

A Comparative Analysis of the Dissertation Self Efficacy of Black Students at Historically Black Universities and Predominantly White Universities

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Abstract

This study measured the dissertation self efficacy differences between African American doctoral students at Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and African American doctoral students at Predominantly White Universities (PWUs). One hundred twenty-two third year doctoral students (HBCUs, n=62; PWUs, n=60) completed a self efficacy survey regarding their confidence to complete key tasks of the doctoral dissertation. Independent T-Test measures showed that African American students at HBCUs held the higher self efficacy for writing the doctoral dissertation. PWUs on items related to working with the dissertation committee. These findings highlight the need to measure and develop the dissertation self efficacy of African American doctoral students at Predominantly White Universities (PWUs). They also reinforce the value of using cross cultural comparisons to develop international perspectives on educational beliefs.

The dissertation is one of the most pivotal components of doctoral programs in educational administration (Hines, 2006). This scholarly work measures doctoral candidates' ability to perform self-directed scholarly research. In addition, the completion of this degree can raise graduates' academic and social status in their respective careers. Yet, Barnett (2004) indicated that many doctoral students do not complete their dissertations. Instead, they depart the doctoral experience with "All But Dissertation" (ABD) status.

These findings implicate the need to identify factors that could affect students' completion of the dissertation. Much research has focused on self efficacy's influence on academic achievement (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Lane & Lane, 2001; Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995). As a significant academic activity, the completion of the doctoral dissertation could be linked to race and student self efficacy. Drawing upon this notion, this study investigated the differences in the dissertation self efficacy of African American doctoral students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and African American doctoral students at Predominantly White Universities (PWUs).

A significant aspect of this study can be found in Bandura's (1977, 1997) self efficacy theory. Bandura defined self efficacy as the confidence in ability to achieve a desired course of action. According to Bandura, self efficacy is not a global measure of perceived confidence. A content specific construct, self efficacy focuses on judgment for completing specific tasks.

Bandura further indicated that self efficacy is developed through a) successful practice of a desired course of action; b) receiving meaningful feedback on performance; and c) observing and identifying with other people's modeling of a desired skill.

Numerous researchers have used this theoretical framework to measure self efficacy in academic settings (Lane & Lane, 2001; Pajares, 1996; Pintrich, & Schunk, 1996; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). But few, if any, studies have replicated this theoretical notion in completing the doctoral dissertation.

The second significant aspect of this study is race. There is a need to determine how students of African American students progress in doctoral programs with mostly Black doctoral faculty members and mostly White faculty members. The findings from this study could provide more insight on the need for cultural competence and cultural responsiveness to exist between doctoral faculty members and doctoral students.

There will be presumable similarities and differences between predominantly Black doctoral programs and predominantly White doctoral programs. But the pivotal bicultural perspective is the extent to which the racial configuration of these programs impacts how African American students negotiate their doctoral experiences. That is, will African American doctoral students in predominantly Black doctoral programs show a different level of confidence for completing the dissertation than African American doctoral students who attend predominantly White doctoral programs? The remainder of this research provides a framework for answering this question.

Doctoral Dissertation Process

In most American doctoral programs, a standard approach is used to prepare students for writing the dissertation. During the first semester of the final year of coursework, students take a course on dissertation proposal writing. This course provides them with an overview of the purpose of the dissertation. By the end of the course, students are required to develop a proposal of the first three dissertation chapters. During the second semester, the students meet with the director of the doctoral program to discuss dissertation committees. They then select a doctoral chairperson. Afterwards, the doctoral dissertation chairperson and student select the other committee members.

The doctoral student then begins to write the dissertation. Throughout the process, the student receives feedback and revisions from the doctoral dissertation chairperson. After completing the revisions, the doctoral students begin to prepare for defending the dissertation to the committee members. The doctoral student then presents the dissertation to the committee. Afterwards, the committee then determines if the doctoral students' presentation has met or exceeded all requirements. If the doctoral student has met requirements, the student makes final revisions and then completes graduation.

Methodology

Participants

This study consisted of 122 third year African American doctoral students (HBCUs, n=62; PWUs, n=60) in doctoral programs from universities in North Carolina, South Carolina, California, and Texas. Of this population, there were 58 males and 64 females.

Instrumentation

Prior to conducting this research, I administered an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix) to professors and doctoral graduates from doctoral programs from across the country. The questionnaire asked them to describe the most difficult aspects of completing the dissertation. I extracted 27 common statements from the 212 responses. I then conducted a principal components analysis to identify the underlying constructs of the items. Using a Kaiser criterion, the analysis revealed five constructs that explained 67% of the variance (eigenvalue ≥ 1). The constructs were as follows: Conceptual Alignment (9 items); Written Composition (4 items); Revision (4 items); Committee Interaction (4 items); and Efficacy (6 items).

Conceptual alignment focuses on the ability to select and develop ideas and resources that are aligned to the aims and goals of the dissertation topic. *Written composition* describes the ability to use technical writing to complete the dissertation. *Revision* explains the ability to proofread and revise the dissertation. *Committee interaction* describes the ability to work with and follow the committee's directives for completing the dissertation. *Efficacy* denotes the ability to remain motivated throughout the dissertation experience. The alpha results from piloting the survey on 25 doctoral students were as follows: Conceptual Alignment (alpha=.78); Written Composition (alpha=.81); Revision (alpha=.72); Committee Interaction (alpha=.84); and Efficacy (alpha=.91). The survey's overall reliability coefficient was .92. This outcome suggests that this survey has the internal consistency to measure the self efficacy of doctoral students of educational administration.

Procedures

In the spring of 2010, I contacted and explained the study to the chairpersons of each university's chose doctoral programs. I then mailed 232 surveys to the chairpersons. They informed their professors to administer the survey to a random sample of African American doctoral students in their classes. Survey items were centered on the question "How confident are you in your ability to ..?" At the end of the semester, I received 122 surveys from the chairpersons. Thus, I achieved a 52% return rate. A T-Test for independent means was used to analyze the survey results.

Results

Independent T-Test results showed statistically significant differences for six of 27 items. The mean comparisons of these and the other items are presented in Table 1. Both the statistical

significant and insignificant items show a higher self efficacy for African American doctoral students who were enrolled in doctoral programs at HBCUs.

Table 1

Mean Comparisons for Dissertation Self Efficacy Items

Task	African American Doctoral Students HBCUs	African American Doctoral Students PWUs	T	p
1. Design research questions that match the purpose of your study.	4.58 (.75)	4.01 (.47)	1.075	.064
2. Write an appropriate introduction to your dissertation.	4.24 (.91)	4.01 (.37)	-.988	.976
3. Use the appropriate quantitative or qualitative procedures to analyze the data for your study.	4.01 (2.42)	3.66 (1.03)	1.214	.432
4. Write a discussion section that explains the findings of your study.	4.34 (.91)	3.44 (1.02)	1.069	.242
5. Give implications that are related to the findings of your study.	4.21 (.45)	3.25 (.94)	-1.682	.111
6. Ensure that a coherent, transitional flow exists throughout the dissertation.	4.01 (.27)	3.65 (1.01)	1.214	.265
7. Write a literature review section that matches the purpose of your study.	4.42 (1.00)	3.37 (1.01)	.124	.209
8. Develop appropriate recommendations for future research.	4.66 (.56)	3.24 (.76)	1.432	.367
9. Work with your doctoral dissertation committee to complete the study	4.67 (.82)	3.41 (1.49)	.795	.046*
10. Work on your dissertation when you are tired and distracted by other issues.	3.78 (1.00)	3.46 (1.45)	1.594	.024*
11. Ensure that references and the text are formatted in accordance to APA style.	4.67 (1.09)	4.54 (.43)	.176	.938
12. Accept and use your committee's constructive feedback for revising the dissertation.	4.59 (1.02)	3.33 (1.05)	-3.629	.002*
13. Write a statement problem that accurately describes the major issue of your study.	4.01 (.57)	3.65 (1.45)	3.955	.012*
14. Identify a theoretical framework that matches the aims and goals of your study.	4.22 (.14)	3.56 (1.01)	2.409	.000*
15. Defend your completed dissertation to the dissertation committee.	4.14 (.84)	3.23 (.76)	2.396	.000*
16. Ensure that all tables and figures are developed in accordance to APA style.	4.01 (.34)	3.95 (1.02)	1.946	.976
17. Describe the limitations of your study.	4.26 (.74)	3.46 (1.29)	2.714	.099
18. Submit chapter revisions to your dissertation committee in a timely manner.	4.45 (.90)	3.20 (.76)	.366	.365
19. Make the necessary revisions to your dissertation chapters in a timely manner.	4.10 (.61)	3.67 (.49)	1.075	.645
20. Ensure that your "Literature Review" chapter consists of research from key theorists and researchers on your dissertation topic.	4.04 (.45)	3.78 (0.29)	1.214	.234

21. Remain motivated to complete the dissertation.	3.56 (0.78)	3.46 (1.02)	1.456	.412
22. Show continuous excitement and positivity about the dissertation experience.	3.62 (1.06)	3.12 (0.61)	3.412	.346
23. Gather relevant information from books, journals, and other literary sources.	3.37 (0.77)	3.23 (0.46)	3.046	.112
24. Analyze the implications of previous research to your dissertation.	3.42 (0.78)	3.01 (1.09)	1.712	.168
25. Prioritize your time to complete the dissertation?	3.45 (0.78)	3.27 (0.64)	1.654	.141
26. Set and complete short-term and long-term goals for completing the dissertation.	3.55 (0.68)	3.11 (0.78)	1.283	.319
27. Work on your dissertation for long periods of time during the day.	3.18 (1.04)	3.44 (1.01)	4.012	.057

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this study showed that African American doctoral students from HBCUs held a higher dissertation self efficacy than did African American doctoral students from PWUs. Based on the descriptions of pre-dissertation experiences, I attribute the findings to Bandura's (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory. His theory espouses self efficacy development through socially constructed learning experiences. That is, people raise their confidence level by interacting with competent people.

On the one hand, these students did receive instruction on completing a dissertation proposal. Therefore, the students could have displayed a high self efficacy for completing the entire dissertation. However, a difference exists between writing a proposal and completing a dissertation. In addition, the students may not have received the feedback needed to build confidence for writing the dissertation.

Moreover, the dissertation writing class served as one example of how the students gained insight on writing the dissertation. The doctoral students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) may have received significant mentoring with their preparation for writing the dissertation.

These differences could explain the largest mean score differences for the following items: "Work with your doctoral dissertation committee to complete the study;" "Accept and use your committee's constructive feedback for revising the dissertation;" "Defend your completed dissertation to the dissertation committee;" and "Work with your doctoral dissertation committee to complete the study." The common theme among these items is the development of skills through social interaction within the context of race (Bandura, 1977, 1997).

Implications

This research does not implicate the need for restructuring American doctoral students' preparation for writing the dissertation. The reason is that many American doctoral programs may use strategies that effectively prepare doctoral students for writing the dissertation. In addition, some American doctoral students of educational administration may possess a high dissertation self efficacy.

As such, this study highlights the need to maximize doctoral students' self efficacy for writing the dissertation. In my opinion, the process should begin during the first year of the

doctoral program. Here, program officials would measure new doctoral students' self efficacy for writing the dissertation. They should also repeat the procedures, as doctoral students complete their coursework. The findings should be used to address perceived task related concerns about writing the dissertation.

If students display a low dissertation self efficacy, they should participate in activities that promote goals-based achievement. For example, the findings revealed that some American doctoral students were somewhat confident about creating a literature review. As such, program officials could work with these students to develop set short term goals for writing the literature review. Consistent with Bandura's (1977, 1997) and Schunk's (1995) research, the students should receive frequent feedback about their progress. The feedback must focus on students' actions instead of personal characteristics. The reason lies in Bandura's cautioning about criticizing low efficacious people.

Finally, another strategy for helping doctoral students with a low dissertation self efficacy is to provide them with samples of dissertations. The dissertation should be related to the student's proposed dissertation topic. This information provides the doctoral students with "vicarious" insight on how to write the dissertation.

Limitations and Future Research

This study consists of a few limitations. First, the small sample size limits the study's generalization to other states and countries. Thus, future research should focus on settings in other states. Second, I did not control for gender or other personal characteristics. These variables have been cited as having a major influence on student self efficacy (Schunk, 1995). Therefore, future studies should consider these variables' influence on dissertation self efficacy. Third, I did not control for similarities and differences in doctoral dissertation topics. Bandura (1977) believed that self efficacy is a context specific construct. Thus, if doctoral students are planning to study difficult topics, they could have high concerns and a low self efficacy for the dissertation.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study showed different dissertation self efficacies existed between African American doctoral students in doctoral programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and African American doctoral students at Predominantly White Universities (PWUs). The findings highlight the need to measure doctoral students' level of confidence for writing the dissertation. Finally, they promote the opportunities for culturally constructed discussions on this scholarly activity. In particular, they expand our understanding on how nationality and graduate experiences relate to the efficacy for completing the dissertation.

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Appendix

Dissertation Self Efficacy Scale

A. Gender: Male ____ Female ____

Directions: Please using the scale to rate your confidence for completing each of the follow items.

1=Not confident in my ability 2=Not really confident in my ability 3=Somewhat confident in my ability
4=Confident in my ability 5=Very Confident in my ability

Item	Rating
Now that you have completed all coursework and are preparing to write your dissertation, how confident are you in your ability to:	
1. Design research questions that match the purpose of your study?	1 2 3 4 5
2. Write an appropriate introduction to your dissertation?	1 2 3 4 5
3. Use the appropriate quantitative or qualitative procedures to analyze the data for your study?	1 2 3 4 5
4. Write a discussion section that explains the findings of your study?	1 2 3 4 5
5. Give implications that are related to the findings of your study?	1 2 3 4 5
6. Ensure that a coherent, transitional flow exists throughout the dissertation?	1 2 3 4 5
7. Write a literature review section that matches the purpose of your study?	1 2 3 4 5
8. Develop appropriate recommendations for future research?	1 2 3 4 5
9. Work with your doctoral dissertation committee to complete the study?	1 2 3 4 5
10. Work on your dissertation when you are tired and distracted by other issues?	1 2 3 4 5
11. Ensure that references and the text are formatted in accordance to APA style?	1 2 3 4 5
12. Accept and use your committee's constructive feedback for revising the dissertation?	1 2 3 4 5
13. Write a statement problem that accurately describes the major issue of your study?	1 2 3 4 5
14. Identify a theoretical framework that matches the aims and goals of your study?	1 2 3 4 5
15. Defend your completed dissertation to the dissertation committee?	1 2 3 4 5
16. Ensure that all tables and figures are developed in accordance to APA style?	1 2 3 4 5
17. Describe the limitations of your study?	1 2 3 4 5
18. Submit chapter revisions to your dissertation committee in a timely manner?	1 2 3 4 5
19. Make the necessary revisions to your dissertation chapters in a timely manner?	1 2 3 4 5
20. Ensure that your "Literature Review" chapter consists of research from key theorists and researchers on your dissertation topic?	1 2 3 4 5

21. Remain motivated to complete the dissertation?	1	2	3	4	5
22. Show continuous excitement and positivity about the dissertation experience?	1	2	3	4	5
23. Gather relevant information from books, journals, and other literary sources?	1	2	3	4	5
24. Analyze the implications of previous research to your dissertation?	1	2	3	4	5
25. Prioritize your time to complete the dissertation?	1	2	3	4	5
26. Set and complete short-term and long-term goals for completing the dissertation?	1	2	3	4	5
27. Work on your dissertation for long periods of time during the day?	1	2	3	4	5