

*“ProQuest is the best. It’s the standard for housing and databasing all of the dissertations that have gone on for decades. Their search mechanism is very easy to use.”*

– Dr. Jearl (Ken) Helvey, Assistant Professor of Education –  
Doctoral Program at Texas Wesleyan University



## PROQUEST DISSERTATIONS & THESES SUCCESS STORY

# Improving Graduate Student Outcomes

How incorporating dissertations into the curriculum improved the doctoral student success at Texas Wesleyan University

Dr. Jearl (Ken) Helvey, Assistant Professor of Education – Doctoral Program at Texas Wesleyan University, came into his current role after spending 31 years in public education, and most recently as a school Superintendent. Given his background in education, when Dr. Helvey joined Texas Wesleyan he made some initial observations.

“I said, ‘If we want to be more effective at finishing doctoral students, which on the average nationwide is probably in that 50% range, we need to build in the systems [for writing a dissertation] all the way through the coursework,” he said.

Helvey observed that many graduate students weren’t prepared to conduct the depth of research required for their programs.

“The doctoral style of writing, the tools that are required and are effective, are pretty foreign to most people because you don’t do them every day,” he explained.

**Jearl (Ken) Helvey**

**Texas Wesleyan University**

Assistant Professor of Education –  
Doctoral Program



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"A common problem in doctoral programs that I experienced as a doctoral student at the University of North Texas and as well as an adjunct professor is, it appears that during the journey from starting the coursework towards the end, there was a very little emphasis on what is arguably the hardest part of the doctoral program, which is the capstone dissertation, the study."

So he teamed up with his fellow faculty to collaborate on a curriculum solution that started in students' first year of graduate school. From the first course in their doctoral programs, students were instructed in how to plan and prepare for the completion of their capstone projects.

As the result of this effort, Texas Wesleyan University's graduation rates are now significantly higher than the U.S. national average.

### **Integrating ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global into coursework**

One of the first orders of business for doctoral students at Texas Wesleyan University is being able to identify and understand the tools they will need to conduct and curate research – ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global among them.

A new technology course was developed using ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global to help students hone advanced search skills by exploring content related to their topic of interest.

"We know with our doctoral students, if they choose a subject that they're somewhat passionate about they'll typically have a stronger chance of finishing," Helvey said.

Students use ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global weekly to learn how to conduct efficient searches, curate their research and analyze dissertations to find the strongest studies and foundational references and citations for their own work. Studying existing dissertations can inspire students to consider a variety of perspectives and help them refine their own approach and research skills, while growing more accustomed to conventions – such as language and citations – of writing a dissertation in their field.

Dr. Helvey provided background on the philosophy behind these assignments. He explained the idea was to get doctoral students to start thinking about their dissertation – the most challenging and important part of the doctoral

process – from the beginning of the program so they can be working toward it day one.

"Nearly everyone can finish coursework," he said. "Not everyone can do the dissertation unless they're prepared. The more they're prepared, the better off they're going to be, and it's going to result in a quality product that is completed on schedule."

Dr. Helvey also noted when it comes to helping doctoral candidates prepare for their dissertations, "ProQuest is the best. It's the standard for housing and databasing all of the (dissertations) works that have gone on for decades. Their search mechanism is very easy to use."

### **How dissertations can inform better teaching – and a better future**

Dr. Helvey has influenced a lot of change within his institution by collaborating across courses with his faculty team. The result has been increased successes in the graduate rate for Texas Wesleyan University graduate students. Integrating the use of dissertations into their course curriculum has made a great impact for their students and their school.

"I think the big takeaway and thing I'm proudest of is that by the end of their first semester in their coursework students are getting pretty close to an idea of what they're going to study. From that point on, all of the dissertations they're looking at through ProQuest, all of the literature review they're looking at is reflective of that idea."

"The quality of ProQuest provides a very easy, searchable, application friendly database that's the best I've ever seen at being able to retrieve results in a way that the candidate needs, that's reflective of their study. There's no other system that does that as well," he continued.

Dr. Helvey decided to use ProQuest to support their goals because of the extensive full-text and supplemental files, as well as the historical and current breadth of content that is all pulled together in one location in an easy-to-use experience.

"Students are not wasting time looking at things that may not be relevant to their study," he continued. "That's ultimately what makes you [as faculty] excited. You didn't waste their money. You didn't waste their time. All of the professors are working together. All of the students are working toward that same goal."

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