

Original Paper

Addressing Doctoral Student “Failure”: Catching Lost Souls

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Abstract

Statistics indicate that 45-50% of doctoral students who finish their course work never finish their degrees (<https://www.statisticssolutions.com/almost-50-of-all-doctoral-students-dont-graduate/>). This essay examines this problem as an example of fundamental attribution error and suggests that in some cases, but not all, success rates can be improved by making changes in the situation instead of blaming the students. It illustrates this point with examples of successful efforts to prevent students from failing to finish their degrees by advisors serving as process experts instead of content experts. It also points out that while being a process expert may increase the percentage of students who complete their degrees, it does not always lead to success. Rethinking this issue may assist educators as they attempt to help college students at all levels finish their degrees.

Keywords

attribution theory, A.B.D. status, degree completion, process expert

1. Introduction

Each year, bright new students enroll in Ph.D. programs across the country. They often excel in their coursework and pass their written and oral comprehensive or general exams within a few years. As such, they reach the official status of doctoral degree candidate, although they are known more frequently by their unofficial status, A.B.D. (All but dissertation? All but done? All but dead?). They seem destined for distinguished careers when suddenly they get lost. Instead of graduating with a Ph.D., they join the ranks of the 45-50% of doctoral students who finish their course work and never finish their degrees (See for example: <https://www.statisticssolutions.com/almost-50-of-all-doctoral-students-dont-graduate/>).

2. Theoretical Framework and Case Studies

2.1 Fundamental Attribution Error

Faculty and program directors often commit the fundamental attribution error to explain this pattern. Attribution theory focuses attention on whether we use individuals' situations (external causes) or their personal qualities (internal causes) to explain the individuals' choices and actions, including their successes or failures (e.g., Kelley & Michela, 1980). The fundamental attribution error overestimates "the importance of personal or dispositional factors relative to environmental influences (Ross, 1977, p. 184). In other words, in this situation, we typically blame these students for becoming lost souls and failing to finish their degrees while ignoring situational factors. We say things like, "The students would not settle on a dissertation topic." "They settled on the topic, but never wrote anything because they were in an endless cycle of reading the literature." "They were perfectionists who never showed what they had done because they never felt it was quite ready." Attributing their failures to internal causes allow advisors, programs, and universities to excuse themselves from responsibility for these abysmal statistics. After all, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

There certainly are multiple reasons why students get lost once they reach their A.B.D. status. Some graduate students are largely responsible for their failure to finish. However, as attribution theory suggests, there are often significant external influences that cause students to join the status of A.B.D. permanently. For example, there are advisors who are simply difficult to work with and who rarely successfully mentor a student to degree completion. They do not provide enough direction, or they are slow to read drafts and provide helpful feedback to students, and so, after a number of delays and a general lack of progress, the students simply stop trying probably due to situational factors. Those situational factors might include factors like the busy lives they are leading—such as earning a living wage to pay off student loans, taking care of family commitments, and those sorts of things. If a faculty member has not guided any Ph.D. student to degree completion in 10 years, the faculty member is likely at least part of the problem.

Students are frequently victims of other circumstances largely beyond their control. For example, their advisors retire suddenly or take jobs at other universities midway through the students' programs and decide not to continue working with students from that university after retiring or leaving. Whatever the reason for the departure, often the students discover there is no longer a good match for their interests within the remaining faculty in the department and none of the remaining faculty are willing to work with them on their topics. If faculty members only work with students who align with their very narrow interests, they limit the opportunity for graduate students in this situation to succeed.

Regardless of the circumstances that bring their progress to a halt, if we continue making the fundamental attribution error, we conclude that, yes, circumstances worked against the students, BUT they had free will or agency to change their situation instead of becoming lost and drifting aimlessly, and so ultimately, the students are responsible for their failure to graduate. "They could have changed their topic." "If they showed more diligence someone would have worked them." If you have taught in

a PhD program, you recognize these different types of “lost soul” Ph.D. students.

2.2 *Changing Personal Resources*

One way that advisors attempt to provide A.B.D. students with the ability to successfully finish their dissertations is to provide them with additional resources. A common practice is to encourage (or require) students to read one of the many advice books for finishing a dissertation published over the years (e.g., Becker, 2007; Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2018; Sternberg, 1981). These books generally include chapters on choosing topics, choosing advisors and committee members, working with the Institutional Review Boards, and making timely progress among others. The title of one suggests that you can finish your dissertation as long as you commit to working on it for 15 minutes a day (Bolker, 1998). Other resources may include writing programs and support groups on campus or during the summer. Certainly, these additional resources have helped many graduate students complete their degrees and providing them to students is important. But in the end, if the students do not finish, we can still commit the fundamental attribution error and blame them for not taking advantage of all the resources we provided them.

2.3 *Changing the Situation*

I am not convinced that these lost souls are to blame. After all, even when it seems like the students’ actions or inactions are to largely to blame, it does not make sense to make the student solely responsible; the system must also take some of the blame. But, rather than discussing this irresolvable philosophical question further, I’d like to discuss ways to change the situations faced by these lost soul situations so that they can eventually graduate. I’ll use an analogy to S. D. Salinger’s (1951) *The Catcher in the Rye* to make my point.

Depending on your age, demographic, and location, you may have read Salinger’s book in junior high or high school. I don’t remember much about it except for the main character’s explanation of his role in life which explains the book’s title. In Chapter 22, the main character, Holden tells his sister:

"Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be." (Salinger, 1951, pp. 224-225)

That image represents how we need to address lost soul graduate students. They are headed toward the cliff that represents falling into the abyss of eternal A.B.D. status. Someone has to catch them and stop them. Catching them involves changing their situation and sending them back into the field of rye where they can succeed. A couple of personal examples of catches illustrates this point. During my career at two Ph.D. granting programs, I have caught a number of students who became stuck largely through no fault to their own and was able to prevent them from falling over the cliff.

2.4 Being Process Experts

In one case, the two members of the student's committee with similar interests to his both left the university over two years. This occurred in part because he was a non-traditional student working full time as a faculty member at another institution while being a part-time student at ours. As a result, it took him longer to complete his course work and some of the faculty members he had for some of his early coursework, including his chosen advisor, were gone when he was ready to work on his dissertation. When he approached me as the director of graduate studies to become his advisor, I urged him to find someone else more suited to his topic, a content expert. The newer faculty members in his area of interest rejected his requests since they never had him in class and so he returned to me with a second request a few weeks later. His topic was unrelated to anything I ever studied, but I knew the steps needed to write a defensible proposal and dissertation and so I became his advisor as the process expert, not the content expert. I simply made him work on the proposal until it seemed logical and complete to me. The rest of his committee served as content experts. I remember being anxious at his proposal meeting because the topic was completely outside of my area of expertise. I was relieved when a young committee member, a content expert, reported his literature review was one of the best she had read. I realized that an advisor who is good at the process of completing a degree is perhaps more important than one who is a content expert. After defending his dissertation, he continued his career at his institution and has become a director of a program and a full professor.

In two other cases, students began working with faculty members who were content experts. Both students soon found it too difficult to progress due to their advisors' poor (slow) work habits and lack of mentoring (unclear or non-existent advice). The advisors were failing as process experts. After floundering for a year or more, each approached me, apparently due to my reputation as a process expert, and I guided them through the process although both took somewhat longer to graduate than it should have taken. One went onto a career at a liberal arts college where she was eventually promoted to full professor. The other went on to a successful career in a statewide government agency (Success stories do not always have to end with careers in academics). Both of these cases suggest that if more faculty focused on becoming process experts instead of content experts, the percentage of A.B.D. students who graduate would likely increase.

Perhaps the most extreme lost soul I worked with faced this situation. She had already defended her dissertation proposal when her advisor retired suddenly. The secondary advisor took a job elsewhere at the same time. Both decided not to work with students from my university anymore. I respect those decisions, but the student was left with a committee of three and no advisor. She approached me even though I was not on her committee and I eventually took on the dissertation in a topic that was unfamiliar to me with the proposal already approved. Although the study design was in good shape, the rest of the proposal did not meet my standards for writing and so the student ended up rewriting large portions of the literature review until it satisfied my standards. Then she finished the data collection, wrote and defended the dissertation, and went off to her first position at an international university. She

bounced around from adjunct position to adjunct position for a while before pursuing a career outside of university settings. Again, she needed a process expert to be able to finish, not a content expert. I was able to be that process expert.

Of course, it would be ideal to have an advisor who was both a process and content expert. Reading some of those same books mentioned earlier can help advisors become process experts. But if you have to choose, it seems like a process expert might be the better choice.

By now you might think I am rather prideful about my ability to prevent students from falling into the A.B.D. abyss, for being the catcher in the rye. You might bright. I like to think I made a difference for these students, but I have seen other advisors do the same thing and so someone else might have caught these students instead of me had I not been available. After all, the students did the work. Each was capable of writing a reputable dissertation when the roadblocks got removed. All their dissertations were comparable to the others I advised or approved as a committee member. They needed someone to step in as a process expert to prevent them from falling off the metaphoric cliff. It did not have to be me.

2.5 An Extended Counter Example

It is important to note that being a process expert does not always lead to success. In another case, I became aware of another lost soul. The advisor the student originally selected left the university suddenly. She replaced him with one of those difficult to work with faculty members. When I found out about her, she had completed her courses except for two incompletes. She had not even filed her plan of study for her degree due to poor mentorship by her new advisor. She had no plan for when she might take her comprehensive exams. She had only one more year of support coming from the department. That meant it was imperative that she at least be A.B.D. before the end of the academic calendar so she could finish her dissertation long distance.

I approached her about her progress early in the Fall semester. She clearly felt lost. She did not know what to do about her situation or her advisor. I volunteered to be her advisor instead of waiting for her to ask me, perhaps a mistake on my part. I remember telling her that it did not matter that I was not an expert in her area of interest. I was good at getting students through the process. If she was willing to work, then I would help her achieve her goal. She took me up on the offer.

The first step was identifying her committee members and filing a plan of study. Within a week or two, we pulled together the committee meeting. It was not really a plan of study; it was more of a record of completed coursework. Her committee accepted the plan recognizing that she still needed to finish the two incompletes. By the end of the semester in December, she turned in the two papers, received grades, and was ready for her comprehensive exams. She had turned back from the cliff.

With her assistantship running out in May, we selected dates for the written exams and oral exams before the end of the semester. She studied. I checked back periodically. She studied more. When she announced that she was ready, she took her written exams. Her written exams were quite good and her oral exams went well. The committee had no major concerns and she passed both her written and oral

exams with unanimous approval. She had avoided the cliff for now.

As part of the oral exams, her committee asked about her dissertation topic. She explained that she was going to examine how one university responded to the scandal that led to the departure of a respected coach (There are enough such examples that I can leave you guessing which coach, which sport, and which year. Let's just say it made national news). The committee responded enthusiastically to the idea for the study.

During the last week of the semester, the student and I talked about the topic. We talked about how to access the news stories for analysis. We talked about getting multiple sources including print and television news. We talked about the method of analysis she would use. Since the story was ongoing, we discussed some of the latest developments as well.

When she left at the end of May, it seemed like she was on the right path. She had a plan. She just needed to execute the plan. She would begin writing, sending me drafts and she would gradually finish a proposal and then the whole dissertation.

And then it didn't happen.

I sent her an email asking about progress. Because she no longer had an assistantship, she wrote that she was busy looking for employment, but she assured me that she would get to work on the proposal once things settled down. A few weeks later, I sent her another email about some breaking story related to the case when it made it in the news again during the summer. This time there was no response. I figured she was still busy settling in and so I did not give it too much thought.

During the fall semester I emailed her and asked her for an update. Again, no response.

At the beginning of the next semester, progress reports for all graduate students were due. I sent her another email. I was not surprised that there was no response.

In fact, I never heard from the student again. It has been several years. Obviously, I had incorrectly congratulated myself for keeping her away from the cliff. I had kept her in the field for a while, long enough to reach the A.B.D. status, but she still managed to get past me to fall off the cliff and become another permanently A.B.D. former graduate student.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

So, what can we learn from these examples? It has been far too common for faculty, programs, and universities to commit the fundamental attribution error and blame students and not the situations for the poor completion rate of students who reach A.B.D. status. These examples point to a number of situational factors that contribute to this low success rate. The factors include faculty turnover, ineffective advisors who poorly manage the process, or faculty who will only work on a very narrow area of research with students, among other external causes for low completion rates. Some of these factors are situational factors that can be addressed. Faculty can focus on being process experts instead of content experts. Being a process expert means knowing the steps but also recognizing the importance of timely progress. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard a faculty member

suggest that it is no big deal if it takes another year for the student to finish because they will be better prepared or get a better job. If you are living on a TA salary or adjunct pay at a community college, another year is very costly, and another year does not guarantee better preparation or a more prestigious job. A process expert will work to reduce time to completion. And of course, it is important to note that even if we address situational factors and remove barriers so that the student can succeed, not all will. Some will still find their way off the cliff and fail to finish. We need to be sure that we have done what we can to remove the situational barriers.

I am currently working with another lost soul student. Her advisor put a roadblock in her way, refusing to work with her for a semester because he was too busy preparing to teach a new class. That postponement would have delayed her degree completion by at least 6 months, but probably a year. He was a content expert, but not a process expert. She came to me for help and I agreed. My hope is that the outcome will be positive again this time and that I can help keep her from going over the cliff.

There are similar lost souls in undergraduate and master's degree programs, not just in Ph.D. programs. The students come close to graduating but never make it. When they apply for jobs, they fall into either the category of "some college course work" or "some graduate coursework." Some of these students do not have the ability to complete these degrees. Others genuinely change their minds and decide not to complete the degrees. But in other cases, there are situational barriers that can be addressed to enable them to finish their degrees. I am confident that there are many faculty members, advisors and administrators who have helped changed situations so the students can graduate and who continue to do that for many students at all levels. We need more of these catchers in the rye for students at all levels.

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