

2022

## Dissertation Completion Experience in Online CACREP-Accredited Counselor Education Programs: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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### Recommended Citation

Splinter, L. A., Pool, A. M., Schmuldt, L. M., & Bluemlein, J. S. (2022). Dissertation Completion Experience in Online CACREP-Accredited Counselor Education Programs: A Phenomenological Inquiry. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 15(3). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/jcps/vol15/iss3/5>

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## Dissertation Completion Experience in Online CACREP-Accredited Counselor Education Programs: A Phenomenological Inquiry

### Abstract

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the purpose was to explore the experiences of recent online Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)-accredited counselor education and supervision (CES) graduates concerning their dissertation completion process. Past research had shown a dissertation noncompletion rate 10%–20% higher in distance education programs compared to traditional institutions. Participant recruitment was facilitated by criterion sampling and snowball sampling and included seven recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited CES programs. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Data analysis conducted using Smith et al.'s six-step data analysis process yielded three significant themes: dissertation task engagement, stakeholder interaction, and impact of the environment. Implications of the findings extend to improvements in dissertation readiness and socialization, meaningful experiences, and dissertation completion rates.

### Keywords

dissertation, dissertation completion, counselor education programs, CES, CACREP

### Author's Notes

Thank you, Kelle Falterman, for serving as the peer reviewer on the dissertation, which was the basis of this manuscript. Thank you to the seven participants who shared their dissertation completion experiences for this research study. May your experiences inspire candidates to finish their dissertations to further contribute and advance research and scholarship in counseling, counselor education, and supervision.

Counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral programs aim to develop students in research and scholarship, teaching, clinical supervision, leadership and advocacy, and advanced counseling practice (Council for Accredited Counseling and Related Education Programs [CACREP], 2016). In the professional education of a doctoral counseling student, the dissertation forms the concluding experience of developing new knowledge to inform counseling supervision, counselor education, and counseling practice (CACREP, 2016). A researcher's ability to generate research is essential for obtaining recognition in and advancing the field of counseling (Lambie et al., 2008). For the continuity of counseling as a field, scholarship is necessary, and a CES doctorate degree is intended to prepare leaders who will contribute to advancing the field (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). Since a dissertation is written in the concluding phase of the doctoral counseling student's professional education, this document also demonstrates a doctoral counseling student's foundational understanding of research scholarship (CACREP, 2016). Doctoral counseling students obtain validation for their professional academic competencies by finishing and defending their dissertations.

Consequently, it is noteworthy that there is limited research on aspects of the CES doctoral degree in general. In particular, there is a dearth of research on the dissertation process of doctoral students enrolled in CES programs (Borders et al., 2015). Researchers such as Borders et al. (2015) have called for further research on the experiences of doctoral students in CES programs. As Borders et al. highlighted, the importance of dissertations as an area of exploration lies in the fact that they are required across different counseling programs. Research exists on how mentoring relates to the dissertation process (Anekstein & Vereen, 2018; Boswell et al., 2017; Nolte et al., 2015; Petko et al., 2020; Stark et al., 2019); however, the researchers did not focus on online doctoral CES programs. The limited recent research on the dissertation process of online doctoral graduates in doctoral CES programs represents a gap in this knowledge area.

Of particular concern is the fact that not all doctoral students complete the dissertation process. Across the different aims set by Council of Graduate Schools programs, differences exist among CES doctoral students concerning preparation for research activities (Kline & Farrell, 2005). While the various program phases are designed to help doctoral students become proficient in meeting the dissertation process's requirements, Borders et al. (2014) found variations in research training in CACREP-accredited CES programs. Consequently, it is estimated that 43% of doctoral students in CACREP-accredited CES programs do not take part in the research process until their dissertation process begins (Borders et al., 2014).

Multiple researchers have noted the dissertation process's stressful nature. For CES doctoral students, the dissertation process may be further complicated due to the lack of a hands-on approach for guidance across the different phases of the process, such as prospectus and defense (Del Rio & Mieling, 2012). Consequently, there is a need to decrease attrition and increase persistence in both traditional and online doctoral programs (Fiore et al., 2019). Attrition refers to drop out among doctoral students and results from reasons that decrease the attraction of completing the degree for students (Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Kelley and Salisbury-Glennon (2016) estimated that as many as 60% of doctoral students do not finish the dissertation process. The dissertation noncompletion rate in distance learning is estimated to be 10%–20% higher than in traditional programs (Fiore et al., 2019). High attrition at advanced stages carries serious consequences for students and institutions in terms of invested time, energy, and money in the dissertation process (Burns & Gillespie, 2018). Thus, the problem of attrition carries consequences that extend beyond individual students.

Dissertation completion is associated with specific characteristics that separate students who complete their dissertation from students who do not. For instance, Devos et al. (2017) noted that students who complete their dissertation do not feel overwhelming distress while moving ahead across the different stages of the dissertation process. Other students may

experience significant difficulties in the process that may contribute to delay or attrition (Marshall et al., 2017). Such difficulties may result from factors internal or external to the student. Without overcoming such difficulties, doctoral students may not be able to complete the dissertation process. Consequently, to help enable dissertation completion, interventions may be required to address difficulties across individual, relational, or institutional levels (Liechty et al., 2009). However, with limited research on doctoral CES programs, particularly on the dissertation process, it is difficult to identify the specific supports students need across the dissertation completion process (Marshall et al., 2017).

While previous researchers have studied the dissertation completion process in such fields as social work, psychology, and education, the phenomenon has not received significant attention in the context of CES (Knox et al., 2011; Liechty et al., 2009; Marshall et al., 2017). In the existing literature on the doctoral process in CES, such as studies conducted by Burkholder (2012), Castro et al. (2011), Flynn et al. (2012), Hinkle et al. (2014), Jorgensen and Wester (2020), Rockinson-Szapkiw and Harrichand (2021), and Swank et al. (2021), there has been a lack of focus on both the dissertation completion experiences and online CES programs. To date, there has been no research focusing specifically on the experiences of recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited CES programs concerning their dissertation completion process.

### **Research Questions**

To explore both positive and negative aspects of recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited CES programs experiences and the meaning they made of their experiences while navigating the various phases of the dissertation process, three research questions were used to guide this study:

Research Question 1: What aspects of the dissertation completion process do recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited CES programs experience positively?

Research Question 2: What aspects of the dissertation completion process do recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited CES programs experience negatively?

Research Question 3: How do recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited CES programs make meaning of the dissertation completion process experience?

With 10%–20% higher rates for dissertation noncompletion in distance education compared to traditional institutions and the high cost associated with such noncompletion for both the individual students and institutions (Fiore et al., 2019), improving persistence and decreasing attrition are significant issues. Consequently, limited research on the dissertation completion process in the context of CES (Knox et al., 2011; Liechty et al., 2009; Marshall et al., 2017), especially for online CES programs, presents a knowledge gap. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of dissertation completion among recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited CES programs.

Because of the lack of research on CACREP-accredited online CES programs, the focus was directed toward all the available online CACREP-accredited programs in the United States. This had the benefit of facilitating diverse perspectives concerning the dissertation process rather than being limited to a particular program. Without sufficient understanding regarding the dissertation completion process in online CES programs, it may be more challenging to improve persistence and decrease attrition in these programs. It was hoped that the study findings would expand current understanding through which to improve dissertation readiness, completion rates, and positive experiences among CES doctoral students.

## **Method**

### **Population and Participants**

The study population consisted of individuals who had recently graduated from online CACREP-accredited CES doctoral programs. Recency was defined in terms of 2 years or less from the time of dissertation completion. Participants were recruited from all online accredited

programs, according to the CACREP directory, located in Colorado, Kentucky, Minnesota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Recruiting participants from different programs enabled a diversity of perspectives. Online programs formed the center of inquiry because of the higher rate of dissertation noncompletion across distance education programs than in-residence traditional programs (Fiore et al., 2019).

To ensure quality standards were met, only CACREP-accredited sites were included. Criterion sampling was used primarily to identify participants who met the eligibility criteria, which included being a recent graduate of an online CACREP-accredited CES program with experience in the dissertation completion process. LinkedIn, an online professional networking platform, was used to identify participants who met the eligibility criteria. Once identified, each participant was sent a solicitation email. Counseling departments at online CACREP-accredited CES programs were also emailed to identify relevant participants. Finally, snowball sampling was also used whereby participants who met the eligibility criteria were asked to refer further potential participants. These efforts resulted in a sample of seven recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited CES programs.

### **Measure**

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection source. The interviews were conducted using an interview schedule that included six open-ended questions and prompts. The questions included descriptive questions aimed at encouraging descriptions regarding relevant events and evaluative questions intended to evoke an evaluation of the different aspects of the phenomenon. Sense-making questions were also included, which aimed to understand how the participants made sense of or derived meaning from their experiences. The schedule also included questions on demographic information such as age, ethnicity, race, and gender.

## **Procedures**

Institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to recruiting study participants. The researcher ensured adherence to the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics and completed Collaborative Institute Training Initiative Program training. Individuals who qualified for the study were provided an informed consent form and an interview schedule via email. After potential participants signed and returned the informed consent form, they were asked to respond to the questions provided in the interview schedule. Individual email interviews took place over 4 weeks. In the first 2 weeks, participants responded to the interview schedule. The second 2 weeks were used for follow-up questions and clarification with participants via email.

Each participant had the option to be interviewed via Zoom or email. Of the seven participants, four preferred to be interviewed via Zoom. Mutually agreed-upon dates and times were determined for these participants after receiving the informed consent forms. The interviews ranged from 57 to 110 min, were video recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

## **Data Analysis**

As participants' responses to the interview schedule were collected, the researcher recorded personal reflections on the research process in a journal. She reflected on study methodology as well as her intuitions, feelings, thoughts, and experiences. These notes provided an additional source for contextualization. All data were anonymized, and participants were referred to by participant number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2).

Smith et al.'s (2009) six-step process was used for data analysis. This approach was selected because, in addition to phenomenology and hermeneutics, interpretative phenomenological analysis relies on idiography, which is an in-depth analysis of individual cases that examine participants' perspectives in a specific context (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

In the first step, the verbatim transcripts were read and reread to become acquainted with the data. Next, the rightside margin of the transcript was used to make initial notes to highlight relevant components of the dialogue. Emergent themes were then developed from the data and written on the transcript's left side margin. Themes were connected and clustered to develop a table of themes. Finally, convergence and divergence across the participants' responses were examined, and salient emergent, subordinate, and superordinate themes were developed, as shown in Table 1. Member checking was conducted with the initial results, which allowed participants to evaluate the accuracy and completeness of their responses. Based on participant feedback, initial findings were revised.

**Table 1**

*Development of Salient Emergent, Subordinate, and Superordinate Themes*

Emergent themes	Subordinate themes	Superordinate themes
Story of positive experiences Story of negative experiences Finding meaning Dissertation research process Barriers to completion	Thoughts Feelings Actions Independent	Dissertation task engagement
Story of positive experiences Story of negative experiences Finding meaning Chairperson influence Committee function Feedback Barriers to completion University/department interaction	Thoughts Feelings Actions Interdependent	Stakeholder interaction
Story of positive experiences Story of negative experiences Finding meaning Peer working groups Mentor Statisticians	Thoughts Feelings Actions Peer support	Impact of the environment
Spouse Fiancé Children Grandchildren	Significant other impact	

## Results

### Demographic Characteristics

Seven participants participated in the semi-structured interviews. They had diverse backgrounds in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, and age. Their ages ranged from 30 to 70 years. In terms of race/ethnicity, they identified as White, White/Latina, Black/African American, Native American, or White/Non-Hispanic. Specific demographic data for each participant are shown in Table 2. Of the seven participants, Participants 1, 5, and 7 chose to take part in the interviews through email. Participants 2, 3, 4, and 6 took part in the interviews face-to-face via Zoom.

Table 2

#### *Participant Demographics*

Participant number	Race/ethnicity	Gender	Age range (years)
1	White	Male	40–45
2	White/Latina	Female	35–40
3	White	Cisgender male	30–35
4	White	Female	30–35
5	Black/African American	Female	65–70
6	Native American	Female	45–50
7	White/Non-Hispanic	Female	45–50

### Superordinate Theme 1: Dissertation Task Engagement

The first superordinate theme was dissertation task engagement. Participant 1 experienced mixed feelings about identifying his dissertation topic and using archival data. He described selecting an appropriate topic meaningful enough to be a launching point for additional studies as a negative aspect of the dissertation process. However, he generally felt ready for the process. After identifying an appropriate topic, Participant 1's experience became positive. He felt motivated to finish his dissertation by deriving meaning from work through

his topic's potential for further research and career advancement. Participant 1 felt both anxious and excited when selecting committee members due to the members' reputations of having high expectations.

Participant 1 maintained focus during the dissertation process because he found the study content to be of interest. Learning itself became a source of enjoyment. In Participant 1's words, "It was a treat to be able to delve deeply into my topic."

Participant 1 made it his personal mission to learn something new during the dissertation process and felt he grew spiritually, noting that the process was a "collaborative one with the Lord" and something in which he could "encounter his direction and intimate counsel." In general, Participant 1 felt he "grew a lot personally and professionally and enjoyed the process overall." The challenge of a self-imposed deadline was another aspect Participant 1 reported feeling optimistic about. Participant 1 did not feel the need to share his experience with others, although he considered dissertation completion a "personal badge of honor."

Participant 2 felt panic because she did not think she was where she needed to be at that point in the dissertation process. She considered who would be an appropriate chairperson and selected one based on trust. Once her desired chairperson agreed to be her chairperson, Participant 2 felt relief, as she saw it a positive sign that she would complete her dissertation. With respect to dissertation management, despite coursework-based preparation, Participant 2 felt "stupid and lost." Because of her lack of proficiency in statistics, Participant 2 hired a statistician for support.

Comparing herself to others was another source of negativity for Participant 2: "I felt like everybody else knows what they are doing . . . they all seem to have done this without a statistician, and with a statistician, I am still struggling." For Participant 2, the dissertation process magnified all her insecurities, and she felt lonely. When describing how she made

meaning out of her dissertation completion experience, Participant 2 stated that taking ownership of her dissertation shifted her anxiety into purposefulness.

For Participant 2, her faith was an essential aspect of the process, and she associated it with her persistence, purpose, and meaning. She believed that “God is going to help me overcome those dark and difficult places.” Dissertation completion came with relief as well as disbelief that she made it through.

Participant 3 mentioned looking for an administrative chairperson who was also a mentor for advanced quantitative methods. He described selecting the right chairperson as “probably the most weedy of processes.” Ultimately, Participant 3 selected a chairperson and two individuals from his university’s counseling department.

Concerning the positive aspects of the dissertation process, Participant 3 mentioned writing. With respect to the negative aspects, Participant 3 mentioned time cost analysis. As the dissertation process requires extensive time, Participant 3 wondered what else he could have been doing instead. He mentioned “Reading, watching TV, play volleyball . . . why are we in the summer hours away inside on the computer?” When reflecting on how he made meaning of his dissertation completion experience, Participant 3 said he felt “profound as the defense wrapped up.” He mentioned the significance of linking research meaningfully back to a bigger story and of the responsibility to advance the field.

Describing her admission interview, Participant 4 mentioned feeling “so comfortable in a moment that was designed to be inherently stressful.” The initial dissertation stages felt “very overwhelming theoretically,” and she felt a “sense of full responsibility” and a “feeling of ownership and independence” of an academic project. With respect to committee selection, Participant 4 said she looked for personality more than content area expertise. During dissertation management, she said she “never felt unmoored” and felt “like I had resources to

go to, whether it was past dissertations from other advisees, outlines or models.” Thus, her dissertation completion experience was “largely painless.”

Participant 4 also described negative aspects of the process. When the seventh edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* was published in the middle of her dissertation, she felt frustrated, but only for about a day (American Psychological Association, 2020). Her initial plan to collect institutional data did not materialize as she lost her grant-funded position. When she decided to use archival data set instead, she struggled with data access. When making meaning of her experience, Participant 4 reflected on the writing process, which was the largest she had ever undertaken. Overall, the dissertation completion provided her “a little bit more confidence” as a researcher.

Participant 5’s dissertation process included multiple changes in her assigned chairperson and committee roles. She felt the process was occurring abnormally, and while she felt weary, she persisted because of her “desire to complete this journey and work with whoever is assigned until we get it right.” She did not want to be seen as someone who complained, but she remembered comparing her dissertation process with others and feeling others had completed their dissertations while she was still struggling.

Participant 5 eventually tried to approach a higher authority to solve her issues, but the dissertation process was still not smooth. She felt she would never complete her dissertation as she continued to face barriers. Another negative aspect of the process regarded participant recruitment. Her plan to recruit participants for an experimental study did not materialize, and she continued to experience difficulties after changing to a survey method. While making meaning of her experience, Participant 5 mentioned how she “successfully completed a journey and now is considered a subject matter expert” in her study area. She felt confidence, self-efficacy, and a sense of making a positive impact in society. She appreciated her entire journey

and those of others who completed the dissertation. She was happy about having completed this phase and was excited about the next.

Participant 6 had clarity regarding her topic. An IRB policy changed as she was finishing her dissertation, which could have reduced the length of her dissertation process. Describing the positive aspects of the process, Participant 6 felt the adventure and excitement of the process as a positive aspect. She felt that she loved research, which was a new discovery. She realized that it “really empowers me to want not to give up and keep going.”

Participant 6 also mentioned the spiritual elements of the journey. “For me, the dissertation was a ceremony” of becoming “part of my perseverance and part of my walk, because . . . I can’t give up on this . . . I am committed to this.” She said the “spiritual journey of it was beautifully positive.” Participant 6 enjoyed collecting data and interacting with her study participants. Upon receiving her diploma in the mail, Participant 6 recalled crying as “none of it felt real.” Reflecting on meaning, she said, “I think I’m still in process . . . It hasn’t even been a year yet of really understanding what does that mean to me.”

Participant 6 viewed dissertation completion as a personal accomplishment. She discussed her Native roots, how Native people are less than 1% of the population, and how women are a percentage of that number. As a result, dissertation completion was an opportunity to be a “model for other Native women and all women.” Participant 6 also mentioned loving her job: “I love waking up every morning and going to work. To me, that’s priceless, so it didn’t matter how much my PhD cost.”

For Participant 7, determining her dissertation’s direction took time. She decided on her topic a few semesters prior to beginning her dissertation. In choosing her chairperson during the initial stage of the dissertation process, she looked for someone who would be encouraging and supportive rather than a content expert. She also decided on a chairperson based on trust. When asked about the positive aspect of the process, she mentioned that she “actually found

much to be positive” about it. She loved her topic and enjoyed interviewing the participants. While she felt the process required much work, it was a happy journey for her as she felt she had created an impact on her culture and field.

With respect to the negative aspects of the process, Participant 7 remembered not doing well in aligning her dissertation in a format advised by professors in the planning phase. She recalled that she “muddled through that course” but passed in the end. Reflecting on the meaning of the experience, she said, “This is the most important thing educationally I have ever done.” She felt proud of her work and its impact on the world, explicitly building three courses for a counseling specialty at her university.

### **Superordinate Theme 2: Stakeholder Interaction**

The second superordinate theme was stakeholder interaction. In this regard, Participant 1 mentioned positive collaboration with his chairperson and committee and appreciated their attention to detail and help in quickly completing his dissertation. He described their relationship as tremendous and found the committee overall to be an “absolutely amazing team.” Thus, interaction with the committee during the dissertation process was a positive aspect of that process.

Although the committee members were different in terms of their personalities and styles, Participant 1 found it easy to work with them. However, there was also some confusion with respect to feedback and its timing. Participant 1 felt that some input received during defense would have better served earlier, especially since the same member was present during both proposal and defense. Because the suggestions were received late, he felt he “couldn’t make the changes suggested without recollecting data.” However, after making some changes, he was able to pass his dissertation defense.

Participant 2 and her chairperson had previously collaborated as part of her coursework. The chairperson provided assistance regarding committee member selection, and Participant 2

mentioned that she had “no problem, no push back during the process.” Their relationship was characterized by trust: “I trusted him . . . I had a high level of respect and trust for his perspective.” Thus, the assistance Participant 2 obtained from her chairperson was appreciated and found to be “very, very helpful in getting the proposal ready.”

While Participant 2 felt she would get more feedback, she found what she received to be enough. An important detail regarding Participant 2 is that she experienced a loss of family and friends as part of the COVID-19 pandemic during her dissertation process. During this period, both her chairperson and committee members provided her psychosocial support: “The chair was very understanding of that and offered support in what he could, and so that was helpful.” Thus, Participant 2 appreciated the “very supportive environment” given her needs. She highlighted the need to “acknowledge life stressors in the mix of dissertation expectations.”

For Participant 3, the experience was similarly optimistic. He “felt like folks had my back” in the university system. However, he experienced two significant barriers in the second half of the dissertation process. One committee member retired without telling him. A colleague from his department eventually stepped up and served as the graduate council representative. Lack of academic credit was another barrier. After his degree audit, Participant 3 was notified that he had not accrued enough dissertation credits while writing his dissertation. The registrar’s office resolved this issue.

Reflecting on positive aspects, Participant 3 mentioned the “deepening relationship” with his chairperson where they “solidified our working alliance . . . we’re in this together.” Collaboration with the chairperson was “more than just a chair relationship, more like mentorship.” Participant 3 received mentorship from the chairperson both through research and identity development and felt that he was treated like a peer. While the feedback process during the dissertation was very stressful for him, he “always felt like the feedback I was getting was

meant to push me a little further” and was “meant to facilitate my learning.” Overall, Participant 3 felt the experience to be like “a rite of passage, but it was not trial by fire.”

For Participant 4, who selected her chairperson on the very day she was admitted to her program, an anecdote indicates her positive experience: “I remember at one point he gave me a thumbs up underneath the table when I responded with a good answer, and I was like, That’s the kind of encouragement I need.” Participant 4 also shared aspects of the feedback process: “One of the narratives that were consistent . . . he would always say, ‘I don’t care if you bring a sentence a week; you just need to keep writing’” and “This will likely not be the best thing you’ve ever written.” The advisor made the process feel doable and the dissertation manageable, although Participant 4 felt stressed at times. Overall, she felt she had a “fantastic committee” and appreciated “collaborating along with my advisor, but essentially being responsible for this thing.”

Participant 5 was assigned a chairperson and committee members in her dissertation initiation phase. Her first chairperson did not approve her dissertation topic, which resulted in Participant 5 selecting another topic. Participant 5 experienced many barriers during the dissertation completion process as her assigned chairperson and methodologist changed due to “resignations, promotions, and personal reasons.” She also sought help from program leadership at one point. Once she had a conference with all stakeholders, her dissertation was no longer stalled. Despite these difficulties, she felt a rapport and a sense of connection with her chairperson and committee members. Overall, the negative aspects of the dissertation experience outweighed the positive aspects. She appreciated the feedback style but felt negative about her feedback revisions not being seen.

Participant 6 selected her chairperson during her initial dissertation phase, but her committee members were assigned. She had a previous relationship with the chairperson and mentioned receiving psychosocial support from her chairperson. Participant 6 described her

chairperson as an “awesome mentor,” “emotionally and academically supportive,” and a “fabulous editor.” Participant 6 further stated that “If it wasn’t for her, I don’t think I would have finished.”

However, concerning the feedback she received, Participant 6 felt her chairperson was overworked: “I got the feeling pretty early on that she was pretty overworked . . . in a 10-week quarter . . . I might get two reviews on my work from her.” She experienced having to jump through hoops when interacting with a specific committee member, who also instigated several barriers to delaying her dissertation completion. In this regard, Participant 6 said she felt “discrimination to me or some kind of, I don’t know if discrimination is quite the right word, but, um, someone’s ego and personality getting in the way.”

Thus, Participant 6’s interaction with her committee members was negative, which happened in writing. They did not give “any positive feedback, not giving any encouragement” and were “very critical.” Participant 6 felt triggered by these interactions. Because of such pushbacks, her IRB approval process also took twice as long.

Near the end of the process, Participant 6 received three different versions of her dissertation from her committee, and none of the members helped her merge them. She mentioned she felt “pissed off for about 3 weeks . . . just so angry.” The committee’s disconnectedness was, for her, the most damaging aspect of the experience.

In contrast, Participant 7 said “I worked well with my chair.” For Participant 7, in the entire process of her dissertation, from initiation to completion, her chairperson was a positive aspect.

### **Superordinate Theme 3: Impact of the Environment**

#### ***Subordinate Theme 1: Peer Support***

The third superordinate theme was the impact on the environment. This was divided into two subordinate themes, of which peer support was first. Regarding peer support,

Participant 1 said he “collaborated with dozens of professionals throughout the country during that data-gathering phase of the process.” He felt that conversations in the field with peers benefited his career advancement.

Participant 2 described herself as very independent. She said she “had to break that and definitely outreach and get help.” Participant 2’s peer support included hiring a statistician for assistance during dissertation development. The statistician taught her, but she did not feel she understood statistics even with assistance. She said she wanted to cry: “I felt so dumb.” However, not all peer support was negative. She mentioned she was “very fortunate, very blessed, I actually had like an angel to me, one of my colleagues had set up a dissertation group for us to check on each other . . . she was my lifeline.” For Participant 2, obtaining a friend out of the dissertation process was “absolutely beautiful.”

Participant 3 also mentioned friendship, as he “had a buddy who we were in a friendly heat with each other to see who would defend first.” They “would schedule 2-hr sessions on Zoom . . . say this is our goal, turn off Zoom . . . then just do it.” For Participant 3, the dissertation process “solidified our friendship and our working relationship.” Online peer meetings helped Participant 3 to work as the dissertation process moved ahead.

For Participant 4, interdependence with a colleague was a positive aspect. She would have workshops for writing on Zoom in which they would “basically sit there and would work and not talk, and we’d be on there for like 2 hr.” She added, “That external accountability just having someone kind of there . . . it really felt like something that grounded me to this work.” Participant 4 and her colleague finished their dissertation together.

Participant 6 mentioned having a mentor from her Native community with a doctorate in philosophy. The mentor took Participant 6 under her wing and helped her during the process. The mentor told her, “We’ve been walking this walk for a long time . . . and we have to do one foot in this world and one foot in this world.”

The mentor further said, “We’re not going to reconcile this dominant culture world and this native American world. Those things are never going to reconcile.” Thus, “We have to be okay with ethical enough, and we have to be okay . . . this is enough of who I am without losing myself to survive in this world.” Participant 6 also obtained help from her mentor in participant recruitment. In this regard, she said she “didn’t ask her to do any of it . . . she did that for me so I could get my study done.”

### **Subordinate Theme 2: Significant Other Impact**

The second subordinate theme was significant other impact. Participant 1 felt role conflict and the impact of the dissertation process on his personal life. Balancing his “time commitments and the various hats” was the most challenging aspect of the process.

Participant 1 saw his wife as a significant part of his journey. He mentioned that he and his family were “stretched pretty thin” at different times. He and his wife learned to balance the demand on their time. For Participant 2, being away from her spouse was a negative aspect of the process: “It was days, weeks away from my husband, my children, and it was a financial investment and having to pay so much just to do this.” She also mentioned role conflict. She felt “exhaustion, coupled with underlying guilt.”

Participant 3 felt that his “partner, fiancé . . . he was just as critical to the dissertation process as my chair was,” and it felt “like a critical part of our relationship was birthing this dissertation.” Participant 5 obtained support from family. Thus, despite a sense of fear, she was able to “overcome the many obstacles.” Participant 6 mentioned that the dissertation experience was “very emotionally challenging on my family and myself.” In this regard, Participant 6 added, “There was a little bit of depression at the end . . . what have I missed . . . was it worth it?” While reflecting, she recalled issues she had in her marriage and again wondered if it was worth it. Participant 6 separated from her husband for a time during the dissertation process. However, she said, “In the end, my kids have been super supportive, and my husband’s been

super supportive, and everyone's like, you did it. I'm so proud of you." Thus, she noted that "In the end, the answer is yes," it was worth it.

## **Discussion**

This study's findings reflected three superordinate themes: dissertation task engagement, stakeholder interaction, and impact of the environment. The participants' experiences concerning their dissertation completion process revealed details associated with these themes. The current study's findings support the findings of Ghoston et al. (2020), who found five themes concerning dissertation completion support: mechanics of the program, supportive environment, selecting and working with committee members, intentionality in developing identity as a scholar, and accountability. Dissertation task engagement is influenced by students beginning their dissertations at different readiness levels (Baird, 1997), which makes student readiness a significant part of the dissertation completion process (Lim et al., 2019). The current study's findings supported these insights from previous research. Participants 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7 all talked about factors related to their readiness, including proposal coursework, statistical analysis, critical writing, and identifying support services for deficient skills.

Previously, Devos et al. (2017) showed that those who complete their dissertation are distinguished from those who do not by progressing through processes that made sense to them and did not produce overwhelming distress. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 all mentioned stress to some extent. The necessity of persistence against challenge was mentioned by previous researchers such as Devos et al. (2017), Locke and Boyle (2016), and Tinto (1994). Participants 2 and 5 discussed persistence, while Participant 6 discussed perseverance.

Barriers to completion were mentioned by Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. These barriers included the COVID-19 pandemic, insufficient statistics knowledge, lack of dissertation course credits, issues with data access, marital issues, and reassignment of chairperson and committee

members. Previous researchers such as Flynn et al. (2012), Hwang et al. (2015), and Marshall et al. (2017) mentioned barriers as threats to dissertation completion. The need for interventions to overcome such barriers has been mentioned by Liechty et al. (2009). In the present study, Participants 2, 3, 5, and 6 mentioned interventions.

Different stakeholders in the dissertation process have different roles and responsibilities (Knox et al., 2011), but they are interdependent. Dissertation advising can help or hinder dissertation completion (Marshall et al., 2017). In this regard, Goodman (2006) mentioned a lack of synchronization between advisor and advisee. Fiore et al. (2019) mentioned dissertation advising as inconsistent. Mirick et al. (2020) stated that most dissertation advisors or chairpersons do not receive formal training for this role. The majority of the participants in the current study selected their chairpersons and committee members but expressed both positive and negative experiences with collaboration. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 described collaboration as a positive aspect of their dissertation experience. Participants 1 and 3 mentioned deriving meaning from stakeholder interaction, while Participants 2 and 6 also obtained psychosocial support from their chairpersons.

In a 2017 study, Marshall et al. identified environmental, departmental, and individual factors as delaying or expediting the dissertation completion process. The present study's findings showed both positive and negative aspects related to these factors. Previous researchers had shown the importance of peer support (Denman et al., 2018; Dupont et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2019). Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 mentioned peer support as a positive aspect of their dissertation process.

In previous research, support from significant others was also discussed in relation to attrition, persistence, and motivation in the dissertation process (Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Galvin et al. (2009) noted family issues as a barrier in dissertation completion, while Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) did not find family and children influencing

dissertation persistence. In the current study, Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 discussed significant others and their impact on the dissertation process. Of these participants, 1, 2, 3, and 6 mentioned negative impacts, including time cost, marital issues, and role conflict. Participant 5 mentioned receiving support from her family and how it aided her persistence.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited to online CACREP-accredited doctoral CES programs and recent graduates less than 2 years prior to the study. Widening the research to traditional CACREP-accredited programs or non-CACREP-accredited programs may provide different results, thereby limiting the transferability of this study.

### **Implications**

Research and scholarship have been identified as core areas in a CACREP-accredited doctoral degree in CES. However, variations exist across programs concerning doctoral research preparation (Borders et al., 2014). The present study's findings highlighted the implications for dissertation stakeholders, including institutions and departments, dissertation chairs, committee members, and doctoral candidates. When and how the dissertation was introduced differed across programs. It can be noted that beginning the dissertation process later in the program delayed completion time, but this was not the case in programs that integrated accrual of dissertation credits throughout. Differences also occurred based on whether candidates were able to choose their chairpersons and committee members or whether they are assigned. Program administration and faculty may consider conducting a program evaluation to determine where dissertation research skill development occurs in the curriculum. Understanding the impact of assigned versus student-selected chairpersons or committee members and curriculum improvements may enable better dissertation socialization for students as well as readiness for tasks.

The study findings showed both positive and negative factors related to interactions with chairpersons and committee members. Balanced, timely, and structured feedback provided by advisors was associated with positive interactions. Negative interactions were associated with criticism, writing-only feedback, and cultural impasse. Based on these findings, it is essential to note the interdependent nature of advising and its role in the dissertation completion process.

The implications for candidates extend to the importance of dissertation task engagement, stakeholder interaction, and the environment's impact, including peer support and significant others. Both positive and negative aspects of the students' roles were highlighted. Overall, a better understanding of dissertation completion experiences in CES could further dissertation readiness and socialization, meaningful experiences, and dissertation completion rates.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, recent graduates of online CACREP-accredited doctoral CES programs shared their experiences concerning their dissertation completion process. Participants discussed both the positive and negative aspects of dissertation task engagement, stakeholder interaction, and the environment's impact. Further, they mentioned how they made meaning out of their experiences. Overall, the participants' experiences highlighted the independent and interdependent nature of the dissertation experience. For all participants, finishing their dissertations were significant landmarks in their careers, beginning their journeys into counseling, counselor education, or clinical supervision. The study findings contributed to obtaining a better understanding of the phenomenon of dissertation completion.

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