DISSERTATION WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: ASSUMPTIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND PRACTICES OF DISSERTATION WRITERS AND THEIR SUPERVISORS

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GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Where Innovation Is Tradition

Dive in or Die (Walvoord, 1996)

- Background of the problem of attrition and time to degree nationally
- Origins and overview of a study (in progress) of dissertation writing at Mason
- Some early sense making
- Questions going forward

At least 40% of the students who begin a doctoral program fail to complete it

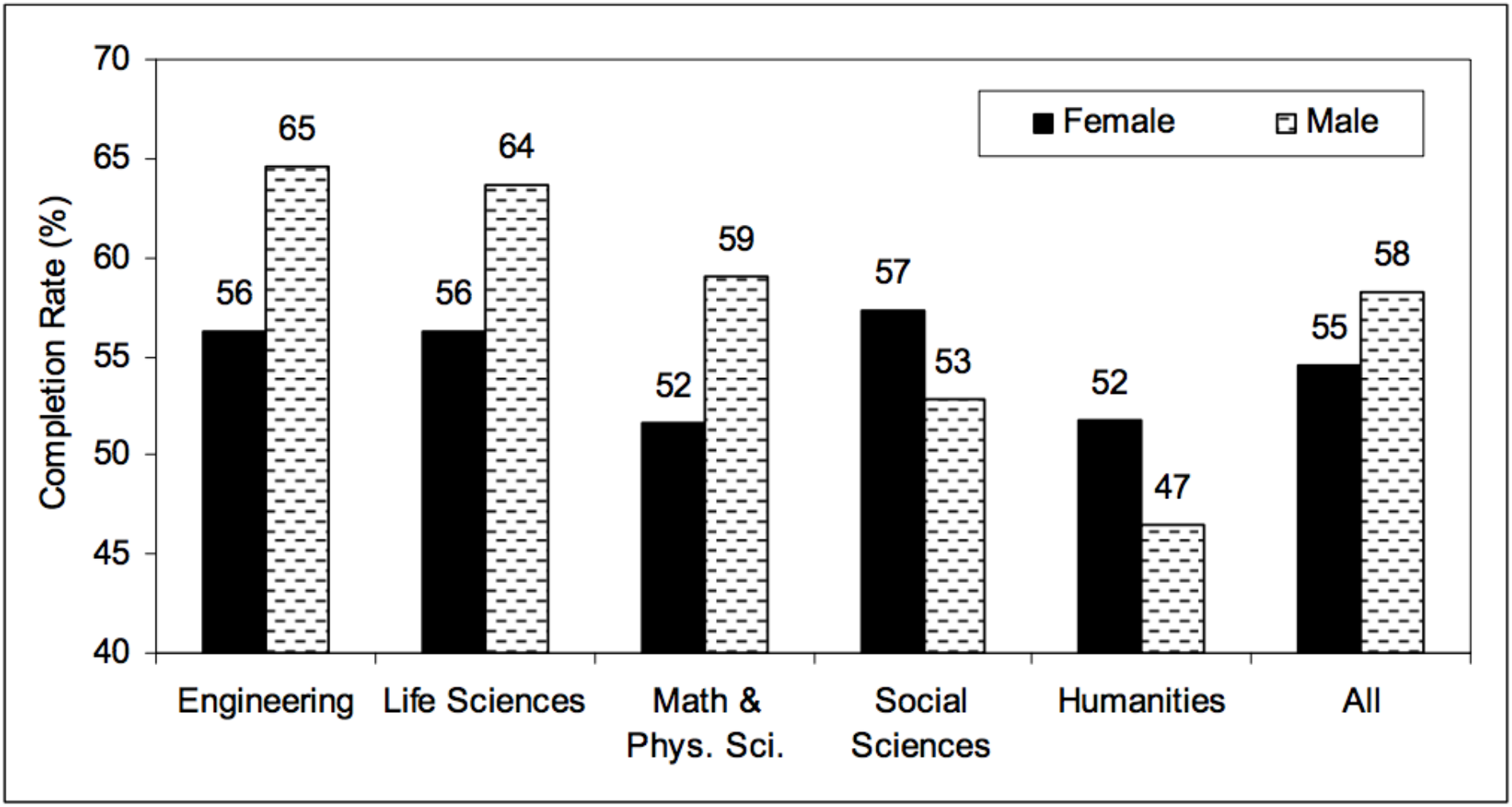
PhD completion rates vary by field of study, gender, and nation of origin.

Completion Rates
Overall 57%

Male 58%
Female 55%

International Students 67%

Figure 1. Cumulative Ten-Year Ph.D. Completion Rates by Gender and Broad Field



20% of the students who complete Ph.D. degrees in ten years do so after year seven.

Six broad categories of institutional factors influence completion rates:

- selection processes
- ***mentoring***
- financial support
- ***processes and procedures***
- ***program environment***
- research mode of field

Council of Graduate Schools. (2004). Ph.D. completion and attrition: Policy, numbers, leadership, and next steps. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools

The department is the “locus of control for doctoral education”

(Golde, 2005)

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Data-driven (experience-based) interventions aimed at supporting students, faculty, and departments in this case, focused on increasing completion rates and lessening the time to degree.

Back to WAC

Research Questions

What kind of supports do dissertation writers want?
What are their struggles?
What elements of the writing pose the greatest challenges?
What are their understandings of the expectations of the dissertation?

What are the overlaps and mismatches between the attitudes, values, and beliefs of dissertation writers and dissertation supervisors?

The Paradox of Writing

On the one hand, the discursive knowledge-making practices research cultures develop over generations to accomplish their knowledge work become normalized, transparent, invisible, and indeed appear universal to long-term members of research cultures, rendering writing a non-question. On the other hand, for newcomers, these very practices constitute new territory and a vital site of inquiry into how knowledge and researcher identities are produced and negotiated in these research cultures.

Starke-Meyerring, 2011

TABLE 1

Theoretical Categorization of Reasons for Doctoral Attrition

	Discipline	Department
Mismatch/Incongruence	Does not fit with conventional ways of being researcher or scholar in the discipline	Does not fit with ways of being a student or junior scholar in the department
Isolation	Marginalized from the discipline	Marginalized from the departmental community

Methods

- 10 Question Survey of Dissertation Writers
- Interviews with 25 Faculty Members
- Interviews with 20 Dissertation Writers
- 6 Focus Groups with Dissertation Writers

- *Especially interested in breaking out our results by field/program, and subfield, as well as looking closely at the experiences of non-native speakers*

Early results from select fields

Responses from 206 Dissertation Writers at Mason 10% of the overall population of dissertation writers at Mason.

Majority Responses

- Biodefense
- Community College Education
- Computational Science and Informatics
- Conflict Analysis and Resolution
- Cultural Studies
- Education
- Environmental Science and Public Policy
- History
- Neuroscience
- Nursing
- Physics
- Political Science
- Psychology

Survey Questions

1. **What PhD program are you enrolled in?**
2. **When (month and year) did you begin your PhD program?**
3. **Please list the languages in which you speak and write in the order that you learned them.**
4. **What sections of your dissertation have you written? Check all that apply.**
5. **What kinds of help have been beneficial in terms of writing your dissertation?**
6. **Rate the difficulty level of the sections you've written.**
7. **How familiar are you with the guidelines, expectations, norms, and standards for dissertation writers in your field?**
8. **Rate the difficulty level of the following elements of dissertation writing.**
9. **To what degree do your dissertation advisor and your dissertation committee members talk to you about the actual writing of your dissertation (e.g. elements described in question 8 or other)?**
10. **What kinds of writing support would you find most helpful as you write your dissertation?**

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PAGE: DISSERTATION PROGRESS

5. What kinds of help have been beneficial in terms of writing your dissertation? (Check all that apply)

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	Response Percent	Response Count
One- on- one conversations with my dissertation advisor and / or committee members	**84.8%**	**145**
Written feedback from my dissertation advisor and / or committee members	76.0%	130
Conversations with or written comments from fellow PhD students in my program	45.6%	78
Conversations with or written comments from individuals outside my program	39.2%	67
Reading books with advice for dissertation writers	37.4%	64
Reading published dissertations	49.1%	84
Attending workshops offered by the Writing Center	8.8%	15
Other (please specify) Show Responses	14.6%	25
	answered question	**171**
	skipped question	**35**

PAGE: SUPPORT FOR WRITING

9. To what degree do your dissertation advisor and your dissertation committee members talk to you about the actual writing of your dissertation (e.g.elements described in question 8 or other)?

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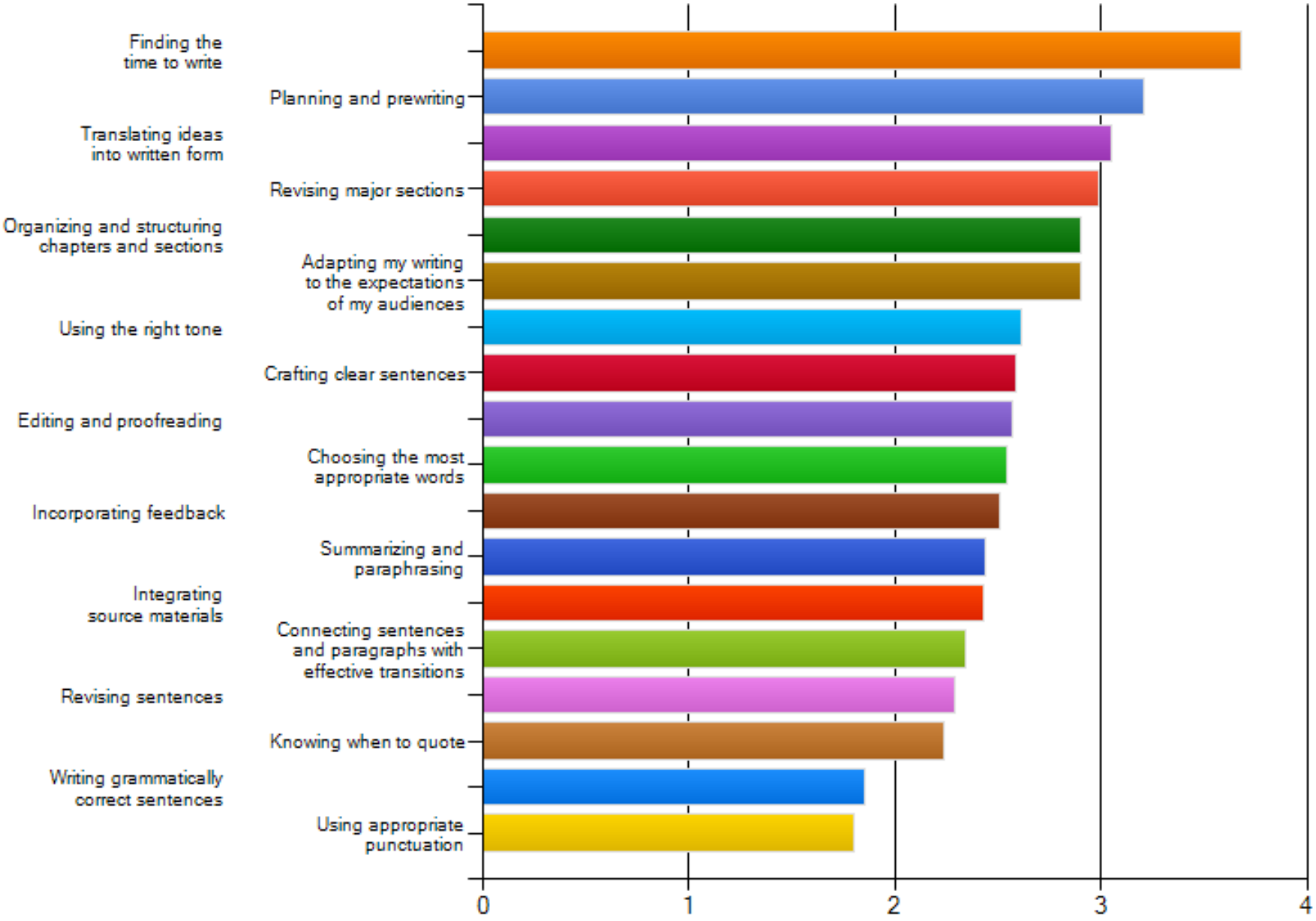
	Response Percent	Response Count
Never (1)	13.1%	22
2	**29.8%**	**50**
3	28.6%	48
4	14.9%	25
Regularly (5)	13.7%	23
answered question		**168**
skipped question		**38**

Rate the difficulty level of the following elements of dissertation writing.



Finding the time to write

Overall	6.2%	13.6%	14.8%	37.0%	28.4%
HEP	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%	60.0%	20.0%
Psychology	0.0%	15.0%	20.0%	45.0%	20.0%
History	0.0%	10.0%	15.0%	50.0%	25.0%
Education	7.1%	14.3%	21.4%	57.1%	0.0%
Computational Sciences and Informatics	0.0%	25%	25%	25%	25%
SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS	9.1%	18.2%	22.7%	36.4%	13.6%

Organizing and structuring chapters and sections

Overall	9.9%	28.6%	30.4%	23.0%	8.1%
HEP	10.0%	10.0%	30.0%	40.0%	10.0%
Psychology	20.0%	25.0%	30.0%	25.0%	0.0%
History	5.3%	31.6%	31.6%	26.3%	5.3%
Education	6.7%	26.7%	26.7%	33.3%	6.7%
Computational Sciences and Informatics	8.3%	33.3%	50%	8.3%	0.0%
SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS	.1%	22.7%	27.3%	27.3%	13.6%

Writing grammatically correct sentences

Overall	**51.9%**	25.6%	10.6%	8.8%	3.1%
HEP	**40.0%**	20.0%	**40.0%**	0.0%	0.0%
Psychology	**55.0%**	15.0%	**10.0%**	15.0%	5.0%
History	**61.1%**	22.2%	**11.1%**	0.0%	5.6%
Education	**40.0%**	40.0%	**13.3%**	6.7%	0.0%
SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS	**13.6%**	36.4%	**22.7%**	18.2%	9.1%

Clues from faculty interviews

The work of the dissertation matters “critical for future careers”.

Clues from faculty interviews

Error from L2 writers is unacceptable “get an editor”.

Clues from interviews

Emotions (fear, isolation) playing a role.

Dive in or Die (Walvoord, 1996)

At the programmatic level does dissertation writing represent an opportunity or mission drift?

Does it dissipate already scarce human and other resources or does it open up opportunities for development?

To what degree should WAC take responsibility for writing at the institutional level? (What about the WC?)

Thank you for your attention