Higher education administration: Students' perceptions concerning the research process for a newly developed specialist program

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ABSTRACT

A new specialist program in Higher Education Administration (HEA) was created and implemented at a small, private institution in the southeastern United States. An evaluation was conducted with students concerning research coursework and their research process. Initially, an intense literature review was conducted in order to develop the best specialist program in HEA possible. Surveys were supplied via email to students toward the end of their specialist program and who were included in the very first group of specialist students at the newly developed HEA program. There were 33 potential participants who were invited to complete an online survey, and 9 responded resulting in a 27% response rate. A Likert-scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) with statements concerning different aspects of research courses and the research process was used. Students were also asked about timelines for completion. Responses indicate students completed the program in a timely manner and overall, were satisfied with research courses and the research process.

Keywords: Higher education administration, research programs, research process

INTRODUCTION

A new specialist program in Higher Education Administration (HEA) was created and implemented at a small, private institution in the southeastern United States. Great care, thought, and research went into the development and implementation of the program. An examination was conducted with students after they successfully completed research coursework and conducted and defended a field-research project.

Initially, an intense literature review was conducted in order to develop the best specialist program in HEA possible. It has been noted that there is a need for ongoing evaluation of research graduate programs and ongoing evaluation is imperative to ensure best practices and quality programs and to tweak what might need adjusting and to obtain confirmation to continue with practices data suggest are working well (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006; Sum, McCaskey, & Kyeyune, 2010). Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, and Abel (2006) wrote, "We believe the waste of time, resources, and energy can be reduced with a greater sensitivity to the plight of today's graduate student and an awareness of how program structure contributes to high rates of attrition" (p. 29). This particular research was conducted in order to specifically examine students' perceptions of their research process while completing requirements for a newly developed and implemented specialist degree in HEA.

Several pieces of research have been conducted on the development and ongoing process of research practices in order to make data-driven decisions for best practice for graduate student research (Cumming, 2010; Neumann, 2007; Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006; Wisker, Robinson, & Shacham, 2007). Cumming (2010) provided an initial, brief explanation of demands for graduate research practice reform due to varying issues with current practices of many institutions of higher learning (IHLs) and did so because Cummings noted that there have been issues related to students' research processes and those issues need to be examined. There is a real need to research students' perceptions about their research process.

Sum, McCaskey, and Kyeyune (2010) wrote, "There is need for more research in higher education that focuses more on student needs and concerns for the purposes of improving academic programs" (p. 2). Barnes, Williams, and Archer (2010) noted how important it was to conduct research on graduate research students' perceptions of their research process since there is so little empirical information available on the topic. Barnes et al. found that students wanted advisors who were readily available to meet research graduates' needs, who would provide timely and appropriate feedback, who had the knowledge and information they needed, and who would get to know graduate students and show that they cared about those students and their research journey. Sum, et al. (2010) made the argument that by continuing to examine students' perceptions of satisfaction with programs, IHLs could possibly address retention issues, develop appropriate marketing strategies, and ensure quality programs.

Sum, et al. (2010) conducted research using a survey to examine master's students' satisfaction levels with their university and department program at a mid-western university. Sum et al. noted that it appeared most student perception studies focused on students' intrinsic motivation instead of extrinsic variables. Sum and colleagues noted the importance of examining students' perceived needs in order to improve programs to better meet students' needs, and Sum et al. examined student satisfaction levels of their program.

Issues noted by Neuman (2007) were increasing numbers of students in graduate programs, reduced funding to IHLs, reduced staff and/or departments, and several other variables. Neumann asked questions in relation to variables such as student recruitment, advisor-

advisee supervision, research process, and administration were asked. Neuman's examination was made about students defining their research topic and variables in relation to that process. Neumann made an interesting point, "It was pointed out that the days of the 'blockbuster thesis' are over, and that the focus in on 'do-able' projects within the … time frame…" (p. 465). Neumann observed that IHLs provided a more structured, monitored, time-limited research process for graduate students conducting research. Neumann noted topics for research often have to be narrowed and approved. This often results in advisors and advisees having to be very closely matched in order for a student to have an advisee who is a knowledgeable supervisor of the student's research topic in order to help with the flow of the research process. Results showed that formal, progress monitoring by an advisor was essential to ensure students completed research in a timely manner. Could this approach be an issue where IHLs end up being institutions with an assembly line research industry losing academic integrity and innovation? It certainly seems a conundrum when there are fewer faculty members due to budgetary issues, but increased demands on supervision of students conducting their research in order to both help those students graduate within a certain time frame and still be able to meet all mandatory criteria.

Wisker, Robinson, and Shacham (2007) recommended using cohort groups for quality supervision in order to help graduate students through their research process. Many quality supervision attributes were provided. Students working on research need help developing their research interest and topic, and they need help with developing their methodology, data collection and analysis, and interpretation. Students need their research supervisor to help keep them motivated to see their research through until it is successfully finished. Wisker, et al. noted that research graduate students, toward the end of their research graduate work, should transition from being a student to being more of a professional in the field of expertise and become prepared for putting into action what was learned from graduate school and the graduate research process.

Research supervision has been examined in relation to research students' research processes and students' satisfaction level of their research experiences (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010; Drennan & Clarke, 2009; Ismail, Abiddin, & Hassan, 2011; Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel & Abel, 2006; Wisker, et al., 2007). After conducting content analysis of open-ended responses from graduate students, Barnes, et al. (2010) found that supervisors of research should be accessible, helpful, and caring (p. 39). Supervisors who were available and flexible to meet, answer questions, and provide appropriate and timely feedback to students were deemed helpful. Supervisors who could help students navigate both the formal and informal research processes from the inception to the end were found to be most helpful. Supervisors who helped students feel included in some kind of research and professional community were reported to be successful supervisors. Students with supervisors who were caring, both emotionally and professionally, were found to be supervisors who successfully helped students complete their research processes (Barnes et al., 2010).

Students have been reported as more satisfied with their research process when they are permitted to choose their supervisors (Lovitts, 2001; Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz & Hill, 2003). When students are assigned supervisors, rather than being allowed to choose supervisors for themselves, there are generally higher student attrition rates (Lovitts, 2001; Smith, et al., 2006). Drennan and Clark (2009) noted students would have liked more support in narrowing a research topic and the literature review process, but overall, students were quite satisfied with their research supervision. Students noted they were fully made aware of what was expected of them

in a step-by-step research process. Students responded they felt they had regular contact with their major supervisor and received timely and proper feedback from their major supervisor as well (Drennan & Clarke, 2009).

Stevenson (2003) noted the importance of making data-driven decisions for program development and/or updating for effectiveness and in order to better meet the students' needs. Smith, et al. (2006) wrote on program structure, components needed, and the importance of having a program structure. Smith et al. noted "[a] structural balance that provides each student with a road map for successful completion of his or her studies is recommended…" (p. 20). Ismail, Abiddin, and Hassan (2011) indicated that there are certain components of a graduate research program that should be provided. Graduate research programs should be organized and managed in a way to provide appropriate support for students to help assure student completion. Ismail and colleagues recommended having the research process outlined in writing. Records should be maintained showing students' research progress. Students should regularly meet with their major supervisor (Ismail et al., 2011).

It is necessary to continually evaluate research graduation processes, and it is necessary to examine that process through the perceptions of the graduate students themselves. They are in the best situation to provide evidence of what they feel is working well and what is not working well. Sum, et al. (2010) noted how important it is to examine students' perceptions in order to make data-driven decisions to ensure quality programs. Since there is little research on the topic, an examination of research graduate students' perceptions during the development of a specialist program is a rare and timely opportunity supported views of other professionals in higher education.

METHOD

Surveys were supplied via email to students toward the end of their specialist program who were included in the very first group specialist students at the newly developed HEA program.. The institution operates using a trimester system, with three trimesters in a regular school year. The trimester includes fall, winter, and spring terms for each school year. There was also a summer term, so including the summer term would make the school year a four-term school year.

Students in the specialist program in the HEA began the first phase of their research process by taking an introductory research course. Students were expected to demonstrate an understanding of general research practices, designs, ethical issues and practices related to anonymity and confidentiality, informed consent and all other pertinent, basic research information. During this course, students developed a research question, began their literature review process, and wrote their first draft of their methodology. The document was skeletal since the document developed for course requirements was students' first attempt at writing their proposal document, but the course was designed to help students create a document that could allow them to begin their research process.

The next phase of the students' research process was when students took a course in descriptive statistics and survey design. Students were expected to master basic descriptive statistical practices, were introduced to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and were expected to input data and utilize the descriptive tools in SPSS to analyze those data. Students were also expected to develop a survey. Towards the end of this course, students asked

a faculty member to chair their research process. The three-person committee, comprised of the chair and two committee members, was created toward the end of this course.

The third phase was where students were expected to take a minimum of six research hours, three hours over two terms, in order to go through obtaining Institutional Review Board permissions, further develop their research document, obtain and analyze data, write results and explain what the results meant in relation to their original research question(s). The chair worked closely with a student during this last phase of the research process. The chair made the decision to allow a student to send the document to the other two committee members, and the student contacted all three committee members to coordinate a date to defend the student's research once it was completed.

A survey was developed to obtain data of specialist students' perceptions of their research process. Questions were developed based on a review of literature. After an initial survey was developed, administrators with over 25 years experience each who had also been extensively involved in research over those years were asked to examine the survey for face validity. The survey was adjusted based on feedback from those experts.

Participants were sent an email containing all pertinent cover-letter information and a survey link to route them to the online survey. Demographic information was requested, and no information was linked back to an individual based on those demographics. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative portion of the survey. Responses from open-ended questions were examined and linked with quantitative information to help enrich and better interpret quantitative data.

RESULTS

There were 33 potential participants who were invited to complete an online survey, and 9 responded resulting in a 27% response rate. Of the 9 respondents, 2 were female and 7 were male. The mean age of respondents was 42.55 years. Five respondents reported being Caucasian, 3 as African-American, and 1 as Hispanic.

Respondents were asked how many terms (four terms including the summer term possible in one year) it took them to complete the program for a specialist degree in HEA. The program was created in a format for students to be able to complete the program in seven terms taking two courses a term, and two of the respondents reported that they did complete their requirements for the specialist program in seven terms (including the summer term). Three respondents reported finishing in 8 terms, and one person reported finishing in 10 terms. One respondent reported not finishing the program. There were two students who noted they were able to complete in 6 terms, indicating they took more than two courses in a term.

All nine respondents indicated they took the required Research Foundations course. It is in the Research Foundations course where students developed a preproposal for their research. If a respondent indicated he/she had taken the course, the respondent was then asked to indicate level of agreement on eight statements about the Research Foundations course. The level of agreement was measured using a 5-point Likert-Scale, with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree. With the exception of one respondent, all items were rated with Agree or Strongly Agree. Means, standard deviations and frequencies are provided for statements provided in this section of the survey in Table 1 (Appendix). Furthermore, all items have means ranging from 4.00 (I was able to develop a good research topic) to 4.71 (The course was beneficial to me writing my preproposal).

Three people provided feedback in an open-ended query concerning the Research Foundations course. Respondents indicated that the course was necessary and beneficial to the research process. One respondent wrote, "Very good preparation for the research process." Another wrote, "Courses are very necessary in beginning the research project."

Respondents were next asked to indicate if they took the next research course, Descriptive Statistics and Survey Design. Seven respondents indicated they had. Those respondents were then asked to indicate their level of agreement on 12 statements about the Descriptive Statistics and Survey Design course. The level of agreement was also measured using a 5-point Likert-Scale. Almost all of the statements received Agree or Strongly Agree responses, and item means range from 4.33 (I have a good understanding of correlation) to 4.86 (I was able to develop a comprehensive cover letter, and I was able to develop a survey). Means, standard deviations, and frequencies are provided in Table 2 (Appendix). There were no qualitative responses for the Descriptive Statistics and Survey Design course.

Respondents were next asked if they had taken HEA Field Research hours. Seven indicated they had. When asked how many hours they had completed, there were only six total responses. Three respondents indicated six hours, one indicated nine hours, and two indicated more than 12 hours.

Respondents were asked to rank statements regarding their research process while taking their field research hours. Statements could be ranked using a 5-point Likert scale. The lowest mean was a 4.00 (Both committee members provided appropriate feedback for the final research document (not including chair)). The highest mean was a 5.00 (I was satisfied with my choice of committee chair; My chair provided appropriate feedback on my results; My chair provided appropriate feedback on my discussion; and My chair provided appropriate feedback on my final research document). Means, standard deviations, and frequencies are provided in Table 3 (Appendix).

Respondents were then asked in an open-ended format what they liked about the Field Research hours and what they thought was done well. They were also asked what elements should be maintained. Five participants responded to this question and it was indicated participants liked having time set aside for working on their field projects while maintaining some flexibility. One respondent stated that "The supervisory perspective went very well and was helpful to me throughout." Another wrote, "I liked the structure…it helped me stay on task and made the project seem less daunting by completing it in sections." A third respondent noted, "I liked having the time built in to work on and complete our research project." Another reported, "I appreciated the flexibility. I am a working single mom and I was thankful for not having to sit in a classroom for hours each week. Working at home and still be able to multitask was an asset and I would live to see this maintained." Students noted structure, flexibility, and time as a few notable variables beneficial to them during their research process.

Respondents were then asked in an open-ended format what could be done differently for the HEA Field Research hours. There were four responses. One respondent indicated an APA course should be offered before writing the Field Research document. Another respondent believed that setting up individual appointments would be a better use of time instead of having a designated class time. Another respondent stated there were timing issues at the end of the process and s/he felt rushed when having to make revisions to meet deadlines.

Participants were asked if they had defended their research. Out of the seven who responded, five indicated they had. That may mean two were either still working on their research or waiting to defend their research. The five respondents who had defended their

research were provided statements concerning their defense process. Statements were ranked using a 5-point Likert scale. All of the statements received Agree or Strongly Agree responses, and item means range from 4.60 (My chair adequately prepared me for the research defense) to 5.00 (I knew my research well enough to adequately defend before the committee; I felt comfortable going to my chair for guidance if I went to publish my research; and Now that I have completed the research process, I better understand the value behind conducting research). Means, standard deviations, and frequencies are provided in Table 4 (Appendix).

There was only one response for the open-ended question used to ask for input about the research defense. A participant noted, "Very intense, yet extremely beneficial ..."

Participants were asked to respond to statements regarding their overall research process. Again, a 5-point Likert was used for participants to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements provided. The lowest mean was a 4.00 (I was satisfied with my other committee members (not including the chair)). The highest mean was a 5.00 (I am satisfied with my research chair). Means, standard deviations, and frequencies are provided in Table 5 (Appendix).

DISCUSSION

The intense literature review conducted before the development of the HEA program and specifically, the research process for students appears to have been quite beneficial for students. Most students from the initial group were able to finish the program, including their research process, in a timely manner. The Research Foundations course and the Descriptive Statistics and Survey Design course were found to be beneficial as well. Research hours were initially established as one night a week for meeting, as would be the case for a standard education course. Students attended, talked with an instructor, and talked with other students. Most noted this was a beneficial format for them. However, there were a few students who noted they would have liked to have had a more traditional, setting up an appointment with his/her chair format. This was taken into consideration, and for subsequent students, both formats were provided for students' convenience. An APA course was also established as a requirement prior to beginning the research process. These changes seem to work rather well, and an examination of these changes can be empirically examined at a later time. All students who defended their research were pleased with their selection of a chair for their research process. Overall, students were satisfied with the research process.

Literature review of development and research processes was a wise initial investment (Cumming, 2010; Neumann, 2007; Smith et al., 2006; Wisker et al., 2007). The numbers might have been low in relation to data collection, but numbers typically are in graduate programs, so generalizability should cautiously be considered. However, the main purpose of conducting this analysis was to examine these HEA students' perceptions of their research experience in order to help make data-driven decisions for the best HEA research process in this new program. There was some constructive feedback from students, and decisions were made to address those. Overall, students are satisfied with the research process for the program's research process. Hopefully, readers will find these results beneficial for them as well if they are considering developing a research program or making an examination of their existing research program.

This HEA program is a new program, and the plan is to continue to collect and examine data in order to make date-driven decisions to further develop and support best practice for students. Future studies could include implementing an evaluation of students' satisfaction

before the research process begins. This would allow the content coursework to be evaluated before the students begin the research courses and process. Then, after the research process has been completed, students' feedback could be solicited again and comparisons could be drawn and data-driven decisions made for program improvement.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Statements Concerning the Research Foundations Course

Questions	*SD*	*D*	*N*	*A*	*SA*	*M*	*SD*
1. I was able to develop a good research topic.	1	0	0	4	3	4.00	1.31
2. I was able to appropriately justify why my research was important.	1	0	0	2	5	4.25	1.39
3. I was able to develop a good initial literature review.	0	1	0	3	4	4.25	1.04
4. I was able to develop an appropriate methodology to implement my study.	0	0	0	4	3	4.43	0.53
5. The course was beneficial to me in writing my preproposal.	0	0	0	2	5	4.71	0.49
6. The PowerPoint on my research preproposal was beneficial in preparing me to propose my research topic.	0	0	0	3	4	4.57	0.53
7. I obtained a good, basic understanding of various quantitative-types of research designs	0	1	0	3	3	4.14	1.07
8. I obtained a good, basic understanding of various qualitative-types of research designs.	0	1	0	4	2	4.00	1.00

Note. 1 = SD = Strongly Disagree, 2 = D = Disagree, 3 = N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = A = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. $n = 8$ for Statements 1-3, $n = 7$ for statements 3-8

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Statements Concerning the Survey Design Course

Questions	*SD*	*D*	*N*	*A*	*SA*	*M*	*SD*
1. I was able to obtain institutional review board permission in a timely manner.	0	0	0	2	5	4.71	0.49
2. I was able to develop a comprehensive cover letter (or cover-letter information for online survey).	0	0	0	1	6	4.86	0.38
3. I was able to develop a survey that adequately measured key variables for my research topic	0	0	0	1	6	4.86	0.38
4. I have a good understanding of validity.	0	0	0	2	5	4.71	0.49
5. I have a good understanding of reliability.	0	0	0	2	5	4.71	0.49
6. I have a good understanding of descriptive statistics.	0	0	0	2	5	4.71	0.49
7. I have a good understanding of correlation.	0	0	0	4	2	4.33	0.52
8. I have a good understanding of chi square.	0	0	1	3	3	4.29	0.76
9. I have a good understanding of *t* tests.	0	0	0	5	2	4.29	0.49
10. I obtained a good, basic understanding of survey development.	0	0	0	2	5	4.71	0.49
11. I have a good, basic understanding of how to use SPSS for descriptive statistical analysis as a result of taking this course.	0	0	0	3	4	4.57	0.53
12. I obtained a good, basic understanding of basic statistics taught in this course.	0	0	0	3	4	4.57	0.53

Note. 1 = SD = Strongly Disagree, 2 = D = Disagree, 3 = N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = A = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. $n = 7$ for all statements except statement 7, which is $n = 6$

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Statements Concerning the Field Research Hours

Questions	*SD*	*D*	*N*	*A*	*SA*	*M*	*SD*
1. I was satisfied with my choice of committee chair.	0	0	0	0	6	5.00	0.00
2. I was satisfied with at least one of my committee members.	0	0	1	0	5	4.67	0.82
3. I was satisfied with both of my committee members (not including chair).	0	0	1	1	4	4.50	0.84
4. I was able to further develop my literature review.	0	0	0	3	3	4.50	0.55
5. My chair encouraged me to further develop my literature review.	0	0	0	3	3	4.50	0.55
6. I was able to adequately collect my data.	0	0	1	1	4	4.50	0.55
7. My chair adequately guided me during my data collection process.	0	0	0	1	5	4.83	0.84
8. I was able to adequately write my Results section.	0	0	0	1	5	4.83	0.41
9. My chair provided appropriate feedback on my Results section.	0	0	0	0	6	5.00	0.00
10. I was able to adequately write my Discussion section.	0	0	0	1	5	4.50	0.41
11. My chair provided appropriate feedback on my Discussion section.	0	0	0	0	6	5.00	0.00
12. I was provided appropriate support for the final formatting of the final research document.	0	0	0	3	3	4.50	0.55
13. My chair provided appropriate feedback for the final research document.	0	0	0	0	6	5.00	0.00
14. At least one committee member provided appropriate feedback for the final research document (not including chair).	0	0	0	1	5	4.83	0.41
15. Both committee members provided appropriate feedback for the final research document (not including chair).	0	1	0	3	2	4.00	1.10
16. My chair provided appropriate feedback on the PowerPoint used for the defense of my research.	0	0	0	1	5	4.83	0.41

Note. 1 = SD = Strongly Disagree, 2 = D = Disagree, 3 = N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = A = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. $n = 6$

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for Statements Concerning the Research Defense Process

Questions	*SD*	*D*	*N*	*A*	*SA*	*M*	*SD*
1. My chair adequately prepared me for the research defense.	0	0	0	2	3	4.60	0.55
2. I knew my research well enough to adequately defend before the committee.	0	0	0	0	5	5.00	0.00
3. The research defense is necessary to display knowledge of the research topic.	0	0	0	1	4	4.80	0.45
4. My research contributed to the body of knowledge on my topic of research.	0	0	0	1	4	4.80	0.45
5. I feel comfortable going to my chair for guidance if I want to publish my research.	0	0	0	0	5	5.00	0.00
6. Now that I have completed the research process, I better understand the rationale behind conducting research.	0	0	0	1	4	4.80	0.45
7. Now that I have completed the research process, I better understand the value behind conducting research.	0	0	0	0	5	5.00	0.00

Note. 1 = SD = Strongly Disagree, 2 = D = Disagree, 3 = N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = A = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. $n = 5$

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Statements Concerning Overall Research Process

Questions	*SD*	*D*	*N*	*A*	*SA*	5.00	0.00
1. I was satisfied with my research chair.	0	0	0	0	6	4.67	0.82
2. I was satisfied with at least one of my committee members (not including my chair).	0	0	1	0	5	4.00	1.26
3. I was satisfied with both of my other committee members (not including my chair).	0	1	1	1	3	4.50	0.55
4. I was satisfied with the research course RSH 720 – Research Foundations.	0	0	0	3	3	4.50	0.55
5. I was satisfied with the research course RSH 740 – Descriptive statistics and Survey Design.	0	0	0	3	3	4.50	0.55
6. I was satisfied with the EDH 721 – Higher Education Administration Research Hours.	0	0	0	3	3	4.50	0.55
7. Overall, I was satisfied with the research process in the higher education administration program.	0	0	0	3	3	5.00	0.00

Note. 1 = SD = Strongly Disagree, 2 = D = Disagree, 3 = N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = A = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. $n = 6$