



HOW EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL MENTORSHIP SAVED MY DOCTORAL JOURNEY

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Introduction

The journey of completing a doctoral degree is one that is comprised of many twists, turns, and redirecting. Nearly half of all doctoral students who begin their degree do not finish (Cassuto, 2013; Sowell, Allum, & Okahana, 2015). There are numerous challenges that prevent some from completing their degree. Some of those challenges include; lack of support, lack of funding, and systemic sexism and racism just to name a few (Castelló, Pardo, Sala-Bubaré, & Suñe-Soler, 2017; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Patton, 2009). However, there is one area that can affect the success of doctoral students of color, and that is the barriers that are presented to them by the administration and faculty present in their respective universities. This group, which also includes individuals at the college and departmental level, can be just as influential in the success or failure of students. The purpose of this paper is to share my experience of how cross-cultural mentoring allowed me to complete my doctorate and to provide strategies for current and potential doctoral students, as well as faculty mentors.

I began my doctoral journey in the fall of 2013. The first two years of my PhD program consisted of classes, working as a graduate assistant, attending and presenting at conferences, and collaborating with my major advisor to create a summer reading program for high school students. My advisor and I had a good relationship and worked closely on various projects. My plan was to graduate in the summer of 2016.

During my first year as a doctoral student I was invited to be a part of a program that was designed to mentor doctoral students of color. The Holmes Scholar Program is a national program that has chapters at universities across the United States. At my institution, the program was housed in the College of Education so most of the participants were doctoral students in departments like counselor education,

special education, math education, higher education leadership, etc. It provided a great opportunity for collaboration. Our leader was a Black female who had a background in curriculum and instruction and had received her doctorate there at our institution. She had been with the university for many years and was admired and respected by all. She also had a long history of mentoring and supporting students of color. Since my area of interest was language and literacy, she was instrumental in making sure I got connected with the literacy experts in the College of Education. It was during my interactions with her that I first experienced cross-culture mentoring. Cross-culture mentoring can be defined as an ongoing, intentional, and mutual relationship with someone of a different race, ethnicity, gender, cultural background, and educational background/expertise (Crutcher, 2014). As a cross-culture mentor, you help guide your mentee's intellectual and personal development (Crutcher, 2014). Over the next few years, my mentor would do just that.

In the fall of 2015, I completed my dissertation proposal and began to collect data in the spring of 2016. By the early summer of 2016, I had collected data and was working on writing chapters four and five of my dissertation. I had a great statistician who invested quite a bit of time in helping me to analyze my data. However, my dissertation chair was not on the same page as the statistician and me. Nevertheless, my first dissertation defense date was scheduled for June 2016. It was a very stressful time. My dissertation chair kept saying that my stats were not correct, even though the statistician had approved of them. It was also during this time that I had several issues with my health to emerge. Due to the stress, and my coping mechanisms, these health issues had first appeared the year prior in 2015. However, by the summer of 2016, they had exacerbated.

My chair informed me that I was not going to be able to defend my dissertation in accordance to the

timeline we initially constructed. Additionally, her announcement solidified that I would not graduate, as anticipated, in August. Initially, I was very emotional and upset. However, after speaking with my family and mentor, I felt better about taking the extra time and doing what I needed to mentally and physically recover. I even found out that I would continue to receive my departmental assistantship and another fellowship for the semester. The aforementioned news was a big relief. My new proposal date would be pushed to October. To put things into perspective, the fall proposal date would allow me the opportunity to graduate in December of 2016.

I continued to meet with my statistician and worked on analyzing my data. About a month before my new defense date, and as a precaution, I met with my committee. Present during the phone discussion was my dissertation chair, statistician, and another committee member. During the call, my statistician explained some of my data results. However, my chair did not quite understand her explanation. At a point during the conversation, my chair recommended going back to make certain changes with the data. My statistician immediately stated that changes could not be made to the data. Her concerns were of an ethical nature. Little did I know, that was one of many red flags. Nevertheless, I continued to work, and my chair continued to question my results. One week before my scheduled October defense, my chair phoned me at 7:30 p.m. Her call was unusual. Moreover, I was in the doctoral student office working on my dissertation defense slides. Her call was heartbreaking. She stated, once again, that I was not going to defend the following week. I was also not going to graduate in December. As I recalled it, she took issues with my data. In particular, she felt that the numbers just “weren’t right.” Her rationale for cancelling my defense for the second time was I needed more time to fix my data. I hung up the phone, left campus and went home and just cried for about an hour. My department was not going to give me my assistantship for the spring of 2017. Thus, I was more than likely going to have to leave school to go back home and finish writing my dissertation.

At the beginning of December, just a week before I would have graduated, I met with my committee to come up with yet another game plan to graduate in May 2017. My chair was supportive and later sent me an email stating how impressed she was with my attitude regarding the situation. However, I would later regret leaving the university before graduating. There had been another minority doctoral student in our field that faced obstacles during her dissertation process. Her experience led to feelings of self-doubt, loneliness, and self-blame. She watched her White

classmates move through the process with ease, without the standard anxieties that come from the rigor of a doctoral program, and life challenges (e.g. sickness, loss of a job). This student had shared that she couldn’t understand why she was tasked with developing an intervention approach when her peers were able to modify an already established strategy. After her dissertation defense, she spent two more semesters editing. She shared that she felt like a failure. She had reached out to the college dean to assure herself that she understood the dissertation process and if what she was experiencing was the norm. By doing this, it resulted in a respectful, but strained relationship between herself and that faculty member, who happened to be my dissertation chair. This student felt she was advocating for herself in trying to gain understanding, but the faculty member viewed it as betrayal to the program. Even though, I was aware of this student’s experience, I remained confident that my journey would be different.

In January of 2017, my committee and I set another date for a proposal defense in March, which would allow me to graduate in May. I was in constant contact with my committee members, especially my statistician. I even came back in February for a few days to meet with her and we sat for hours in her office re-running my stats. I went back home extremely confident concerning my dissertation. I also felt ready to defend in March. Then, once again, my March date was cancelled, and an April date was set. At this point, I was not too stressed because I felt like I still had a good chance of graduating in May. Then my worst fears came true, my April defense date was cancelled. Despite my efforts to incorporate my chair and to leverage her advice, she remained unsatisfied with my statistics. She kept telling me “I wasn’t explaining it well enough”, even though my statistician, the expert, thought otherwise. Not defending in April meant not graduating in May and not being able to start the fall tenure track position, I had accepted earlier in the spring. What made matters complicated, my chair recommended me for the position. Furthermore, my committee knew I had accepted the position.

The biggest blow came on May 6, 2017, when I received an email from my chair. I figured she emailed me regarding next steps or to give feedback on the last edits I sent her. Instead, she was emailing me to say that she would no longer serve as my chair. I went numb at that point. I immediately sent a text to my mentor and forwarded her the email. I did not respond because I needed to pray and gather myself. If I responded immediately, it was going to be an emotional response. After a couple of days passed, I emailed my chair and thanked her for informing me

of her decision and for her guidance up to that point. I started to contact my other committee members and my mentor to see what recommendations they had concerning next steps; this is where it really got interesting.

I went back to the university to meet with my former chair, committee members, and the department chair. At this meeting, my former chair sat across from me and she did not say one word. I was uncomfortable that she never looked at me or even acknowledged my presence. The department chair told me that not having a chair was pretty much my fault. He agreed with the decision of my dissertation chair and stated that I did not do what she asked me to do regarding the stats. I had one committee member who came to my defense. My statistician, who was in the meeting, told my department chair and everyone else in the room that my statistics were good and that I understood my stats and was able to explain them, apparently, that was not enough for my department chair. Once the meeting was over, I felt my eyes welling up and my heart pounding so fast I thought it would jump out my chest. When I walked out the door to the parking lot, a flood of tears ran down my face. I cried all the way to my car. I drove over to the building where my mentor's office was. As I sat in there waiting for her, one of my committee members who had been at the meeting walked in. She apologized and stated that she had never seen anything like that before. By the time my mentor arrived I had calmed down enough to tell her what happened. She had been talking with the dean of the college and they had a plan. The way our program was set up, my actual department was in the College of Health and Public Affairs, but our PhD program was in the College of Education. Therefore, the dean of the College of Education had the last say.

I went back home and started communicating via email with my department chair to see what my options were to graduate. He and my former chair stated that I could change programs and get another degree and still be able to work in our field. I thought about that option for only a few minutes and then replied, "absolutely not." No way would I start another PhD program after spending the last 3 ½ years completing one. I had a fully completed dissertation, chapters one thru five. Then they said I could graduate if I found another professor in the department to serve as my chair. My mentor and I immediately reached out to the one Black professor in our department. He knew what was going on with my situation. I sent him my dissertation and he said he would look over it and get back to me. A couple of days went by and he spoke with my mentor and said he could not do it because he did not have time. My mentor re-

minded him that the dissertation was complete and that the only thing needed was my defense. He then began to give her all the reasons as to why he couldn't do it and what he had going on. He also took that opportunity to complain to my mentor about how my previous chair did not know enough about research to run a PhD program and how she should not chair dissertations. After he declined to help me, I sought additional help. I reached out to my committee member who was a Latina professor in our department. She and I had a good relationship and worked very closely on different projects. We had spoken a week prior via Skype, she was encouraging me and giving me some direction on how to proceed. I asked her to be my chair and gave her a couple of days to think about my request. She emailed me later that week and declined to be my chair and recused herself from serving on my committee. At that point, I did not have a faculty member from my department to chair me. I also no longer had any committee members from my department willing to serve on my dissertation. My emotions moved from frantic desperation to furiousness. It was very obvious that the individuals in my department had gotten together and decided not to support me. No one was going to help me complete the program. What they ultimately decided to recommend was that I find someone to chair me that was in my field of study but who worked at a different institution. By this time, my mentor and the dean of the College of Education decided that enough was enough. The vice president for research for the university was contacted and was now involved in my dissertation dilemma, as well as the vice provost.

The vice president and vice provost took over at this point. The fall semester started. I also, had not graduated. Further, I was unable to start the tenure track job I had accepted. News arrived that the vice president would not allow another professor from a different institution to chair a dissertation. The rationale for the instruction was direct: our university had plenty of people who were qualified to do the work. The dean of the College of Education and my mentor recommended a professor in the College of Education whose area of research was aligned with mine. My department chair and my former dissertation chair were not pleased and tried to disqualify this professor, but the dean's decision was final. However, I did need another person from my field. My former chair then tried to recommend a person that completed the program before me. This particular person was one whom I had no relationship with, who I had previously reached out to for assistance for a class I was teaching and was no help whatsoever. She was my former chair's golden child. I knew she was being recommended so that my former chair could still have her hand in interjecting her opinion

about my dissertation. Plus, this person had never worked in academia and was not currently working in academia. Instead, I asked the only Black PhD student who had graduated from our program to be on my committee. She also had some difficult experiences with my former chair. Nevertheless, she and I had the same research area and interest. After that was settled, the vice president advised the people in my department to have no further contact with me. The College of Education was going to handle everything concerning my defense and graduation. I was still going to graduate with my PhD in communication sciences and disorders, something that my former department was trying to keep me from doing.

I met with my new dissertation chair and two committee members from the College of Education that had been with me all along. We also had a phone conference to include my new committee member in my field who was working at another university in Virginia. We set a defense date and I started making plans to graduate, albeit, again. However, the preparation process was different this time. I knew I was going to defend and graduate. I had confidence in my new chair and my committee. I defended in October 2017. I was told that my former department chair wanted to come to my defense. However, the dean of the College of Education empathically insisted that he not attend. As an alternative, he could be outside of the room and tell me congratulations, but he was not allowed inside. Sure enough, after I completed my defense and waited outside for my committee to decide, there he was. He had this big fake smile and unsuccessfully attempted to make small talk with my parents and me. Out of respect for him as a professional, I shook his hand and told him thanks, then proceeded to speak with my mentee who had come to support me. After all the trials and tribulations, I walked across the stage on December 15, 2017, and went on to the tenure track position that I had accepted the year prior.

Even when I started my new position had to seek help to erase the bitterness and anger that I held towards the individuals in my department. I had an unhealthy perception toward White males. Every time I experienced a microaggression, I saw the face of my former department chair. It took months of counseling to get me to a space where I had forgiven the people in my department and was confident in my knowledge and skills.

The Value of Cross-Cultural Mentoring

Cross-culture mentoring is a pathway for making excellence inclusive (Crutcher, 2014). If we, as a profession, are committed to inclusive excellence, then we should not only work to make our programs and

professional body more diverse, but we need to pay attention to the social, emotional, and educational wellbeing of our students (Crutcher, 2014).

I credit my mentor and my other committee members in the College of Education for making sure I graduated. My new dissertation chair was Hispanic and my other committee members were White females. None of them were in my department and/or profession. But there was a sense of trust and understanding between us that was crucial to our relationship. I had known all of them for about the same amount of time that I knew the people in my CSD department. However, my new committee provided the sense of care, guidance, and support that I needed to complete my journey.

Within a month of arriving at my university in 2013 I was connected with my mentor and the Holmes Scholar Program. She helped me to navigate various relationships and issues within my CSD department. When I came into the PhD program my understanding was that the people in my program and department would be the ones to mentor and guide me through the process of completing my program. In the beginning I felt fortunate to have a mentor in my department, who was also my major advisor and chair, as well as another mentor in a different college on campus.

My mentor in the College of Education made sure that all the Holmes Scholars attended the annual conference (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, AACTE) and even assisted us with attending the annual conferences of our various professions. Even though I was in the College of Health and Public Affairs, she knew that my area of interest was language and literacy, so at AACTE she always made it a point to introduce me to the major leaders in literacy.

She understood what it was like to be a Black woman in academia. She always allowed me to cry and share my frustrations with the microaggressions and flat out racism. Two times a year, December and May she would have all of us come to her house for a gathering. Even though she was married to a White man, she nor he, never undervalued our experiences. During our monthly meetings she would invite other professors from the College of Education and other colleges across the campus to come and talk about what they are doing, and how we would potentially collaborate with them. She showed us that everyone who doesn't look like us isn't against us. And even she wasn't just a mentor to students of color. She had numerous White and students whom she mentored. Her mission was to be a champion for all students while recognizing that students of color had a different plight.

Some Recommendations and Concluding Thoughts

Below are some recommendations for those persons contemplating pursuing a doctoral degree. These recommendations are based on my personal journey and offered with the hope that they provide some useful strategies for success in your journey.

First, for students who are thinking about or going through the doctoral journey, make sure you have a community. Whether it's other doctoral students in your program and/or university, family and/or friends, you need people who will hold you up and encourage you along the way. The Holmes Scholar program at my university is the reason why I and so many students of color have successfully completed doctoral programs. Don't be afraid to find mentors outside of your program/field AND outside of your race. I feel blessed to have great relationships with several Black professors/scholars in this field whom I look up to as mentors, but I've also had to learn that everyone who looks like me isn't always for me.

Next, make self-care a priority. This is hard when you start your program because you feel like you need to always "be on" and be available. While there is some truth to that, if you're not well mentally, physically, and spiritually, you can't function at your highest level. Don't be afraid to use your campus mental health resources as well as off-campus resources. Even if you can't participate in structured exercise programs/classes, make it a priority to do something every day for at least 30 minutes. It can be a walk, run, yoga, or whatever you need. Make it a point to get away for 30 minutes and let your mind be free of school and other cares that may be holding you down or are toxic to you. If you are spiritual and/or religious, make that your top priority. Start everyday with meditation, prayer, a grateful heart, and find a church home where you can get feed spiritually.

Lastly, although it sounds cliché, believe in yourself. You have been given a unique opportunity and you belong! Understand that you belong to be in that space just as much as anyone else does. You're not an imposter, you're not a bad writer, and you're not a weak student.

If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing. I love our profession and the students whose lives I get to impact daily. I am thankful for the opportunity to have attended a great university where I had experiences that prepared me to be successful in academia as an instructor, researcher, and mentor.

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