1, of the 43 potential participants contacted, 26 did not respond at all; five participants responded by indicating they did not meet all criteria to participate; three responded by indicating they could not fulfill the time requirements of the multiple phases of the study; and a total of nine individuals responded by enrolling in the study and completing the first phase. The final enrollment size of nine exceeded the minimum standard, as the amount of

participants in Delphi studies can be as small as eight (Novakowski & Wellar, 2008; Powell, 2003). In Phase 2 the response rate was 67% ( $n = 6$ ) and in Phases 3 and 4 there was a 100% response rate ( $n = 9$ ). A smaller sample size and fluctuation in response rate across phases is acceptable given the Delphi research process can be highly demanding of participants, there may be difficulty with finding experts on certain topics, and adjusting the participant criteria to increase enrollment may actually compromise “expertness” (Kang, Kim, & Trusty, 2015; Powell, 2003).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Once approval was received from the institutional review board, the current authors started Phase 1 by recruiting participants through both purposive and criterion-based sampling, as noted above (Higgins et al., 2013). The first author sent an invitation to participate to the 43 identified counselor educators’ institutional email accounts. The email included a description about the study, information about the Delphi study process, the estimated timeline and commitment required by participants, and a Qualtrics study link that directed participants to provide consent and complete Phase 1 of the study.

**Phase 1.** In Phase 1 the authors collected data about demographics, experiences of dissertation chairs, and thoughts on what equates success in that role. The initial steps of creating the questions included the first author developing a list of both demographic and open-ended questions based on literature about the dissertation process and research mentorship (Borders et al, 2012; Burkard et al., 2014; Flynn et al., 2012; McNeale & Ward, 2015; Roberts et al. 2019; Wester & Borders, 2014), her own experiences as a doctoral student and dissertation chair, and observations she had made of other dissertation chairs. The first author then sent her list of questions to the second author and they met face-to-face to discuss other potential questions. An additional three open-ended questions were added based on the second authors’ recommendations.

All open-ended questions in Phase 1 included: (1) What has been your experience as a dissertation chair?; (2) When you became a dissertation chair, what prepared you, if anything, for that role?; (3) Do you feel like you have grown or changed as a dissertation chair from the time you first entered that role?; (4) What (or who) helped you grow and develop as a dissertation chair?; (5) What equates “success” as a dissertation chair?; (6) Thinking of your experiences, or others you have seen chair dissertations, what do you think equates a ‘successful dissertation chair?; (7) Think of a situation, relationship, or person who you believe was unsuccessful at chairing a dissertation or an unsuccessful relationship, what happened in this instance? What do you think was missing?; (8) What knowledge and skills should one have to be a dissertation chair?; (9) What guidelines would you give when mentoring a colleague to be a dissertation chair?

The data analysis in Phase 1 involved the authors examining the content of the open-ended responses and identifying concrete and specific items about being a successful dissertation chair. The term “items” relates to main ideas that were captured in the open-ended responses as aspects of being a successful dissertation chair (e.g., “creating a safe place for students”). Both authors reviewed the open-ended responses independently by analyzing each line and coming up with items, then they came together to determine which items would be presented to the participants in the preceding phases.

**Phases 2-4.** The goal for Phases 2 through 4 was to collect data (via a Likert scale) on the items created from Phase 1. In Phases 2 through 4, participants received an email with instructions on rating the items and the Qualtrics survey link. The survey contained all items needing to be rated or rerated, along with a summary of group responses (mean, median, IQR) for all items that were not conceded, were conceded, and/or dropped during the previous phase, and open-text so participants could provide subjective comments about the items (e.g., comments regarding items,

changes in their rankings of items). In Phases 2-4, the participants were asked to consider the prompt of: “In becoming a dissertation chair, the following has facilitated my success as a dissertation chair”, and then rate each item using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). This process was consistent across Phases 2-4, with one variation in Phase 4 being that these authors provided comments from participants, anonymously, to provide understanding and rationale for rankings on the remaining items.

The data analyses in Phases 2-4 involved determining which items met consensus (as determined by median score and interquartile range described below) as necessary or not necessary. Per recommendations of methodologists and previous researchers (Doughty, 2009; Powell, 2003; Wester & Borders, 2014), these authors created a predetermined cut-off of an interquartile range of 1 to equate consensus among participants. Additionally, a median score of 6 or above represented the item facilitated or impacted their success as a dissertation chair. The median was used given it is less vulnerable to atypical data, which is especially important when there is a small sample size (Doughty, 2009). Thus, a median score of 6 or above, combined with an interquartile range (IQR) of 1 or less resulted in keeping the item as needed or necessary for success; while an IQR 1 or less combined with a median score of less than 6 resulted in consensus that the item was not necessary for success and therefore dropped. Finally, an IQR of greater than 1 indicated the item was not conceded.

## **Results**

### **Phase 1**

In Phase 1, participants responded to nine open-ended questions. An example of an open-ended response included “I see the successful dissertation chair as one who has comprehensive understanding of the research process and of student/researcher development....is also active and

present throughout the process (e.g., willing to meet on a regular basis, provides feedback on timeline basis, helps student shape process throughout) and is able to engage in an interpersonal journey throughout process.” Another example was “A chair needs a wide range of knowledge about research methodologies, humility to know their limits and where to find additional information PLUS all of the knowledge and skills that goes into an effective mentoring relationship.” Using content analysis, these authors independently reviewed all open-ended responses and came together to assess overlap and discrepancies. Initially, 42 items were commonly created across both authors, while 30 items were unique. After comparison and discussion, we conceded on the initial 42 items of overlap and an additional 22 items, resulting in 64 items total from the analysis of Phase 1 data (see Tables 1 and 2 for all items).

Table 1

*Items Conceded as Not Necessary, Dropped, or Not Conceded as Necessary to Dissertation Chair Success*

Item	Round Determined	Mean	Median	IQR
<u>Items Conceded as Not Necessary</u>				
Foreseeing the student as a colleague	2	5.50	5.00	1
Stepping back and allowing natural consequences to occur for student(s)	2	5.67	5.50	1
Applying my own experience from my dissertation process to inform my role as chair	2	5.17	5.00	1
<u>Items Dropped in Phase 2</u>				
My ability to be flexible throughout the dissertation process		5.67	6.00	3
Connecting with the student both professionally and personally		6.00	6.00	2
My willingness to engage in an interpersonal journey with student(s)		5.00	6.00	4
Effectively working with students who are culturally different than me		6.17	7.00	2
Having the ability to choose students whom which I work		5.00	5.00	4

Screening for compatibility with the student prior to entering the relationship	5.83	5.50	2
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Items Not Conceded as Necessary

Being able to assess and conceptualize student needs developmentally	6.33	7.00	2
Shifting my role, as needed, within the mentoring relationship based on student needs	6.33	7.00	2
Having empathy for student(s)	5.33	6.00	3
Being able to think a priori about potential barriers or stumbling blocks for student(s)	5.78	6.00	2
My willingness to provide both emotional and instrumental support to student(s)	5.56	6.00	2
Setting firm expectations	5.67	6.00	2
Using contracts to formalize the process	3.67	4.00	3
Meeting regularly with student(s)	5.56	6.00	2
Identifying as a researcher myself	5.89	6.00	2
Engaging in my own research (outside that of the dissertation experience with students)	5.67	6.00	2
Being fluent in a wide range of research methodologies	4.89	5.00	3
Being fluent in data analysis	4.67	5.00	2
Identifying my own needs during dissertation process	3.22	4.00	2
Reflecting on my own impact on the dissertation process	5.56	5.00	2
Reflecting on my role as dissertation chair within each specific student relationship	6.11	6.00	2
Avoiding overpersonalization of the process	5.67	6.00	3
Using past experiences in the chair role to inform future experiences	5.56	6.00	2
Using processing skills	5.89	6.00	2
Being transparent with the student throughout the process	5.56	6.00	2
Broaching cultural similarities and differences between myself and student(s)	6.33	7.00	2
Screening for compatibility (e.g., personality, working style, philosophical beliefs) with the student prior to entering the relationship*	5.44	6.00	4

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*Note:* \*Denotes this item was created after Phase 2 based on participant comments and suggestions to changes or additions to existing items from Phase 1.

Table 2

*Items Conceded as Necessary to Dissertation Chair Success*

Category and Item	Round Conceded	Mean	Median	IQR
<u>Navigating Others</u>				
Creating a safe place for student(s)	4	6.11	6.00	1
Building rapport with student(s)	2	6.33	6.50	1
Letting student(s) own their process	2	6.50	6.50	1
Being intentionally present with student(s) throughout the dissertation process.	2	6.33	6.50	1
Being actively engaged with student (s) throughout the process	2	6.67	7.00	1
Engaging collaboratively with student(s) in the dissertation	2	6.67	7.00	1
Engaging in open and clear communication with student(s) throughout the dissertation process	2	6.50	7.00	1
Willingness to confront difficult dynamics with student(s) during the process, when necessary	2	6.17	6.00	1
Connecting with student(s) professionally (e.g., task-oriented, directing toward resources, giving professional guidance)*	3	6.00	6.00	1
Connecting with student(s) personally (e.g., listening to their struggles, celebrating their accomplishments, supporting them in their job search)*	3	6.00	6.00	1
Holding student(s) accountable	2	6.50	6.50	1
Maintaining high expectations of the student(s)	2	6.50	6.50	1
Advocating for student(s) by challenging other committee members, when necessary	2	5.83	6.00	1
My ability to facilitate positive committee dynamics	2	6.17	6.00	1
Providing support and encouragement to student(s)	2	6.83	7.00	0
Providing a balance of support and challenge to student(s)	2	6.17	6.00	1
<u>Navigating Self</u>				
Taking initiative to grow as a chair	4	6.11	6.00	1
Having an awareness of the impact of culture on the dissertation process	4	6.67	7.00	1
Being passionate about mentoring students in dissertations	2	6.50	6.50	1
Valuing student(s) ideas	2	6.33	6.00	1

Ensuring I am available and accessible to the student throughout the process	2	6.33	6.50	1
Being open to learning from student(s)	4	6.22	6.00	1
Viewing the dissertation process as more than just a completed study	3	6.00	6.00	1
Bringing my authentic self into the relationship with student(s)	3	6.00	6.00	1
Having an awareness of my own emotional process that occurs within the dissertation process	3	5.67	6.00	1
Understanding my own limitations in my research knowledge	2	6.33	6.50	1
Having efficacy as an academic writer	4	6.22	6.00	1
Having a comprehensive understanding of the research process	2	6.67	7.00	1
Being fluent in research design	4	5.44	6.00	1
Continuing my own knowledge growth when needed to assist the student in developing a quality dissertation product (e.g., readings, training, consults)	3	6.22	6.00	1
Being able to consult with others when I need to regarding an aspect of the student dissertation experience (e.g., understand methodology, analytical assistance, emotional response)	2	6.33	6.50	1
Being consistent with how I operate (e.g., feedback, response time, engagement)	2	6.33	6.50	1
<u>Navigating Structure</u>				
Establishing expectations of student and chair roles up front	2	6.67	7.00	1
Meeting face-to-face with student(s)	2	6.33	6.50	1
Setting clear, appropriate boundaries with student(s)	2	6.50	6.50	1
Structuring the dissertation process, while simultaneously being open to revisiting the structure to meet the needs of student(s)	2	6.33	6.50	1
Having knowledge of institutional and academic requirements at my institution	2	6.67	7.00	1

*Note:* \*Denotes this item was created after Phase 2 based on participant comments and suggestions to changes or additions to existing items from Phase 1.

## Phase 2

All 64 items that emerged from Phase 1 were included in Phase 2 for participants to evaluate the degree to which they agreed these items contributed to their success as a dissertation



chair. A total of 28 items were conceded by participants in Phase 2: 25 items were conceded as necessary to one's success as a dissertation chair ( $Mdn \geq 6.0$ ;  $IQR \leq 1.0$ ; see Table 1), while 3 items were conceded as not necessary or contributing to success ( $Mdn \leq 6.0$ ;  $IQR < 1.0$ ; see Table 1). This left 36 items not conceded ( $Mdn < 6.0$ ) by participants in Phase 2.

During this second phase, participants were also given the opportunity to comment on the original 64 items, allowing them to provide suggestions on editing, altering or combining existing items, or adding items they believed were not captured from the original content analysis of open-ended responses in Phase 1. Three of the six participants who participated in Phase 2 provided suggestions. As an example of some comments, one participant noted, "Items 7 (my ability to be flexible throughout the dissertation process) and 8 (shifting my role, as needed, within the mentoring relationship based on student needs) seem to overlap. A part of being flexible is shifting my roles." In response to other items, one participant indicated, "I did not like item 19 (My willingness to engage in an interpersonal journey with student(s)). Dissertation is a task that has to be completed, and while there is personal growth, it is not a therapeutic endeavor...[and also] I only chair dissertations that use methodology I am comfortable with in general. Thus I don't see item 41 (being fluent in a wide range of methodologies) as an important element." Another participant indicated "I think I can successfully chair without knowing much about a specific methodology or content area if (1) we have a methodologist who has that expertise and/or (2) the student is developmentally able to bring in that expertise." Based on suggestions from participants, six items were altered or merged, and three items were added (see Tables 1 and 2 for items dropped/merged or added in Phase 2). This alteration in a few items resulted in 33 items that participants needed to re-evaluate in Phase 3.

### **Phases 3 and 4**

Participants were provided all 33 items that needed to be rated or re-rated in Phase 3. While rating each of the items, participants were able to provide their opinion or statement about why they were rating the item the way that they were. Of the 33 items provided, participants reached consensus that six items were necessary in contributing to their success as dissertation chair (see Table 1). This left 27 items participants did not reach consensus on during Phase 3. Participant responses provided information regarding the items that were not conceded. As an example, one participant indicated “On #20 (my willingness to provide both emotional and instrumental support to student(s)), I went down a point realizing that I do provide emotional support and encouragement but put the tasks on the student,” while another participant indicated “emotional support is outside of the relationship...firm expectations are vital.” When reflecting on all 33 items provided in Phase 3, one participant stated, “I was surprised to see the items that were not conceded. Many of the items seem to tap into my inner counselor and I use it a great deal with students I am mentoring. I guess I remember how challenging writing a dissertation can be so I have made it my goal to support my advisees as much as I can while they are going through this journey.”

No items were added or altered during or after Phase 3. Therefore, all 27 items not conceded in Phase 3 were provided to participants in Phase 4. Participant comments were provided with these 27 items during Phase 4 so that other participants could see the rationale behind rankings from other participants, anonymously. Of the 27 items, a total of six items were conceded as necessary in contributing to success as a dissertation chair.

Overall results included three items that met consensus as not necessary to dissertation chair success, six items that were dropped, and 21 items that never conceded as necessary or

unnecessary (see Table 1). The 21 items that never conceded as necessary, or unnecessary, by participants seem to reveal differing viewpoints on what is necessary to be a successful dissertation chair. Thirty-seven items, across three rounds, conceded as necessary to the success of a dissertation chair. These authors organized the 37 items based on three overarching themes: Navigating Others, Navigating Self, and Navigating Structure (see Table 2).

**Navigating others.** The items in this category connected with the relational aspects of being a successful dissertation chair. This category included 16 items that were conceded as necessary for dissertation chair success. The majority of these items (13 items) reached consensus in Phase 2 (i.e., early in the study).

**Navigating self.** The items in this category connected with the intrapersonal aspects of being a successful dissertation chair. This category also included 16 items that were conceded as necessary for dissertation chair success. The items in this category reached consensus during various phases (Phase 2 = 7 items conceded; Phase 3 = 4 items conceded; Phase 4 = 5 items conceded).

**Navigating structure.** The items in this category connected with the structure and organizational aspects of being a successful dissertation chair. This category included five items that were conceded as necessary to dissertation chair success. All five items reached consensus in Phase 2 (i.e., early in the study).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the research question of: “What do a group of expert dissertation chairpersons in the field of counselor education consider as aspects that are necessary to their success in that role?” These findings suggest the answer is complex and there are multiple layers to being a successful dissertation chair, which aligns with the previous study

on this topic (Roberts et al., 2019). The four phases in this study resulted in 37 items reaching consensus as necessary to dissertation chair success, which were organized into three main categories of Navigating Others, Navigating Self, and Navigating Structure (see Table 2). This was done to further enhance discussion and application of the findings.

### **Navigating Others**

Participants' comments and the early consensus on many items in this category suggests that navigating interpersonal dynamics may be most essential to success as a dissertation chair. The theme of Navigating Others aligns with the idea that the interpersonal aspect of one's training and mentoring relationship is imperative to gaining a researcher identity and self-efficacy (Gelso, 1993; Gelso et al., 2013). Gelso and colleagues (1993; 2013) theorized, and supported, that one aspect of research training is faculty and mentors revealing the excitement and passion for research, while providing the support and guidance in non-threatening ways. The items generated and agreed upon by participants on the current panel align with these aspects, as evidence of it being necessary to clearly communicate, collaborate, and support the student personally and professionally.

Other researchers found similar findings from a student perspective. Students often conveyed a preference for dissertation chairs with relational skills over research knowledge and expertise (Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015; Roberts & Seaman, 2017). It is important to note, that while many items in Navigating Others conceded among participants in the current study, some participants communicated differing viewpoints around interpersonal connections. This may speak to differences in presentation and relational style for one dissertation chair versus another. For example, one participant described regularly using counseling skills to connect with students while another expressed concern that would make the dissertation a "therapeutic endeavor." These

discrepant perspectives show that even though there was consensus on the need to connect relationally, there may be unique differences in how that is executed. Either way, it remains important for dissertation chairs to have self-awareness of the way they connect with others in order to guide their research mentoring practices based on what is best for the mentee (Borders et al., 2012). This may include a discussion early on in the relationship, asking the mentee what they need in the dissertation process and from the relationship generally, to know if this is something that can be provided, and if the faculty member is willing (Borders et al., 2012).

While *Navigating Others* is primarily about the interpersonal relationship between the faculty member and the student, it also includes the interpersonal dynamics of the dissertation committee. This is important given the mixed experiences students can have with their dissertation committees (Burkard et al., 2014). Burkard and colleagues found some participants described their committee as having a positive impact while others had negative consequences as a result of their dissertation chairs having conflictual relationships with their committee members. Student participants have even noted that faculty relationships with each other have been a barrier to them completing their dissertations (Flynn et al., 2012). Both the Flynn et al. (2012) and Burkard et al. (2014) provide further support that part of being a successful dissertation chair is negotiating relationships within the system of the dissertation committee.

### **Navigating Self**

Many of the *Navigating Self* items link with what is required of counselors such as having self-awareness, having cultural awareness, seeking growth, knowing limits, and being present. This even aligns with the counseling research competencies, where skills related to being a competent counselor were identified as a component of being a competent researcher (Wester & Borders, 2014). Gelso and colleagues (1993; 2013) suggested part of a successful RTE involves

faculty guiding students to look inward for their own ideas and development; however, the findings for the current study demonstrate that faculty looking inward is potentially an important first step. Dissertation chairs are in a power position and have a responsibility to be reflective and intentional (Flynn et al., 2012; Roberts & Seaman, 2017).

According to the participants, dissertation chair success is also facilitated by having research related skills and knowledge, and being willing to gain knowledge. As indicated in previous literature (Borders et al., 2012; Wester & Borders, 2014; Roberts et al., 2019) and in the current study, dissertation chairs do not need to be knowledgeable in every area of the research; however, they do need to be aware of their limits and disclose those to students. As noted by participants in this study, what seems to have made them a successful dissertation chair was their willingness to compensate for weaknesses by seeking out others with certain skills or increasing their own knowledge base through trainings and consultations.

### **Navigating Structure**

Although there were fewer items conceded as necessary in this category, participants highlighted the importance of providing structure as a dissertation chair. These items included task-oriented aspects related to boundary and expectations setting, scheduling meetings, and continuously reexamining structure. The findings in the current study fit with previous studies (Cornér et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2019) that managerial aspects are key to success as a dissertation chair and decreasing doctoral students' burnout. Cornér et al. (2017) found that students who met regularly also reported less burnout and more satisfaction with their advisor. Additionally, scholars (Borders et al., 2012; Flynn et al., 2012; Roberts & Seaman, 2017; Tengberg, 2015) have found it is important for dissertation chairs to build a framework within a process that is often experienced by students as ambiguous. Flynn et al. (2012) found that students

who completed their dissertations frequently referenced the organization created by their chairs (e.g., chair-imposed deadlines, frequent meetings); in fact, they attributed much of their success in completing their dissertation to the framework their dissertation chair provided. It is also important to acknowledge that flexibility is key as there can be unanticipated changes during the dissertation process; therefore, ongoing conversations need to occur with the student to make appropriate adjustments (Borders et al., 2012; Flynn et al., 2012; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The number of participants in this study was on the lower end of the suggested range for Delphi methodology (Higgins et al., 2013), which may have impacted items reaching consensus versus not. However, this lower range seems to relate to a limited number of individuals meeting the criteria of recently chairing students to completion, chairing at least four, and mentoring others. Another possible limitation is that most participants in this study were located in the southeast region of the United States. Although this could be a limitation of this study, at the same time, it seems appropriate given that the majority of doctoral level counselor education programs are in the southeast region.

While these limitations do exist, this research provides a foundation for future researchers to continue to inform dissertation chair practices. These items could be given to a larger sample of counselor educators and faculty in other disciplines to explore different rating patterns based on number of dissertations chaired, cultural factors, program type (preparing mostly future educators vs mostly future practitioners), and discipline. These items could also be rated by students for comparison with faculty ratings. Qualitative methodology could be utilized to provide more depth to understanding what facilitates success in the dissertation role. Another important avenue for future research relates to the cultural aspects of research mentorship. In the current study,

broaching cultural similarities and differences was not conceded upon, revealing that dissertation chairs differ on this item, some agreeing it is important while others do not believe it is important to helping students successfully complete their dissertation. This finding in conjunction with other studies (Purgason et al., 2018) suggests that culture may not be discussed or broached by some research mentors, so more research in this area may be important.

### **Implications**

There are implications of this research on the chair selection process regarding when and how dissertation chair selection occurs. A few of the participants revealed that part of their success as a dissertation chair occurred because of the structures in place that promote appropriate timing of selection and a strong match with students based on research interests, personality, and other characteristics. Neale-McFall and Ward (2015) indicated the matching process needs to be directed by the student and involve multiple stages of information gathering (e.g., meetings with faculty to assess fit). One participant stated that dissertation chair selection occurs “1st year, 2nd semester, after interviewing all faculty individually in the fall of their first year.” Conversely, another participant said selection occurs “Typically first semester of third year, but only after completion of comprehension exams.” These findings reveal a possible need for programs to be more intentional about how and when student and dissertation chair are paired, as this may influence the interpersonal relationship between mentor/dissertation chair and student. An example of process and timeline may be to have students interview all faculty about research, interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics (potentially using the items from this study to guide the discussion) during their first semester; then students select a dissertation chair the second semester that will remain their chair throughout the rest of their program. This structure integrates suggestions from previous researchers (Lamar & Helm, 2017; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015) that students need to gather



information about faculty to assess fit and have multiple points of connection with their dissertation chairs.

Another implication of the findings relates to culture in the dissertation process. As indicated in the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014), counselor educators are ethically bound to be culturally aware and competent in all their professional roles. Jones and Welfare (2017) found that cultural broaching often did not occur by licensed clinicians and, instead, the clinician waited for their clients to bring up culture. That information connects with dissertation chair practices in that chairs may wait for their advisees to discuss cultural dynamics in the relationship and process. The findings in the current study suggest that culture may not be consistently broached across dissertation chairs in the field of counselor education. During the qualitative phase in this study, four culture related items emerged and only one of those initial four items reached consensus as necessary to success as a dissertation chair. One of the participants stated “I acknowledge that I broach differences more frequently than I do similarities.” Purgason, Avent, Cashwell, Jordan, and Reese (2016) described that discussion of cultural allows dissertation chairs to promote connectedness by modeling and cultivating mutual empathy and authenticity. An example of a statement could be: “as we both know, cultural considerations are essential in all our professional roles and relationships. I hope we can be both curious about and open to exploring how our cultural similarities and differences influence our working relationship and your dissertation process.” Importantly, cultural broaching is an ongoing process (Jones & Welfare, 2017) and this statement should be considered as a springboard for continued conversations about culture.

Lastly, participants used the following phrases when asked in Phase 1 about what or who helped them develop as a dissertation chair: “no one”; “I learned by trail and error”; “no one took

me under their wing”; “I learned from my own dissertation experience”; “I learned by having multiple experiences chairing.” Perhaps, the implementation of items in the categories of Navigating Others, Self, and Structure may diminish the frequency of these types of narratives and serve as a catalyst to promote mentoring of future dissertation chairs so they can provide more effective research mentorship to students. As suggested by Borders et al. (2012), there is a developmental process to learning how to mentor effectively, which suggests there may need to be a tiered process to faculty becoming dissertation chairs. An example of this may be to have faculty serve as dissertation committee members for years 1-3, co-chair for years 4-6, and to become sole chair years seven and beyond. Some programs may not have the resources or staff to allow for this intentional sequencing for dissertation chair responsibilities and mentoring of mentoring. In those cases, these items could, at the very least, help dissertation chairs mentor themselves by examining the items and making action plans to grow in the various areas.

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