

Advising for Persistence: Faculty Women of Color Reflect on Equitable Practices for Doctoral Student Program Completion

Natalie D. Rasmussen, Beatriz DeSantiago-Fjelstad, and Courtney Bell-Duncan
Department of Educational Leadership, Minnesota State University, Mankato

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Corresponding author: Natalie D. Rasmussen: natalie.rasmussen@mnsu.edu || <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9199-9208>

In the United States, doctoral students of color do not complete their programs at the same rate as White doctoral students. The coursework is not usually the issue. The common point of the delay is almost always the time spent at all but dissertation (ABD). This autoethnographic study is of three university faculty—all women of color—their experiences navigating their individual doctoral programs and ABD statuses, and how they now parlay those experiences into culturally constructing how they advise their doctoral students of color to persist until completion. The review of literature is woven among their stories to bring forth a collection of emergent themes and discussion points to reconsider best practices of advising doctoral students of color. Ultimately, the goal of this work is to equip departments to better recruit, retain, and serve doctoral students in general and to enhance the skill set and cultural competency of faculty advising particularly the dissertation processes of doctoral students of color.

Keywords: doctoral students of color, all but dissertation, ABD, persistence, culturally relevant advising, autoethnography

Advising doctoral students through the dissertation process, although rigorously prescriptive and time-consuming, has often been approached as a reactive practice. Students write something, advisors provide feedback, and then students re-write. Hopefully, this iterative practice results in a quality finished dissertation. Unfortunately, for 50% of doctoral students, this time-honored process results in the dubious title of ABD (all but dissertation) for a very long time and, unfortunately for many, permanently. This designation is even more pronounced in females and students of color (Xu, 2014). We don't believe that any student of color enters a doctoral program intending to be stalled at ABD or leave the program prematurely. By analyzing some of the autoethnographic experiences of three female faculty of color who had to examine their persistence narratives in obtaining their doctorates and who now advise doctoral students of color, we can learn how common obstacles and points of pain can be used to help guide others. These are our stories

First Story

I graduated with an undergraduate degree in biochemistry from a large predominately White institution (PWI) in the Midwest. I was used to being the only African American woman in my classes. Some years later, having just finished my master's degree at another PWI, I had what I can only describe as a Word from God, prompting me to get my doctorate. While I'm now embarrassed to admit it, my initial answer to

His call was an emphatic NO! I fought against this call for nearly two years until I reluctantly relented. As the only (and perhaps the first) African American woman in the science education Ph.D. program at a large PWI, I had no one who looked like me to connect with or look to for guidance, nor did I expect to.

I knew that I wanted to focus my research on what was then widely known as the Achievement Gap. In 1994, a horrific book was published entitled *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray that purported that there was an inherent link between race and intelligence—with Black people appearing intellectually inferior. I knew this to be untrue and yet I didn't have the research background or positional authority to refute it. It was as if science had been turned back 150 years to a time when Morton (1839) falsely claimed that he could judge the intellectual capacity of a race by their skull size with White skulls being the largest indicating the highest intellectual capacity, and Black skulls being the smallest as evidence of decreased intellectual capacity. How could the reemergence of this falsehood continue to be entertained and considered? It didn't even make common sense. The basic tragic history of enslaved Africans is widely known. They were people who had been scientists, architects, and rulers in their homeland until they were forcibly enslaved and not even allowed to speak their languages to attempt to communicate with each other. For centuries they were not allowed to learn to read and write under penalty of law and severe punishment. However,

these same people managed to not only read and write but also overcome seemingly insurmountable odds to excel in many areas and make countless contributions to humankind. The only thing Black people have not been able to do is to finally put to rest this tired trope of Black intellectual inferiority. This metonymy rears its ugly head in the form of euphemisms to describe Black students such as “at-risk” and “underprivileged”. These terms are nothing more than socially acceptable microaggressions (Sue et al., 2009; Torres et al., 2011) that put the onus of racially predictable gaps on the backs of students of color while choosing to turn a blind eye to the system that continues to perpetrate and perpetuate inequitable outcomes. Whether used intentionally or not, the impact is the same and further reinforces a common belief of intellectual inferiority about a group of people in the mind of society and even in the minds of the maligned people themselves. This became the impetus for my research.

My first doctoral advisor, an older White male, wanted me to quit my job as a high school chemistry teacher to become his graduate assistant. In our initial conversation, he pressed me for several minutes about how I should desire an on-campus research experience. I politely declined several times during that conversation. He switched tactics and then regaled me with accounts of the camaraderie and intellectual stimulation I would miss without this experience. I began to feel uncomfortable, but again, I declined. I explained to him that I loved my job and that it didn't make financial sense for my family. At which point, he said, “Oh well, it will take someone like you at least 10 years to finish.” *Someone like me?* What did that even mean? Was this comment meant to motivate me to change my mind? I took it as yet another example of a microaggression launched by a seemingly well-intentioned faculty (Gomez et al., 2011; Truong & Museus, 2012). I didn't realize until much later that the words spoken over me by this advisor were an order of magnitude greater than a microaggression. This comment, which I'm fairly sure that the White man wouldn't even remember making, attacked an already sore spot in my psyche.

Smith and Freyd, (2017) classify an exchange of this nature as Betrayal Trauma which occurs when one is mistreated by someone in a position of trust and/or power. This type of trauma can result in dissociation from the source of pain and formulate excuses to remain rather than the typical fight or flight response one might have in the face of a perceived threat. I initially wondered if I had made a mistake in my choice of schools. Perhaps I should cut my losses and find another program. I was too stunned to respond to his comment at that moment but replayed the conversation in my mind for several days afterward. *Did I hear his comment correctly? Was I being overly sensitive? I began to turn the blame inward as if I had done something wrong. Did I insult him by not accepting his generous offer of a graduate assistant position? I was sure that I heard God say for me to pursue this doctorate.*

Was I wrong? This line of reasoning exhibited classic Betrayal Blindness (Freyd & Birrell, 2013), the unawareness and forgetting demonstrated by people towards betrayal. Victims, perpetrators, and witnesses may display betrayal blindness to preserve relationships, institutions, and social systems upon which they depend. Upon consideration of logistics and instead of leaving the program, I asked to have another advisor. My new advisor was a White woman, a world-class researcher, and willing to work with me. While she admitted that she did not have a lot of experience in research about racial equity work in science education, she was prepared to learn and support me.

It has been said that earning a doctorate can be one of the most uniquely selfish endeavors. No one accomplishes this academic goal in a vacuum. Others are always involved and affected by a person's choice to pursue a terminal degree. These other people pay in terms of money, time, energy, and help, all to see their family member, friend, or colleague reach their highest potential. While these are noble gestures of support, they can add a level of stress and perceived obligation to the student.

With the support of my husband and two self-sufficient school-age children, I pursued my doctoral coursework full-time while working full-time as a high school chemistry teacher. Additionally, I coached two varsity sports and worked another part-time job to help defray the cost of my education. I took my studies seriously and did well in all the coursework. At the time, I exhibited all the characteristics of the Superwoman Schema (Wood-Giscombe, 2010): the perceived obligation of Black women to remain silent about feelings of distress or vulnerability, to present an image of strength for families and communities, and to take on the needs of others while neglecting one's own needs (Beauboeuf-LaFontant 2009).

The doctoral coursework was challenging, yet doable. I learned much about research design and statistical analysis. I learned about critical pedagogy. I learned about curriculum, instruction, and assessment in science education. I passed my written and oral examinations. I worked to design a study that would address and refute some of the claims made in that horrible book. I passed my proposal defense and was officially a doctoral candidate. I navigated the logistical hoops to get my IRB application approved by both the University and the district in which I taught as I wanted to conduct a phenomenological study of my high school African American Advanced Placement Chemistry students. When I finally got the approvals, I thought I was on my way.

Before I started my doctorate and during the period in which I was doing structured coursework, I had a harsh viewpoint of students who were ABD for any length of time. I thought that these students must be weak or unmotivated because I reasoned that there was no other explanation for someone to spend the time, effort, and money to do 75% of the

job and not finish. I rode that high horse until my mom was diagnosed with aggressive cancer and suddenly, that someone became me.

My dad, a retired college administrator who rarely if ever asked for help, was in a state of shock at the dim prognosis. Because it was the beginning of summer and I was technically “off” from my high school teaching duties, and my schedule was more flexible than those of my siblings, I became the person responsible for helping my parents get to doctor’s appointments, surgeries, and chemotherapy. As a result, all my dissertation work was put on hold. I didn’t write a word for over nine months. If there ever was a time that my family needed me, it was then, and I could not fathom putting them off simply because I needed to write. Studies (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Austin, 2002) note the added pressures that can delay students of color as they deal with trying to resolve conflicts between personal and academic values.

The negative narrative that can launch a hostile takeover in the mind of the scholar is real. I must admit that these thoughts among others occupied a lot of valuable real estate in my mind. This was certainly true during the nine months in which I wasn’t writing my dissertation. Self-doubt can manifest in the form of legitimate questions. I was bombarded with a constant barrage of internal inquiries: *A Ph.D.? - Really? Who do I think I am? What am I trying to prove? We are still trying to pay off other debts. I don’t need this degree for my job. What am I gonna even do with this degree? Am I missing major milestones in my children’s lives because I am so busy? Shouldn’t I prioritize my family? Maybe now is not the right time for this degree?*

These questions and others like them take up a lot of bandwidth in a scholar’s mind. Additionally, as the racial component of the words previously spoken over me kicked in, as did the prepared reasoning script: *There’s a reason why nobody in here looks like me. I don’t belong here. Maybe it will take someone like me ten years to finish. Maybe there is a kernel of truth to Murray and Herrnstein’s assertions in The Bell Curve?*

My advisor noticed that I had not progressed in my writing. She realized that I was struggling and reached out to check on me. She encouraged me to start small, write just a bit at a time, and send it to her for feedback. She responded to my small attempts with critical feedback to focus my writing and words of encouragement to bolster my resolve. The small-step approach coupled with clear direction and a short deadline for the next small step started me on the road to the completion of my dissertation. This type of socio-emotional support pierced my nebulous understanding of what was required of me to reveal clear and concrete tasks to achieve. Of course, my advisor’s frequent and rapid feedback cycle fueled my desire and confidence to produce not only quality work but a fuller picture of what the final project and its impact could achieve. The more of these tasks that I checked off my to-do list, the

deeper my understanding grew as to their interconnectedness and purpose related to the final goal.

It was during this time that I realized the importance of words spoken over students and the power of advocacy. The Bible says that “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (*Holy Bible, New King James Version*, 1982, Proverbs 18:21). In this case, I interpreted death to mean believing and internalizing the lies, shutting down and quitting, and ultimately killing the original call to earn this doctorate.

When doctoral programs posit methods and strategies to retain students of color, they often limit them to financial aid or academic support via tutoring or writing help; some sort of scaffolding to bridge the students’ perceived intellectual deficits. Davis, et al. (2020) explain that the faculty’s biased and often wrong interpretation of the lived experiences of doctoral students of color can result in deficit-based treatment which can have harmful effects.

When students of color prematurely leave a program, it is usually attributed to some lacking on their part rather than an act of self-preservation; a survival strategy to stay out of harm’s way of being “presumed incompetent” (Heilmann, 1992). Programs rarely, if ever, address the damage caused by the programs or their faculty. If doctoral programs want to recruit and retain students of color, what preparation have predominately White institutions and faculty done to facilitate this endeavor?

My mom’s cancer went into remission for a short time. Her remission paralleled my own as I stepped out of the virtual cancer of negativity and self-defeating narrative that I had previously experienced. My advisor supplied a steady dose of very high standards, guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement – very similar to the type of support I had received from my mother, a family therapist, my entire life. The trajectory of my life was influenced by my doctoral advisor’s willingness to expect the very best from me, reach out to me when I was overwhelmed by the many tropes and voices that would speak negativity and defeat to my situation, and provide me with clear instructions and guidance to re-engage with my dissertation and finish strong. As a result, I was able to complete and defend my dissertation in four months. Six months after my dissertation defense, my mom’s cancer returned and eventually took her life, but not before she was able to attend my commencement ceremony with the rest of my family. Her pride was evident.

I have taken what I’ve learned about myself and what I needed to finish my doctorate and now use it to inform how I advise my doctoral students, particularly my students of color. There is no doubt that White doctoral students might be ABD or leave their programs prematurely, but students of color carry the added burden of navigating implicit and explicit bias. These can be disguised as thinly veiled comments about the student’s reasoning or writing skills that cross the line

from critical constructive feedback to insinuations about the student's intelligence.

Story Two

I was born in Mexico in a family of ten siblings; two of us moved to Minnesota. Our family gatherings were held weekly with religious celebrations, birthdays, and traditions without a particular reason. Since moving to the United States, I went back to Mexico to spend many holidays breaks with my extended family. I am the tenth child in my family and the first to earn a master's and a doctoral degree. My large family is the support system that holds me true to my roots. Natal et al. (2021) found that Latinx scholars felt a sense of duty to their families and were more likely to be first-generation college students.

In Mexico, I attended school as part of the majority in the society; most people around me looked like me and had similar thoughts to mine. In my native country, I never felt racism, discrimination, or left out. Instead, I felt welcomed at most places. However, when I moved to the USA, I became a person of color and felt discriminated against. I became aware of the inequities and racism that exist structurally in this country. Familiar, Borges, Orozco, & Medina-Mora et al. (2011) found that many Latinx immigrants encounter racial and ethnic discrimination in the United States. Soon after my arrival, I began working in the antiracism movement within my church. As a result, I hold a national license to teach antiracism workshops training ordained clergy and laypeople. Also, I supported passing a canon that established that all ordained people must take an antiracism workshop to work in my church of practice.

My first degrees were a bachelor's in Industrial Relations and a master's in Business Administration, majoring in Marketing. I worked as a college professor and dean of Industrial Relations, teaching Finance, Statistics, and Economy courses. In my native country and as a professor, I knew the logical next step in my professional path was earning a doctoral degree. I applied and was awarded a scholarship in Spain for my doctoral degree. However, during one of my vacations, I met my husband; we dated, and I decided to marry him, live in the United States, and have a family. I delayed my dream of having a doctoral degree for several years.

When I immigrated to the United States, English was my second language, and I started learning it as an adult. I wanted to pursue my dream of having a doctoral degree. Still, the insecurities of my English skills held me back from working on learning it before pursuing a higher degree. During my first years in the USA, I took multiple English daily courses from several institutions. A few years later, I still felt incompetent to obtain a doctoral degree due to my limited English writing skills, so I continued working on my English while earning another master's degree before the doctoral degree. Natal et al. (2021) write that Latinx people tend to express a degree of

self-doubt and lack of confidence in their ability to complete a doctoral program. Likewise, I had self-doubt due to my lack of confidence in my language and intellectual skills.

Eventually, I completed another master's degree in teaching, an educational specialist degree allowing me to work as a school administrator, and the doctoral coursework with everyday struggles. However, after working in cohorts on my studies, I felt as if I was left alone to research and write my dissertation. It took me three years longer than most of my peers to complete it. Burns and Gillespie (2018) found that doctoral students who did not complete their dissertations changed feelings of autonomy and congruency between their courses and dissertations. Also, Lovitts (2008) also thought that students might have difficulty adjusting from the coursework to the independent research stage.

I started teaching at a college level as an adjunct professor within my first year of living in the United States. I was the only Latina immigrant and one of the few professors of color at my university. My ultimate professional goal was to continue my career researching and teaching at the university level. For twenty years I worked at three universities teaching as an adjunct while working in K-12 education with very few Latinas colleagues. When I decided to earn my doctorate, I was already an experienced high school teacher, adjunct professor, and school administrator with a limited number of Latina immigrant colleagues. As a high school teacher and coach, I had more colleagues of color than any other time in my career, but not many Latina immigrants. I taught high school Social Studies and Spanish for over ten years and coached world language teachers for two years. Latinos – men and women – were sparsely represented as school administrators. Nevertheless, when I entered the doctoral program, I felt that there were no Latina immigrants to lean on for support because Latinx have not achieved proportionate representation in doctoral education in Minnesota.

According to Jimenez et al. (2011), students struggle in the dissertation stage because dissertation writing is vague, unstructured, and unfamiliar. When it was time to write my dissertation, it was tough to figure out how to begin writing, so I changed my topic several times. At first, I felt isolated and could not find concentration, time, mentorship, or cultural support. Holmes et al. (2009) stated that the thought of isolation is a factor for scholars who reach the dissertation phase and contributes to decisions to become an additional statistic of all but dissertation (ABD). I felt like I was navigating the ocean of ideas with nothing concrete. Finally, the idea of my topic emerged in my work as a school administrator. One of the teachers could not help an English Learner new to the country. I entered the class; the new student had an iPad in his hand, turning pages. I asked the teacher what the student was doing, and the teacher had no idea. I communicated with the student in his native language, Spanish. Then I asked the teacher what his student's assignment was. The teacher said

he was waiting for the English Language teacher to help the student. Fortunately, the idea of studying how we can help all teachers help English learners emerged from that interaction. My research topic was focused on providing equity services to English Learners. Roberts et al. (2021) findings revealed that scholars of color have a high-interest level in addressing educational inequities and the collective advancement of communities of color and they are committed to a systematic effort to leverage their life experience to advance practices based on equity and social justice within their academic activities.

Formulating and defending my proposal took me about a year. Then, unfortunately, the death of two of my brothers and my mother occurred. Labaree (2003) found that ABD scholars indicated that factors related to personal life and factors associated with personality affected the completion of their dissertation. Three years after my mother's death, I completed and defended my dissertation. Despite being alone to write and unfortunate personal things happening, I felt that nobody from the university supported me morally or culturally through these difficult times. As Natal et al. (2021) stated that Latinx scholars depend on their cultural capital to be successful.

Before completing my dissertation, the university offered a boot camp summer writing program for ABD scholars. It was week-long guidance and an allocation of time to write. It helped me to advance and continue working on my dissertation. As a result, I set realistic goals to complete and defend my dissertation within the following year. Locke and Boyle (2016) found that the participants in their study who took the proposed dissertation boot camp seemed to reenergize their enthusiasm for their dissertations; that is, they were inspired and could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

After completing the coursework, I needed mentors to support me morally, culturally, and technically to no avail from the university. Lenz (1995) found that scholars that completed their dissertation needed a caring advisor and family and peer support. Despite having a persistent, professional, and dedicated advisor, I felt I needed someone to connect with at a personal and cultural level. Lenz (1995) stated that ABD scholars do not have an active support network in their educational experiences. My two children and siblings were there for me, although none of them have experienced my feelings. Fortunately, one of my Mexican ABD peers and I called each other to offer peer mentorship, cheerleading, and support until we graduated at the same time.

In my journey to obtaining a doctoral degree, I struggled with autonomy, time, writing, cultural advice, socioemotional and personal issues, career, and family responsibilities, resulting in being ABD for a long time. However, what helped my dissertation completion was my advisor's persistence, my family support, peer cheerleading, and the writing boot camp offered by my university.

Story Three

Before starting my doctoral education, I was encouraged by the coordinator of the program to resign from my position as a social studies teacher at my alma mater, an inner-city high school in the Midwest, and work as a graduate assistant. I was adamant about staying in my classroom for at least three years, earning tenure, and seeing my first class of scholars through to graduation. As an African American educator, an alumna, and a proud community member, I refused to leave my teaching position. I was willing to delay my admission to secure another source of graduate funding that would allow me to continue serving my scholars. God had different plans, however. As I prepared to defer my admission for an academic year, I learned that I was selected for a four-year, full-tuition fellowship that I had applied for.

The fellowship was a graduate student assistantship program developed by a local community activist and scholar to help recruit African American graduate students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities to predominantly White institutions. The scope of the program became broader over the years and provided funding for graduate students of African descent from any collegiate institution. Recipients of the fellowship received a tuition voucher for up to four years, graduate assistantship experience, funding to work alongside their graduate advisor, and bi-weekly affinity peer-group gatherings. I was blessed to be financially and socially supported as a graduate fellow for the duration of my doctoral studies while working as an educator the entire time. The support, affinity, and funding that I received as a scholar were major sources of motivation for my persistence as a doctoral student. While my experience was not "traditional" like that of my peers, I was blessed with community and funding that served as a buffer from the stress and alienation faced by many African American women in doctoral programs (Dortch, 2016).

I ultimately completed my doctoral program for a few key reasons. I wanted to make good on the investment that the fellowship program, my mother, my family, my community, and faculty had made in my life and education, I wanted to finish what I started as my academic experience had been too challenging to be in vain and, and I wanted to be promoted from a classroom teacher to an educational leader. I was encouraged every step of the way and supported financially, morally, emotionally, and spiritually by my community, so much so that I didn't consider failure an option. After switching academic advisors, I felt I was given the technical support that I needed to complete my dissertation which affirmed that it was God's will that I complete my doctoral education to carry out His will for my life. I was also motivated by the opportunity to become a first-generation doctoral graduate and through my dissertation, to tell the story of my community's efforts to save our beloved high school from closing.

My reasons for persisting through doctoral completion

were like the findings of Clewell (1987) who found that the primary persistence and completion factors for Black and Hispanic doctoral students who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds were those who (a) showed a high level of academic success in high school (b) had supportive major advisors (c) participated in professional activities during graduate school, and (d) pursued a doctoral degree for a desire of knowledge. In my post-graduation reflections, I have come to realize that the dissertation writing process begins with the writing of the preliminary exams, not at the passing of said exams. My writing process began during the spring semester of my second year in the program. I was finishing up the last of my research methods courses, and I quickly learned that I was not prepared to write a dissertation. Most of my peers applied to compose their written exam in the fall semester, with their writing period lasting from January to March. In an attempt to move at the same pace as my peers, I tried to draft a proposal for the written exam during the fall semester of my second year of study, but I failed miserably. I was not admitted into a cohort for my doctoral program, but instead a class of peers from all five of the programs which comprised the department. I found freedom in the fact that I was not a part of a cohort model and therefore was able to move throughout my program at my own pace.

I also found the cultural diversity of the students in the department to be quite refreshing and an inviting change from the ethnic homogeneity of my M.Ed. cohort. However, although I was not a part of a cohort, I still experienced feelings of pressure to progress academically at the same rate as my peers. I remember meeting a friend and colleague from my class at a local restaurant and attempting to work through writing our written exam proposals together. I remember how encouraging she was and how uplifting her words as a fellow doctoral student of African descent were to me. Regardless of the encouragement that she offered, I walked away from our meeting without a 750-word proposal.

She would go on to submit and have her proposal accepted and complete and pass her written exam during the spring semester. I remember feeling so inadequate at that moment and completely stuck. I had not received much insight or advice from my initial advisor who identified as a man of African descent. I did not ask for help, nor did he offer his guidance. My relationship with him was cordial in a social capacity, and our interactions were typically positive, however, when it came to academic support there was much left to be desired. As a first-generation college graduate and the first in my family to pursue a doctoral degree, I had no idea how to conduct and write a research study. I had spent 15 years as a passive recipient of knowledge and was now expected to shift from recipient to creator of knowledge. The phenomena of imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) could only begin to explain the level of inability and discouragement that I felt throughout the research and writing process of my doctoral ed-

ucation. The first two years of my program were easy because I was a student, a role that I had played well for 15 years, but the transition from student to doctoral candidate proved to be debilitating. In addition to my non-existent understanding of the dissertation process, I also was not clear about the role that the doctoral advisor was to play in my life as a doctoral student. In a study conducted by Fletcher (2009), implications were for faculty advisors to understand their roles as advisors, to monitor student progress, expectations, and performance, and implement more structural parameters during the dissertation stage to assist students in writing. I would have benefited greatly from a structured format of writing support in preparing for my written exam and beyond.

Despite a lacking sense of direction, I moved forward in writing my written exam over what proved to be a summer of personal loss and devastation, but by the grace of God, I persisted. I submitted my completed written exam and learned that I passed the exam two months later. The comments and feedback from the blind reviewers were scathing and questioned my focus on educational equity for African American students. I was told that I needed to broaden my topic focus to include more students of color for my research to be deemed credible. The feedback from the reviewers was followed up with pressure from my advisor to improve my writing ability because I had “barely passed” the preliminary exam. Unfortunately, the improvement of my academic writing was not scaffolded, so after struggling to write the second of my preliminary exams I decided to apply for a change in advisors. In hindsight, this was one of the best decisions that I’ve ever made.

My new advisor, a woman of African descent, brought forth a very structured writing process which began with concept mapping and helped me to begin the writing of my literature review. Within our first few meetings, she recommended that I switch my dissertation topic to one focusing on education policy, being that she was a policy scholar. I am grateful to say that with the help of my new advisor I completed and passed my final preliminary exam and wrote my dissertation proposal over the summer. I successfully passed my oral proposal examination the following fall semester and began conducting my dissertation research shortly after receiving IRB approval. I conducted my research interviews in one week, transcribed and coded my data from December-February, drafted chapters 4 and 5 in March, and worked with my advisor from April-July to revise and rewrite portions of my dissertation. I defended my dissertation in July and passed with signatures from all four of my committee members. I took the month of August to make a few revisions, additions, and formatting edits to my dissertation and submitted it for final review. My dissertation was accepted and published by the graduate school on its first submission.

I thank God for sending me my new advisor and for all the help, structure, love, support, encouragement, and community

that she provided me in the final stages of my dissertation journey. The relationship that we fostered has transitioned into a friendship and continued mentorship in my early career as an academic. I can say that the affinity that I found with my advisor as a woman of African descent and an academic provided motivation for me to persist through completion. I learned many things about the process of advising from her that I apply to my work as a doctoral advisor today, especially when advising doctoral students of color.

Recommendations for Advising Doctoral Scholars of Color

As doctoral advisors and people of color, we are mindful of cultural differences and seek knowledge to understand our scholars. We strive to offer them cultural components, including space to be themselves and understanding of their struggles balancing family and work responsibilities. As advisors of color, we know how to recognize the tell-tale signs of doctoral students' thoughts when they begin a destructive and downward mental spiral, and we speak directly to them. We call these thoughts out in the presence of our students and expose them for what they are: cancerous ruminations, that left untreated, will produce nothing but death. There is comfort in knowing that one is not alone or that one's experience is not an anomaly (Litalian & Guay, 2015). Young and Brooks (2008) outlined ways in which faculty members and institutions support graduate students of color. We believe institutions should offer formal and informal support to students of color and a robust racially and ethnically sensitive mentorship program. As a result of our experiences as doctoral scholars and now faculty of color, we provide unique perspectives regarding advising doctoral students of color. These perspectives can be summed up in some concrete practices.

Respecting Cultural Identity

The mission of our department clearly states its commitment to the study of the intersectionality among race, cultural responsiveness, and social justice to advance the capacity of leaders who will eliminate predictable racial disparities. Our doctoral program is advertised as developing racially conscious leaders for P-12 schools, higher education, and non-profit organizations. Part of the application package includes an essay on one's racial equity journey. Due to this transparent expectation, most of our applicants desire to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership that specifically addresses issues of race in education. Trent et al. (2021) found that being open and intentional about the racial composition of faculty and students and the curricular choices offered related to diversity issues is a strategy for the recruitment and retention of students of color. This intentionality has been shown to attract a healthy pool of applicants—both students of color and white students. The current cohort of 18 doctoral students was selected with an acceptance rate of 27%. Of those accepted,

55% are students of color. While the program offers one outwardly named course (Organizational and Critical Race Theory Analysis), almost all instructors incorporate a racially conscious curriculum into each course in the plan of study. This is demonstrated as a “grounding” exercise in every lesson that encourages discussions about race and connects those discussions to the curriculum. The agreed-upon practice of incorporating racial consciousness into the course curriculum is undergirded by ongoing professional development by faculty who engage in personal and professional development to increase our cultural competence and awareness of how race is inextricably linked to educational leadership. It is this development that helps us to successfully advise our students.

Encourage Students to Research Personal Issues of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Our students of color and several White students chose to research topics related to issues of racial equity. Although we assign advisors to all students based on advisor loads and similar research interests, we purposefully choose to pair with advisees of the same race or ethnicity as much as possible. One concern during our doctoral programs was not having advisors or mentors that understood our cultural background. So as advisors, we recognize that people of color come from different cultural backgrounds, and we do our best to make a cultural connection to our advisees of color to foster trust. Flores Lopez (2021) stated that Latinx students feel comfortable with her due to sharing the same cultural identity, which is a way to create trust.

Also, we share with our advisees our struggles and the strategies we used to complete our dissertation. They realize that if we finished our dissertations, they could do it too, and they may use our strategies. Adult learners of color feel isolated and unsupported during their studies, so we tried to help our advisees of color navigate the university. Flores (2021) stated, “Latinx student experiences across all types of colleges and universities are often characterized by a sense of isolation and lack of belonging” (p. 15). Possault (2018) speaks of normalizing the struggle as a strategy by which we as advisors support advisees who have historically been excluded or marginalized due to the racialized and gendered dynamics in academia. This intentional development of a growth mindset for doctoral students validates their experiences and promotes a sense of persistence and competence—realizing that through their hard work, they will defend their dissertations—results in our students' persistence and well-being.

Frequent and Culturally Competent Conversations

We set the expectation that our advisees will meet regularly with us to discuss progress, refine thoughts about their research interests, and plan for future opportunities. We recognize that many of our students of color have experienced and carry racial trauma either literally or vicariously. We, as

women faculty of color are cognizant of what microaggressions look, sound, and feel like as we still experience them on a regular basis. This awareness aids us in recognizing when and how our advisees might encounter microaggressions and how to navigate them to a place of safety and productivity. We actively seek ways to counteract the negative effects of microaggressions perpetrated against students of color by employing micro affirmations. Boyce (2021) recommends micro affirmation strategies for advising students of color in the forms of private micro support—usually through substantive dissertation feedback, and public micro validations—usually through acknowledgment in class for sharing their racialized perspective. By humbling ourselves as advisors to share our personal stories of struggle, particularly in racial affinity groups, professors can empathize with and encourage doctoral students to overcome external, and more importantly, internal obstacles that might hinder their completion.

In working with advisees, we ask the necessary questions to understand them and respect their views and opinions. Also, we connect with them and are genuinely interested in what is happening in their lives so we can better support them. Additionally, we know that mentoring provides supportive relationships with scholars for personal, emotional, cognitive, and psychological growth (Rhodes et al., 2009). We practice giving micro affirmations as recommended by Ellis et al., (2019) that advisors of doctoral students of color acknowledge and give time and space to students' cultures and look for opportunities to practice a variety of strategies. (1) Micro validation—Communication expressing appreciation or empathy regarding the experiences, thoughts, or feelings of students who may traditionally feel unwelcome or invisible. (2) Micro compliments—Subtle communication implying praise, admiration, or respect; very likely verbal. We purposely initiate and engage in regular and positive communications via email, text, or videoconferencing. (3) Micro support—Explicit, intentional communication providing feedback or scaffolding. This most often is demonstrated by dissertation writing support. We set the bar high and provide the time, energy, and resources to support our advisees with clear expectations, rubrics, examples, and critical thinking skills.

Academic Writing Support

Many doctoral students of color are stalled at all but dissertation (ABD). To address this phenomenon, and primarily because of our own experiences, we demystified the dissertation process by operationalizing the structure of all five chapters. As former K-12 educators, we are huge proponents of scaffolding learning processes for students, which led us to develop a step-by-step guide for composing each chapter of the dissertation.

We employ a doctoral advising process in which each student is walked through the step-by-step format of writing their dissertations. We start the dissertation advising process by

first explaining the purpose of each chapter of the dissertation. We have found that understanding the purpose served by each chapter, helps to lay a framework and pathway for writing. Once an understanding of the objective for each chapter is established, we then guide students through the essential questions that each chapter of the dissertation should ask and answer. The essential questions for each chapter help to formulate a writing outline for each chapter, which helps students to format their writing.

We help our doctoral students to fill in the blanks of their chapter formats by overviewing the traditional components of each dissertation chapter, usually covered in pre-dissertation courses. We have found the operationalizing and systemic breakdown of the dissertation writing process to be very helpful in advising doctoral students of color. We understand from experience as students and practice as educators that you cannot expect a student to understand a process they are not supported in learning. We believe that doctoral advisors must take on the role of teaching the writing process to their doctoral students to help them to complete their dissertations. Assumptions and preconceived expectations for the writing abilities of doctoral students by doctoral faculty, leave many students with incomplete dissertations. The writing process of the dissertation must begin to be taught by doctoral faculty to address the disparate percentage of ABD doctoral students of color.

Professional Socialization

We invite students to partner in teaching, research internships, and presentations. Aguliar & Ulanoff (2019) describe good advising as helping students of color to access social capital to develop their confidence. We routinely invite our doctoral students to co-teach a masters-level course, or if they are licensed K-12 administrators, co-teach a specialist course with us, providing them the experience of planning, instructing, and assessing a graduate class. We also invite them to partner with us in research as we conduct reviews of literature, data collection, and analysis of our research. This type of modeling is helpful for them to see the scope and sequence of what will be required of them as they conduct their research.

We introduce and connect students to others in academia and educational leadership. As we become more familiar with our advisees' research areas, we offer to introduce them to areas of research or contributing factors that might enhance and deepen their understanding of their topic. We recommend and support their attendance in conferences and workshops that might prove valuable to their research. We also use our personal or professional connections to introduce students to leading researchers of color in their areas of interest.

Presently, doctoral students of color do not finish their programs at the same rate as their White counterparts (Felder, et al., 2014). As was mentioned previously, no doctoral student of color wants to remain ABD or worse, leave their program

prematurely. By assuming students' positive intentions and abilities, the strategies that we have compiled and shared can be distilled into nothing less than recognizing that race as a factor in the internal voices of students of color, establishing clear and high expectations in the writing process, engaging in open and frequent communication, and a willingness to share what you know, we can advise all doctoral students, particularly students of color to persistence that leads to completion.

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