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The ABD Boot Camp Cohort Program: A Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Doctoral Attrition in Educational Leadership Using Tinto's Theory of Student Involvement and Departure

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Abstract

The doctoral degree completion rate in higher education across various disciplines has continued to decline. Currently, attrition rates by program vary from 40-60% across disciplines. This paper examines the implementation and outcomes of the All But Dissertation (ABD) Boot Camp Cohort Program within a Department of Educational Leadership at Tennessee State University. The program addressed a critical situation where nearly 100 students had completed coursework but not their dissertations. Through voluntary enrollment, 40 students opted to join the cohort. The program utilized Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Involvement and Departure as its theoretical framework, implementing structured monthly workshops, faculty mentorship, and comprehensive support systems, along with guided use of artificial intelligence tools. Results demonstrate significant success, with nearly 50% of participants (20 of the 40 students) completing dissertations or on track for completion by December 2025, compared to the pre-intervention graduation rate of 48% and the national average of 56% for EdD programs in Educational Leadership. The program's success highlights the importance of academic and social integration, structured support, targeted interventions, and the innovative use of artificial intelligence tools in the dissertation process. This research contributes to understanding effective strategies for reducing doctoral attrition and provides a replicable model for institutions facing similar challenges.

Keywords

Doctoral Attrition, Educational Leadership, Tinto's Theory, Cohort Model,

Dissertation Completion, Artificial Intelligence, Academic Integration, Social Integration

1. Introduction

The doctoral degree completion rate in higher education across various disciplines has continued to decline. Currently, the average time to complete a doctoral degree has increased to approximately 7.2 years, with between 40% - 60% of doctoral students discontinuing their programs before completion (National Science Foundation & National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2023; Bair & Haworth, 2004; Sverdlik et al., 2018). The attrition reflected represents not only personal disappointment for individual students but also significant resource waste for institutions and lost potential contributions to scholarly fields.

In the Fall of 2023, the University's Department of Educational Leadership, still experiencing the post effects that the global pandemic had on student retention, faced a particular manifestation of this national crisis. Nearly 100 students had completed all required coursework but remained stalled at the dissertation stage, with many approaching or exceeding the university's ten-year maximum completion timeline. The global pandemic had further complicated this situation, with numerous students requesting extensions due to unprecedented personal and professional challenges.

This crisis presented a significant challenge and a unique opportunity. Rather than allowing these students to drop out or face automatic dismissal, the department developed an innovative intervention: the All But Dissertation (ABD) Cohort Program. This structured, comprehensive approach to dissertation support was designed to address the barriers that prevent students from completing their doctoral degrees.

2. Theoretical Framework: Tinto's Theory of Student Involvement and Departure

The ABD Boot Camp Cohort Program was grounded in Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Involvement and Departure (Tinto, 1975, 1993), which provides the most comprehensive framework for understanding student persistence and withdrawal behavior in higher education. Tinto's model posits that student persistence is a function of the dynamic interaction between individual characteristics (background, pre-college experiences, and intentions) and institutional experiences, with the critical mediating factors being academic and social integration into the institutional community.

The theory identifies two distinct but interconnected systems within higher education institutions: academic and social systems. Academic integration encompasses both structural elements (academic performance, intellectual development) and normative elements (identification with institutional values and goals). Social integration similarly includes both structural aspects (extracurricular activ-

ities, peer interactions) and normative dimensions (identification with social communities within the institution). Tinto argues that successful integration into both systems increases institutional commitment, which in turn reduces the likelihood of departure.

Successful academic integration includes students' academic performance, intellectual skill development, and satisfaction with institutional academic systems. For doctoral students, this involves transitioning from structured coursework to independent research, developing scholarly identity, mastering specialized methodologies, and maintaining productive relationships with advisors and committee members.

Social integration refers to students' connections within the academic community, including relationships with faculty and peers, participation in disciplinary communities, and development of professional networks. At the doctoral level, social integration becomes particularly challenging during the dissertation phase, when students often experience isolation and reduced peer contact due to the individualized nature of dissertation work.

Tinto's theory is particularly relevant to doctoral education because it recognizes that the factors influencing persistence change over time and across different educational phases. During the dissertation phase, traditional support structures may weaken, making students particularly vulnerable to departure. The theory suggests that interventions must address both academic integration (through structured support for research and writing skills) and social integration (through peer communities and faculty mentorship) to effectively support student persistence.

The theory's application to doctoral education reveals challenges. Unlike undergraduate students, doctoral students must navigate the transition from dependent learner to independent learner/scholar while managing multiple commitments such as careers and families. The dissertation phase represents the most vulnerable period, where both academic and social supports may diminish significantly while academic demands increase significantly.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Barriers to Doctoral Completion

Research identifies several factors contributing to doctoral attrition. Personal barriers include stress, social isolation, procrastination, and perfectionism (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Many students struggle with the persistence required for dissertation completion. This combined with institutional barriers such as time constraints and inadequate support are equally significant (Devos et al., 2017; Gardner, 2009). Finally, the level of mentoring that students receive varies significantly. Inadequate mentoring poses a significant hurdle towards dissertation completion (Barnes, 2009; Golde, 2005).

3.2. Effective Interventions

According to research, workshops focusing on dissertation writing and research

skills support dissertation completion (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2017). Also, cohort models are beneficial for community development, socialization, and creating positive supportive peer relationships (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). These structured communities provide both academic support and social integration opportunities that are often lacking in the traditional doctoral dissertation experience.

3.3. The Role of Artificial Intelligence

The integration of artificial intelligence tools in the research and writing process has proven to provide support for students. Recent research has examined the ethical use of AI tools including ChatGPT, Grammarly, and other language models for literature review enhancement, brainstorming, and writing assistance. Training emphasizes that AI tools should supplement rather than replace original thinking and scholarly work, with all AI-assisted content requiring proper attribution and human oversight (Aljuaid, 2024; Chen et al., 2020). In years past, students would spend weeks researching and brainstorming various topics. Now, with the appropriate and ethical use of AI, concepts and literature reviews, data analysis, and writing assistance can be supported while maintaining academic integrity when used appropriately and ethically.

4. Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the ABD Boot Camp Cohort Program. Data sources included: 1) Completion tracking data for all 100 eligible ABD students; 2) Program participation records including monthly workshop attendance; 3) Student satisfaction surveys administered at program completion; 4) Faculty feedback through structured interviews.

The satisfaction survey instrument consisted of 15 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) measuring perceived program effectiveness, peer support quality, faculty mentorship satisfaction, and overall program impact. The survey achieved a 78% response rate (31 of 40 participants). Completion data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, comparing pre-program and post-program graduation rates. All data collection procedures were reviewed and deemed exempt by the institutional review board as part of routine program evaluation activities.

5. Program Description: The ABD Cohort Boot Camp

Participant Selection and Enrollment

The program targeted approximately 100 ABD students from the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Tennessee State University who had completed all required coursework but remained stalled at the dissertation stage. Students were eligible if they had been ABD for at least one semester and were approaching or had exceeded the university's maximum completion timeline. Participation was

voluntary, with students required to commit to attending monthly sessions and completing assigned deliverables. Of the 100 eligible students contacted, 40 chose to participate in the program, while 60 opted not to participate and faced potential dismissal from their programs.

Based on program enrollment data, participants represented both concentration areas within the Educational Leadership program: PreK-12 Administration and Higher Education Leadership. The broader program demographics during this period showed 72% female and 28% male students, with 70% identifying as Black/African American, 28% as White, and 2% as Two or More Races. The average age of doctoral students in the program was 49.1 years, with ages ranging from 35 to 72 years. Many participants were employed full-time in educational positions while completing their doctoral studies.

The ABD Cohort Program was developed as a comprehensive intervention targeting both the academic and social integration needs of students. The program consisted of monthly workshops held from January through November 2024, each focusing on specific aspects of the dissertation process.

Workshop topics were strategically sequenced to mirror the dissertation development process: literature review techniques, problem statement development, research design selection, data collection methods, analysis procedures, and defense preparation. Each session was recorded and made available to all participants, creating a permanent resource library.

6. Results

6.1. Program Completion Outcomes

The ABD Boot Camp program demonstrated significant success in supporting doctoral completion. Of the 40 participating students, nearly 50% (20 students) either completed their dissertations or were on track for completion by the December 2025 deadline. This completion rate compares favorably to the pre-intervention institutional graduation rate of 48% and exceeds the national average of 56% for EdD programs in Educational Leadership (Table 1). The program's impact becomes more significant when considering that all participants had been stalled in the dissertation phase for extended periods.

Table 1. Program completion comparison | ABD boot camp | pre-intervention.

Metric	ABD Rate	Pre Rate
Completion/On-Track Rate	50%	48%
Program Duration	11 months	Variable
Support Structure	Workshops	Traditional Advising

6.2. Participation and Engagement Metrics

Monthly workshop attendance varied throughout the program year, with the

highest participation (73%, n = 35) occurring during the January Literature Review session featuring AI integration techniques. Attendance patterns showed strong engagement during critical dissertation development phases: Problem Statement development (31%, n = 15), Research Design workshops (52%, n = 25), and Data Collection training using Qualtrics (35%, n = 17). Lower attendance in later months reflected natural progression as students advanced through different dissertation stages (Table 2).

Table 2. Monthly workshop attendance patterns.

Month	Workshop Topic	(n)	Attendance
January	Literature Review	35	73%
February	Problem Statement	15	31%
March	Chapter 2 Outline	24	50%
April	Research Design	25	52%
May	Proposal Design	12	25%
June	Data Collection—Qualtrics	17	35%
July	Data Analysis	12	25%
August	Writing Conclusions	4	8%
September	Dissertation Refinement	6	13%
October	Defense Preparation	7	15%
November			
December			

6.3. Student Satisfaction Survey Results

The satisfaction survey (n = 31, 78% response rate) revealed high levels of program satisfaction across all measured domains. On the 5-point Likert scale, students reported strong agreement with statements about program effectiveness (M = 4.3, SD = 0.7), quality of peer support (M = 4.2, SD = 0.6), and faculty mentorship satisfaction (M = 4.4, SD = 0.5). Overall program impact received the highest rating (M = 4.5, SD = 0.4), with 87% of respondents rating the program as "very effective" or "extremely effective" in supporting their dissertation progress.

6.4. Comparison with Non-Participating Students

Of the 60 eligible students who chose not to participate in the ABD Boot Camp, preliminary data suggests significantly lower completion rates. While final outcomes will be assessed in January 2026, early indicators show that fewer than 20% of non-participants have made substantial progress toward dissertation completion during the same timeframe, highlighting the potential effectiveness of the structured intervention.

Currently, nearly 20 of the original students are on-track to complete their EdD degrees by the December 2025 deadline.

7. Discussion

The program's success can be attributed to its comprehensive approach to both academic and social integration, the core components of Tinto's theoretical framework. The results demonstrate that structured interventions addressing both academic and social integration needs can significantly improve doctoral completion rates. Academic integration was addressed through structured workshops providing specific research and writing skills while social integration was fostered through cohort community building and regular interaction opportunities. The monthly workshop structure provided the external accountability many students needed to maintain momentum by breaking the dissertation process into discrete components with specific deadlines, addressing the overwhelming nature of the dissertation task that often leads to paralysis and procrastination.

The integration of Tinto's framework proved particularly valuable in understanding why the program succeeded. By addressing both academic integration (through skill development workshops) and social integration (through peer cohort support), the intervention created the comprehensive support system that Tinto's theory suggests is necessary for student persistence. The monthly structure maintained institutional commitment while providing the social connections that had been lost during the isolated dissertation phase.

The integration of AI tools represented an innovative approach to supporting doctoral students, providing 24/7 access to writing and research assistance that supplemented rather than replaced human mentorship and guidance. Consistent with recent research on AI in academic writing (Hrastinski et al., 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019), the program demonstrated that when properly integrated with ethical guidelines, AI tools can enhance rather than compromise academic integrity. The key was teaching students to use these tools ethically and effectively as starting points for their own scholarly work. With this project, students indicated that the research utilized artificial intelligence tools to assist. With this project, all content represents the author's original research, analysis, and conclusions, with AI serving solely as a writing support tool. The program's success depended heavily on institutional willingness to adapt policies to student needs, as the blanket time extension and revalidation process provided a second chance for students who might otherwise have been lost to the system while maintaining academic standards through demonstrated competency.

Limitations and Future Research

While the ABD Cohort Program demonstrates significant success, several limitations should be noted. The absence of a formal control group and the single-site design restrict causal claims and limit generalizability to other institutional contexts. The voluntary nature of participation introduces potential self-selection

bias, as students who chose to participate may have possessed higher motivation or different characteristics than non-participants. The program was implemented at a single institution with a specific student population, which may limit generalizability. Long-term follow-up is needed to assess the sustainability of completion rates and the quality of dissertations produced.

Future researchers should examine the program's effectiveness across different disciplines and institutional contexts. Additionally, investigation into the optimal integration of AI tools in doctoral education, while maintaining academic integrity, represents an important area for continued study.

The cost-effectiveness of such intensive interventions compared to traditional doctoral support models requires analysis. While the program demonstrated success, institutions must consider resource allocation and scalability when implementing similar initiatives.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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