**UDTS Faculty Workgroup on Increasing DMin Graduation Rates**

**Tim Slemmons, Director of the DMin Program**

We met May 8, 2024 at "the Sisters," with Lindsey, Susan, and Jill joining Brad, Elmer, and me to brainstorm on the topic.

Per the completion data from roughly the last 10 years (2009-2020), including Susan's cohort, which now has 4 (not 3) completions. In that chart, I also indicated with an up-arrow ("^") those cohorts where I think we still expect some late finishers. With no outliers excluded (i.e., in a worst-case scenario), even if none of these cohorts have any further completions (which is extremely unlikely), we have a 59% completion rate over this period. That is not great, not even "good," but it can and will improve, and it is also better than average doctoral completion rate across the country in all programs (which tends to hover around 50%).

The following are the strategies we are implementing or considering:

(1) The instructor with one of our lowest completion rates is going to tie written assignments in seminar phase more directly to the eventual final project (one chapter per semester) with a summary of findings and conclusions at the end to serve as the capstone to the program.
(2) The program will require the project proposal to constitute the primary third-year, graded seminar paper.
(3) We have recently made some hard choices in declining to admit candidates who did not seem quite ready for the program, and we will likely need to exercise this option going forward, especially where likelihood of completion seems low, all in the interest of helping prospective student be better stewards of their time and resources, and being better stewards of the same for ourselves.
(4) We will seek to enhance more institutional support, by exercising more "caringly intrusive" encouragement of students in their project phase. Whether DMin Director time and load will allow for this, especially if we decide to add separate terms for the May residency (which would add considerably to registration responsibilities), whether instructors (already stretched) can shoulder this added responsibility, or whether we need a dedicated Director of Doctoral Projects, remains to be seen. [If I can editorialize for a moment, if either of the former two options, doing more with less, seems the way to go, I hope we will bear in mind Sam's reminder, that DMin students now make up half our student body, and if we are going to shepherd them through three terms per years instead of two, then this would add substantially to administrative workload.] But, yes, we need to ride herd more closely over our students in project phase: first, making sure they emerge from seminars with an approved research proposal, and second, making sure that those who do not naturally thrive in doing independent research are receiving frequent encouragement to meet their deadlines.
(5) I would continue to raise awareness of the financial need of our students who are serving in part-time congregations or ministry contexts. Our program is very affordable, but ministry pay is notoriously low anyway, so working for half of what is already low can make even the most modest hill insurmountable for some. The Omaha PSF has been a good friend to our program, but the caps of support they offer and the geographical restriction attached to their mission does exclude some students; meanwhile, those serving in PT charges often have deep holes to climb out of, esp. if they entered such charges with unresolved seminary- or other household-debt.
(6) Susan's proposal to offer her cohort with rolling admissions would also invite project phase students to attend residencies for conversation, fellowship, as well as library-time for research. She envisions that collegial spirit as being conducive toward encouraging students to advance toward completion and even allowing more advanced student to share their experiences, discoveries, and best research practices with those in seminars.
(7) Our "all adjunct" teams—really one—has not had a great completion rate, and though I do expect another finisher there, and those who exited did so for personal reasons (in one case, health; in another, a family crisis), the orientation process for adjuncts could be stronger. These two instructors did take Jenn Pattee's course when she was here; but this cohort has functioned in a fairly hands-off, autonomous mode (as have, frankly, some of our in-house cohorts).
(8) We discussed some other structural matters regarding grading policy, converting the project phase semesters to P/F, etc., and while positive and timely reporting of grades (even P's) in seminar semesters (instead of waiting for an end of year grade to be backfilled) would certainly help build a sense of momentum—itself a worthy goal—beyond that, this part of our conversation was more focused on administrative processes than on direct intervention that would juice our completion rates.