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**IN GOOD COMPANY:
A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY DESCRIBING
THE EVOLUTION OF A SUCCESSFUL DOCTORAL COHORT**

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ABSTRACT

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| Aim/Purpose | The purpose of this paper is to examine the creation and organization of an organic collaborative doctoral cohort, in order to better understand what makes doctoral cohorts successful. The participant-researchers explore their experience as creators and members of this unique group. |
| Background | Although adults often prefer to work on their own, cohorts provide opportunities for collaboration as well as academic and professional support. The authors explore the purposeful, knowledgeable, and relational collective learning environment created by these adult students. |
| Methodology | Through the use of a collaborative autoethnography, the authors are able to examine the individual and collective purpose of this student-led group. This methodology allowed each participant-researcher the opportunity to reflect on their rationale for participating in an organic cohort. |
| Contribution | While traditional cohorts match students with similar areas of focus, this study found value in the cohort's diversity. The differing subjects and individual areas of expertise of each cohort member continuously provided a great benefit for each member of the cohort. |
| Findings | This study found that doctoral cohorts may be more successful if students are allowed to form them on their own. When cohorts are organically created by the members involved, the group can solidify when the timing is right for each member and for the group as a whole. |

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| Recommendations for Practitioners | Directors of doctoral programs should encourage the formation of naturally emerging cohorts by supporting and encouraging relationships among their emerging leader-scholars. |
| Recommendations for Researchers | This study examined the creation of one organic collaborative cohort; consequently, more research is needed to understand when and how other cohorts form and what the members of other cohorts view as advantageous. |
| Impact on Society | While this cohort was created during a doctoral program, the practicality of organically created cohorts can be applied to training, group building, or educational programs across varying environments. |
| Future Research | Because cohorts vary throughout universities and programs, more research is needed on why driven and dedicated individuals choose to create and dedicate themselves to cohorts, rather than working on their own. |
| Keywords | collaborative autoethnographies, doctoral students, cohort, collaboration, higher education |

INTRODUCTION

The definition and implementation of doctoral cohorts vary greatly from school to school and program to program. Common cohort models include open cohorts, closed cohorts, naturally emerging cohorts, and leader-scholar communities. Pemberton and Akkary (2010) assert that organically created cohorts are best for students. Their multi-year qualitative study comprised of seven women in an educational leadership program found that naturally emergent cohorts or those born of relationships of choice were more “relevant, empowering, and sustaining of their educational journey” (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010, p. 179). Similarly, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) affirm that adults’ internal motivators are the principal catalysts for their acquisition of new knowledge and skills.

The purpose of this study was to examine the genesis and design of an organic cohort, in order to better understand what makes doctoral cohorts successful. The study explored an organic doctoral cohort from the perspective of four recent Ph.D. graduates, three women and one man, using a collaborative autoethnographic methodological approach. While many have described these cohorts as “natural” peer groups (Preston, Ogenchuk, & Nsiah, 2014) or “naturally emergent cohorts” (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010), the authors chose “organic cohort” to stress the group’s unforced creation. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, an “organic cohort” is defined as a group of students at the same point in a doctoral program who have made the choice to collaborate. The terms “naturally emerging cohort” and an “organically-created cohort” carry the same meaning for the purpose of this study. The common goal of the cohort was for all members of the group to complete the doctoral program. Collective experiences, including the benefits and challenges of participating in a cohort, as reported by successful doctoral graduates could motivate graduate schools and doctoral programs to encourage and support student choice in cohort programs.

This study’s findings indicate that doctoral cohorts may be more successful if all students, male and female, choose to create a cohort themselves, rather than being forced to collaborate as a mandatory part of the program. Additionally, a benefit to an organically created cohort is that the group can establish itself when the timing is right for each member as well as for the group as a whole. Moreover, this cohort found value in our group’s diversity in terms of subject matter expertise versus a traditional cohort which often aligns members based on common research topic content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many doctoral students enter their program with already established lives, working full-time jobs, and/or having a family to care for. Moreover, when doctoral students enroll in their program, they bring with them a myriad of learning experiences as adult learners. Though the field of adult-

centered learning had already been in existence, the term “andragogy” was coined by Malcolm Knowles as a unique approach to education. In the andragogical model, Knowles et al. (2005) illustrate the unique needs of adult learners. According to this andragogical model, adults need an understanding of the purpose and rationale for learning a new topic. Moreover, Knowles et al.’s (2005) andragogical model emphasizes that adults have a tendency to be independent and self-directed. The model also notes that adult learners must engage in authentic experiences in order to learn most effectively.

Additionally, Knowles et al.’s (2005) andragogical model describes the importance of adults’ willingness to learn and their determination towards learning, which in turn places an emphasis on “real-life” learning experiences. Voogt, Fisser, Pareja Roblin, Tondeur, and van Braak’s (2013) notion of authentic experiences and Bandura’s (1977) notion of active mastery are means to which real-world learning occurs. The final aspect of Knowles et al.’s (2005) andragogical model is motivation; the authors argue that, for adults, internal motivators represent the largest catalyst for learning new skills.

Although cohorts have been used in many disciplines and arenas, there is often a lack of buy-in from adults who often prefer to work on their own. Cohorts can be groups of online communities of practice for pre-service teachers (Goos & Bennison, 2008) as well as program formed learning communities for drawing in prospective professionals into education programs (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Traditionally within the realm of higher education, cohorts are established when a group of students meet a specific criterion often this group is tracked throughout its duration (McCown, 1994). In this case, the governing body will create the parameters of this group and students are often placed together for a certain length of time: one project, one semester, or the entire length of their program. In doctoral education, cohort members usually start the program at the same time and follow a set program taking classes together and completing their degree at the same time.

A number of studies describe the benefits of being a part of a learning cohort. Benefits include an increased sense of community and fewer feelings of isolation, as well as enhanced relationships with peers (Mullen, 2003; Olson & Clark, 2009; Wisker, Robinson, & Shacham, 2007; Zahl, 2015). The cohort structure can also inspire the development of “friendly competition” that encourages students to work to their highest potential (Lake, Koper, Balayan, & Lynch, 2016, p. 10). Additionally, a cohort can provide its members with a broader understanding of concepts due to a greater variety of perspectives, as well as more opportunities for networking both during and after the completion of the educational program (Mullen, 2003; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010).

The very nature of a cohort system can vary depending on how it is structured. Some cohorts are “open” in nature. In an open cohort system, students can enter the program at different times during the school year and have flexibility in their timeline for course completion. Conversely, “closed” cohorts are locked in; students enter the program at the same time and complete coursework together, ultimately finishing as a group (Maher, 2001). Pemberton and Akkary (2010) describe a “naturally emerging” cohort, as one in which participants form a learning community of their own volition. Bound together by “shared experiences, collective efforts, and social and cultural engagements” (p. 193), the group of students ultimately formed an unofficial cohort that they described as beneficial to all of its members. Similarly, “self-help groups” that emerged naturally from existing cohorts based on shared interests and shared needs (Wisker et al., 2007). This development suggests that when students are grouped in formal cohorts, it is possible that their needs may not be met. Instead, groups that emerge by choice may be more beneficial. Preston et al. (2014) discuss a peer mentorship program that was flexible in nature. Students assumed the roles of mentor or mentee with other cohort members; because of the open nature of their group, these roles often shifted depending on their peers’ needs. The authors describe this freedom as one of the key characteristics that made their cohort so successful.

Olson and Clark (2009) suggest that the inclusion of leader-scholar communities should be considered a best practice in doctoral programs. The authors define a “leader-scholar community” as a group of five to seven doctoral students who work closely together and alongside two faculty member advisors. These groups work as a unit for the final two years of the doctoral program, with the goals of dissertation completion and graduation for all student participants. Students who participated in such groups reported feeling an increased sense of safety and trust as a result of being a part of a learning community. They described their cohort as a family and claimed that this familial impression was critical to their success as doctoral students. However, the researchers did not state whether the students who were members of these communities had been grouped together formally, or whether they had come together on their own.

Pemberton and Akkary (2010) stress that the forming of cohorts should not be left to chance, because their members might end up being less than compatible. The authors conclude that doctoral programs should be restructured to allow cohorts to form organically. They identified three crucial points in the program during which students should be allowed the opportunity to connect and form communities on their own. These junctures include the first year of the program, the candidacy period, and the dissertation period. Through this arrangement, the authors claim that doctoral students will be more likely to seek out and make meaningful connections with their peers, thus forming more successful communities of learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As budding researchers, doctoral students socialize and discuss their research with peers before internalizing the information for themselves; therefore, it is important that they be afforded the opportunity to collaborate with peers within their doctoral studies. Lev Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory (1978) contains three themes which include social interaction, the more knowledgeable other, and the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky’s theory asserts that learning appears first at the social level before transpiring within the individual. In a cohort situation, adult learners can lean on each other throughout the learning process, taking on each others’ strengths. This synergy exemplifies the second theme of Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory, the more knowledgeable other. As part of a cohort, individual doctoral students are made stronger, especially in cases where one student’s zone of proximal development is not as developed as that of a trusted colleague. Through the doctoral cohort’s collaboration, new meaning is constructed in a manner that is reciprocal for all students involved.

Similarly, according to Tinto’s (1975) model, social experiences directly impact a student’s commitment to remain enrolled in their academic program. Students who engage in both formal and informal social integration practices are less likely to drop out; an organic cohort allows students to remain connected both academically and socially. Tinto’s (1975) work also suggests that individuals develop goals and commitments as a result of the positive experiences gained through working as a community. In short, students’ positive experiences with peers reinforce their commitment, thus strengthening their bond to the university. By examining the role of doctoral cohorts through the lens of both Vygotsky (1978) and Tinto (1975), the multi-faceted purposes and functions of such cohorts can be better understood.

METHODOLOGY

In order to most effectively understand the experiences of recent doctoral graduates and the role of their organic collaborative cohort, the researchers chose to examine this research primarily through a qualitative lens. This choice was appropriate because we were examining the personal experiences of a group of individuals (Merriam, 2009). As the participant-researchers began to consider which qualitative methodology they would utilize, they determined that an autoethnography (AE) would allow them to best focus on each individual and his or her experience within the cohort culture. Moreover, since the researchers were themselves the participants, they employed an autoethnographic frame in

order to capture the “personal story” of each individual (Creswell, 2013, p.73). Further, Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013) define collaborative autoethnographies as “a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data” (p. 23-24). Thus, a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) afforded the participant-researchers the ability to bring their narratives together by examining them individually and then within the group.

Chang et al. (2013) state that CAE, like singular autoethnographies, are a self-focused mode of qualitative study because the role of the researcher and participant are merged. “However, collaborative projects have branched out of the foundational work of AE. CAE still focuses on self- interrogation but does so collectively and cooperatively within a team of researchers” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 21). CAE studies have been employed to provide firsthand accounts of “nontraditional” doctoral students’ voyage into a group-created cohort (Gleiman, Knolton, & Mokhtarian, 2015); journeys in mentoring and faculty-student partnership (Malin & Hackman, 2016; Moore, Scarduzio, Plump, & Geist-Martin, 2013); and identity and experiences as immigrants in the United States academy (Hernandez & Murray-Johnson, 2015; Wong & Tiu-Wu, 2014). Collaborative autoethnographies provide “a form of narrative inquiry further legitimatizing the personal stories and experiences we shared” (Gleiman et al., 2015, p. 3). Additionally, Moore et al. (2013) state that in their collaborative autoethnography, which includes both faculty and students, they facilitated a “process of writing and reflection” (p. 2).

OUR STUDY

When approaching this collaborative autoethnography, the participant-researchers heeded the recommendations of Chang et al. (2013) which state that because collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a developing methodology it should not be restricted to any one technique. They add that “as long as it holds true to the salient aspects of methodological rigor” then CAEs can be adapted (Chang et al., 2013, p. 25). Therefore, in order to facilitate the essential approaches of “methodological rigor”, the researchers modified and added to the CAE methodological approach that was established by Chang et al. (2013).

To aid each participant-researcher in his or her individual writing and reflection process, three of the cohort members collectively created a response form which included informal questions and prompts. While the responses were not limited to the items on the form, these items directed that participants describe how they came to be a member of the group, the point in their program when this occurred, how long it took each individual to reach that point, and the number of courses that remained when they took the literature review course. The items also requested that participants describe their feelings regarding the formal/informal nature of their cohort, their general thoughts regarding organic cohorts, and the benefits and/or drawbacks they felt they had received as a result of being a member of their group. This approach required the participants to reflect on their experience with the cohort; still, each member was able to provide very specific details and examples as well as specific events from the year’s passing. Moreover, since all members were involved with the cohort at the same time, they created a collaborative timeline of events that referenced throughout data analysis. After each narrative was collected, the group met to share and make initial meaning of the narratives at hand.

Chang et al. (2013) state that “[i]n CAE, researchers can alternate between group and solo work” (p. 24). In a similar vein, this research study facilitated the use of both collective and individual work in data analysis. First each group member coded the data independently. Then the researcher-participants collectively coded all four of the narratives by organizing the information or codes into categories. Then after each researcher coded independently, the researchers met to make meaning of the themes and codes as a group (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). This was a vital step in the process of the collaborative autoethnography because it allowed for triangulation of the data, thereby

increasing the fidelity of the findings. As a group, the researchers agreed on the themes and the descriptors for each theme before they began outlining and making meaning of the subject matter. Then the researchers outlined how the narratives, themes, and results were going to be presented. During this time the researchers began to note how a few of the themes and codes were present not only in all four of the members' narratives, but also visibly vital their stories. While this study merged from a qualitative methodology, the participant-researchers felt it was important to bring attention to not only the qualitative quotes and support but the frequency of these codes as well. Therefore, while it was not the sole purpose of this study, the quantitative data was used as a means for further illustrating this cohort's purpose and role. The researchers subsequently wrote the remaining sections both individually and collectively.

Limitations and delimitations

For this collaborative autoethnography, the potential participants were the six members of our cohort. Our "cohort" is defined as the six post-doctoral students who were actively engaged in contributing and collaborating with the group, ultimately graduating in the 2016 calendar year. The six members were provided the opportunity to join, contribute, and collaborate as participant-researchers for this study. The first limitation was that two cohort members were unable to participate in the study, as they had relocated to various areas throughout the US and had previous commitments. The remaining four cohort members agreed to participate in this study. Another limitation that the researchers acknowledge is that in collaborative writing and efforts, it is possible that not all members can contribute the same amount to the study. Consequently, one of the four members was unable to be involved in every aspect of the study but was still able to provide his narrative as data. While collaborative autoethnographies seek to provide insight into the collective experience of the participant-researchers, this study was limited in the number and contributions that were available. Therefore, the remaining three participant-researchers worked through elements of the study and authorship together.

A different limitation came with the nature of recalling information, described in a previous section, which can restrict the participants' retention of information and experiences. Also, since the researchers were also the participants there can be elements of researcher bias. Finally, it should be noted that this study examined the experience of one group of doctoral students at one university during one calendar year and therefore is limited in the scope and generalizability it can provide. However, the purpose was to explore the unique characteristics in this group's formation and understand why the members found it to be helpful and successful.

BACKGROUND AND BRIEF NARRATIVES

This section begins with a brief overview of our doctoral program. Because our Ph.D. cohort does not follow "traditional" cohort models, it is essential to begin by providing a background into the program and the formation of our Ph.D. cohort. Following this section are four brief personal narratives of the participating cohort members that highlight each individual's rationale for joining the cohort as well as a description of what each person gained from the cohort.

PH.D. PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The members of the cohort met while attending a public research II state university, a doctoral university of "higher research activity" as defined by The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (The Trustees of Indiana University, 2017). This higher educational institution's College of Education houses seven departments which offer various bachelors, masters, specialists and doctoral degrees as well as many certifications, endorsements, and focuses. The program of study was a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction. Although the program now only has fall admittance, during the time of the cohort, the program allowed for both fall and spring. The program's focus is both theoretical and practical and is ideal for educators in all levels and for those

who work in curriculum as coordinators, planners, and developers. The program requires that each student complete 81 hours of coursework at the post-baccalaureate level comprised of core curriculum and instruction courses, research coursework, area of specialization electives, and dissertation credits. The program is very flexible and prides itself on providing students the opportunity to take courses at their own pace as long as they remain continually enrolled as a student. Students vary in the amount of time it takes them to get through their coursework, especially since the vast majority of doctoral students are full-time teachers. During a student's last semester of coursework, they take their written qualifying or comprehensive exam. After successfully completing exams, doctoral candidates shift their focus to writing and gaining approval for their dissertation proposal. The final stage of the doctoral program follows a traditional structure, with each student completing an individual original research product that is then defended before a dissertation committee.

GENESIS OF THE COHORT

All of the cohort members came to the Ph.D. program seeking a terminal degree in Curriculum and Instruction. While most of the members had previous elementary and secondary teaching experience, only two members of the cohort were classroom teachers at the time. The cohort also included a school administrator as well as both full-time and part-time college professors. Members of the cohort ranged in age from their late-20s to mid-30s and all various stages of their life. Moreover, members resided in three different counties, with the furthest two being more than two hours from each other. Cohort members also varied in their areas of research, which included virtual education, early childhood education, religious and faith-based education, and instructional technology. Due to the flexible self-paced nature of our doctoral program, many of the cohort members knew of, had classes with, or had socialized with a member before the organic organization of the cohort. However, the group was not formed until the last semester of coursework. The timing of the cohort's formation was described by all participants as a pivotal moment for each individual. As all of the members were in their last stages of coursework in the fall semester of 2014, the collaboration and feedback each experienced in that course and throughout the subsequent remaining course in spring of 2015 solidified the group. By January 2015 the group talked, met, and collaborated with each other nearly each day. The group also met outside of class on weekends to write for remaining courses, study for comprehensive exams, and prepare for the dissertation proposal, which transitioned the group into an official cohort.

KATIE'S NARRATIVE: MOTIVATION AND SUPPORT

At the end of the fall 2014 semester, I realized that if I was going to make it out of my program, I needed the moral, academic, physical, and emotional support of my colleagues. I believe that our last course, and more importantly the time we spent outside of class, was really what helped us to form as a group. We naturally formed as a cohort because no one forced us to meet and work together, this is what made our group truly successful. I believe our cohort saw the continual benefits of our collaboration and communication, and that we were there to support each other for anything. Personally, the cohort provided me with a set time to meet and complete work, while offering feedback from my group members. This was the support I needed during my last two doctoral courses and then on to comprehensive exams, proposal, dissertating, and finally, the defense.

While our cohort members were spread out over three counties and as far as two and half hours apart, this did not stop us from working together. We often met virtually and remained flexible to the needs of each group member. Also, there was always an open line of communication (usually online or via text) which provided us an avenue to "check in" on each other and support each other between meetings. From day one, all of us agreed that every cohort member might not need the same thing from the group and therefore would not always be at every meeting, but we were all okay with that. I believe that the success of our cohort was largely because each person got out of it what they put into it. For me, the cohort provided an opportunity for support and accountability, while

also allowing me to be open and vulnerable to the critiques and feedback from my colleagues. Each member's willingness to actively engage in the group provided me the continual motivation and support I needed. Although we did have some friendly competition here and there, we all knew that each one of us wanted to get done (with the program and graduate) and therefore we all would help each other as much as we could. I would not be where I am today if it was not for the love, support, guidance, and cheerleading from my fellow doctoral students; there was nothing like the support of my cohort members. And now I have some amazing friends, who continue to support me (and I them) in many avenues of life.

ALLISON'S NARRATIVE: STRUCTURE AND FAMILY

I joined the cohort after having been in the doctoral program for 3.5 years. I knew most of the other members from previous courses we had taken, or from social events put on by the department. At that time, I had been taking online elective courses rather than face-to-face classes. As a result, I was feeling disconnected from the program and the university in general. Thus, I found myself craving more of a personal connection and hoping for opportunities to become more involved. Throughout our interactions in the literature review course, I found that I meshed well both socially and professionally with the other members of the cohort, and as a result I was eager to work with them. They represented exactly the type of opportunity for involvement that I had been seeking.

I felt that being a member of the cohort gave me the structure I needed to stay on track. Our group's frequent meetings and self-imposed deadlines provided me with valuable organization and structure during a time in the doctoral program that was largely self-directed. I also felt an accountability to the other members of the cohort that often gave me additional motivation to continue. I felt a purely personal sense of competition with my peers that kept me working to my greatest capacity so that I would not fall behind the others. I feel strongly that, because each member of the cohort possessed expertise in a particular area, our collaboration served to strengthen the cohort as a whole. On a personal level, I depended on my peers for advice and help; I often wonder whether I could have completed the comprehensive exams and dissertation process without my cohort members' support. I still view my cohort members as family and I strongly feel that the friendships we formed will be life-long.

CHRISTINA'S NARRATIVE: SUPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING

I was a doctoral student in the program for 2.5 years before joining the cohort. I knew each of the cohort members before the group assembled. I also experienced some major life events while I was enrolled in the program's required courses such as the birth of my first child. Still, with the support of close family and friends I was determined to push through and complete my doctorate degree. While my family and friends were supportive, they could not relate to the pressure of writing a quality dissertation. I knew I needed to surround myself with individuals who could empathize with me and who needed my support as much as I needed them. As soon as I began conducting a review of the literature and compiling an actual literature review the internal pressure reached an all-time high for me. My anxiety began to take over and no matter how much literature I read, as I wrote I would ultimately delete it all feeling like nothing was good enough. Internally, I was also doubting my field of study, virtual education. Pinning down a dissertation topic was difficult for me because I wanted to solve all of the problems of virtual education with my one research study.

While I felt comfortable expressing vulnerability in front of my doctoral student peers, I did not feel safe expressing my concerns to the course professor or the teaching assistant. I relied heavily on the compassion and honesty of my peers in the cohort. The peers in my cohort understood the pressures I was facing and could truly empathize with my experiences in the doctoral program. They encouraged me to write, they listened while I read ideas aloud, they helped me to pin down clear research questions, and they always gave me a safe space to rattle off horrible ideas without judgement.

I know without a doubt there is no way I could have completed my Ph.D. without the individuals in the doctoral cohort. I consider each member a part of my family.

MICHAEL’S NARRATIVE: FLEXIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

I am not entirely sure how I became a member of the group or even how the group itself came together. I had known a few members of the group very well through my coursework (Katie and I started the program at the same time) and during my time as a graduate assistant for the department. I worked well with the other members of the group, and therefore the group was casually formed. Having organized times to meet and knowing that others would be reviewing my work drove me to work harder and faster. But I also liked how the “meetings” were always easygoing and flexible. I usually prefer working alone because working in solitude requires me to have tunnel vision; therefore, I usually can really make progress on my work. However, the cohort really worked for me because nothing was mandatory- members could either make it or not- and it also provided a quasi-social outlet of peers which I found to be very important to finish this type of program. Additionally, I felt I could utilize the other members of the cohort to generate innovative ideas, and to provide feedback. I did not feel that there were any drawbacks to the cohort because everything was optional and there was not any pressure to do anything, unless we placed it on ourselves.

FINDINGS

Once data were collected, the participant-researchers examined all four narratives and coded them in order to identify common themes. As a result of this analysis, 25 separate codes were developed (see Table 1). The researchers then began grouping the codes, at which point four categories emerged: sense of belonging, sense of purpose, social/emotional effects and academic effects. Additionally, the researchers identified “benefit” and “challenge” codes as recurring themes. Therefore, they then labeled each code as a benefit, challenge, or both (this will be discussed in further detail in the upcoming paragraphs).

Table 1. List of codes

This table is a list of the original 25 codes the participant-researchers identified when analyzing the data.

| | | | | |
|----------------|---------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Accountability | Balance | Structure | Stress Reduction | Same Point in Program |
| Social | Competition | Benefit* | Challenge* | Flexible |
| Trust | Collaboration | Sense of Community | Diversity of Ideas | Judgement Free |
| Feedback | Bonding | Motivation | Dedicated | Choice |
| Family | Organic | Celebrating Success | Support | Personal Investment |

* Denotes the two codes that through further analysis were removed and used as themes throughout subsequent data analysis.

After the 23 codes were agreed upon, the researchers independently assigned each code to any of the four categories (sense of belonging, sense of purpose, social/emotional effects, and/or academic effects). It was here that the researchers agreed that since many of the codes belonged in one or more categories, they would not limit codes to a single category; instead, they allowed for placing each code under as many categories as they felt appropriate. The researchers subsequently met to discuss the results of their individual coding with the goal of reaching an agreement throughout the codes. Once the researchers compiled their individual results they created Table 2, which illustrates the agreed upon codes and categories.

Table 2. Categorization of codes

This chart illustrates where each code was placed and in which categories.

| Codes | Sense of Belonging | Sense of Purpose | Social/ Emotional Effects | Academic Effects |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| Accountability | | | | X |
| Balance | | | X | |
| Structure | | | | X |
| Stress Reduction | | | X | X |
| Same Point in Program | X | X | | |
| Social | X | X | X | |
| Competition | | X | | X |
| Flexible | | | X | |
| Trust | X | | X | |
| Collaboration | X | | | X |
| Sense of Community | X | X | X | |
| Diversity of Ideas | | | | X |
| Judgement Free | X | | X | |
| Feedback | | | | X |
| Bonding | X | X | X | |
| Motivation | | X | X | X |
| Dedicated | X | X | X | X |
| Choice | X | | X | |
| Family | X | | X | |
| Organic | X | X | | |
| Celebrating Success | | X | X | X |
| Support | X | | X | |
| Personal Investment | | X | X | |

SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL EFFECTS

Social/emotional effects were found to recur throughout the codes. Moreover, the researchers noticed the frequency that social/emotional effects were coded along with the sense of belonging and/or sense of purpose categories. In fact, the only times that social/emotional effects did not correspond to sense of belonging and/or sense of purpose was with the codes “balance” and “flexible.” The importance of flexibility and balance was vital to Michael. Michael stated, “This cohort really worked for me because nothing was mandatory ... I would have not been as successful (or sane) without members of this group ... Everything was optional; there was not pressure to do anything ...” Additionally, the code “stress reduction” did not correspond to sense of belonging or sense of purpose but did relate to academic effects.

While many of the codes corresponded to both social/emotional effects and sense of belonging or sense of purpose, four codes (“social,” “sense of community,” “bonding,” and “dedicated”) were noted across all three categories. Although many of the members of the cohort described the social outlet the cohort represented for them, this was especially important for Katie. She noted:

To me, members of a cohort are there to support each other for anything. While we met to work, provide each other with feedback, and have support during our last doctoral courses, comprehensive exams, proposal, dissertating, and defense, I also had support during other

aspects of my life and celebrated with members of my cohort in their big and small events in life.

While the social aspects were important to Katie, she, Christina, and Allison all noted that the cohort provided them with a “sense of community.” Allison stated that up until the cohort was formed she “was sort of a lone wolf” and she “felt very disconnected.” She noticed that she was seeking a group for collaboration and wanted to feel more connected to the university. Moreover, she noted that if at any other point in the program the group would have tried to form it would not have worked. Allison said, “For me, the timing was crucial. I consider myself supremely lucky that the people who I was working with at the time of the lit review course happened to be amazing.” Similarly, Christina stated that it was during this course that she “truly understood at that point I was not alone.” The sense of community was vital not only to the essence of the cohort but to its very genesis.

Correspondingly, this sense of community also echoed within the recurring code of “bonding”. Many times, the cohort members stated that while they found the support and guidance that they received from family and friends to be important, nothing compared to the support, and subsequent bonding, that came from those who were directly involved in the process. Along this line, Allison noted:

The victories and pitfalls we experienced are not occurrences that our loved ones could identify with. We bonded together through these experiences- we bolstered each other through the stressful times and celebrated together when we found even tiny measures of success.

Katie echoed this sentiment stating, “And while my family and friends supported me, there is nothing like having a group of people going through the same thing at the same time to really forge a bond.” The connection that was forged did not happen in the classroom; instead it occurred outside of the university because cohort members were invested and wanted to create a community of support for themselves and for each other.

As Michael stated previously, the flexibility of this cohort was key to its success; however, this flexibility would not have worked if each member was not dedicated to it. While aspects of friendly competition were introduced occasionally, the overarching purpose of the cohort was always for each member to successfully complete his or her program. Christina recounts in a transformative moment, “That evening we vowed to get through the dissertation process together. We knew that if we could survive the Literature Review course working independently, together we could conquer Comps and the entire dissertation process.” The importance of collaborating and using each other as resources signified that the members were dedicated to not only our own success, but the success of each other. While members of the cohort completed their comps, dissertation, and defense at various times, the members’ dedication to each other never faltered. “[M]y colleagues completed comps two weeks ahead of me, received IRB approval first, defended and graduated a full semester before me, I continued working with the group and they supported me until I graduated,” Christina recalled. The importance of each individual completing the program was of the utmost importance to each cohort member, even if they had already completed the program. This unwavering dedication was essential to everyone’s academic success.

ACADEMIC EFFECTS

Although there were many contributing factors to the creation of the cohort, all of the members stated that there were numerous academic benefits of being a part of the cohort. The three codes that all participants mentioned within academic effects were “accountability,” “collaboration” (also part of sense of belonging), and “motivation.” Additionally, it should be noted that Michael and Katie noted the importance of the valuable “feedback” that members of the cohort provided in various elements and stages of writing and work. Moreover, Christina, Allison, and Michael all discussed their appreciation for each member’s “diversity of ideas” and varying “contribution.” The aspects of “feedback” and “diversity of ideas” were key to Michael and he noted them when describing the

benefits of the cohort. Michael listed numerous benefits which included “Idea generation of peers, feedback from peers reviewing work, motivation to finish in time to have a more polished product to share ...” For Michael, as well as for other cohort members, the work and feedback that everyone provided for each other was instrumental to the group’s success.

The aspect of “accountability” played a vital role for each member in the cohort, but it is interesting to note how accountability represented different things to different people. For Allison, accountability was having people to “check in” on her, to talk her through moments of frustration, or to keep her on her toes. Accountability meant holding each other responsible for themselves and to the group. For Katie, accountability was knowing that there was time set aside to work as a group, that there were always people to support her, and those who would hold her to her own deadlines and due dates. Christina noted that for her accountability also included the main goal: degree completion. Christina stated, “I truly cared about the success of the members in the group and I leaned on them myself for constant support and reassurance ... we held each other accountable for completing the program.” Additionally, “collaboration” created a sense of belonging for members of the cohort and also provided a major academic benefit. Allison mentioned that although cohort members were encouraged to work together in classes, it was from “that point on we continued to work together and lean on each other.” This was done outside the parameters of classes and coursework. She continues, “It was about being there for each other at the most crucial, intense parts of the program.” Members of the cohort valued the time that was spent together, but often it was difficult for six members from three different counties to meet in one physical location. Christina stated that the group often scheduled time to meet; however, when members could not meet in person the group would utilize video conferencing in order to include them. Maintaining a continual physical, virtual, or vocal presence was key to the cohort’s success.

There were many other codes which encouraged and impacted academic effects and successes, but “motivation” was one of the remaining codes that was present throughout all of the narratives. While motivation might seem solely academic, inspiring members to complete the program, it was also present in providing the cohort with a sense of purpose as well as having a social/emotional effect. Additionally, motivation manifested itself in many ways. For Michael it pushed him to finish. Allison stated how her naturally competitive nature kept her motivated, “If a peer was done with chapter 4, then I wanted to be done with chapter 4. It was purely one-sided and unspoken competition, but one that kept me motivated and kept me working.” Christina noted that “Approaching each milestone of the dissertation process alongside the members of the cohort fueled me each day.” Katie echoed the sentiments of her cohort members and added that it was everyone’s personal investment to both the group and their own completion which was key to our cohort’s success.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF AN ORGANIC COLLABORATIVE COHORT

Further analysis of the codes revealed that the participant-researchers all felt the benefits of the cohort outweighed the challenges. As the codes emerged into themes, the researchers found that 21 codes were considered benefits, 2 codes were considered both a benefit and a challenge, and none of the codes were found to be outright challenges. “Collaboration” and “balance” were the two codes found to be both beneficial and challenging.

“Collaboration” among the cohort members came naturally to the group. Michael noted, “I suppose we all just worked so well while together in official school classes and functions that we chose to continue outside of class.” Each member of the cohort had previously been in at least one class with a member of the group prior to the formation of the cohort. According to Katie, “open collaboration and feedback is key.” She went on to explain that trusting the feedback she received from peers in the group was important to the success of all members. Allison explained that the collaborative team made each member better. She explained, “On the surface, amazingly, being a member of a cohort made the often-laborious process of becoming a doctoral candidate and then writing a dissertation enjoyable.” She continued to say:

When one of us would fall behind, as it was easy to do, someone was always there to check in and bring that person back. I have lost count of the number of times someone talked me down during a moment of panic or helped me solve a problem I just couldn't figure out. We all have different strengths – tech support, writing, editing, statistical analysis, etc., and so each person lent that strength to the group as a whole. Simply stated, we made each other better.

Katie agreed with Allison's team mentality, stating "All for one, and one for all. While this might seem cliché for our group this was the case. We never once were competitive."

According to Michael, the drawbacks included both collaboration and balance. He often enjoyed working alone and he found that coordinating schedules could be difficult at times. He states, "I usually prefer working alone. This is because I usually get tunnel vision (in a good way) when working in solitude and can really make progress. Plus, it is often a hassle trying to coordinate schedules." Katie shared a similar sentiment stating, "The drawbacks were that the members of our cohort were spread out over three counties and as far as two and a half hours apart." Coordinating schedules and distance between the members in the group created some challenges. However, all of the participants agreed that technology allowed for more flexibility; specifically, cohort members could conference into meetings when possible. Christina pointed out, "If a meeting time didn't work we rescheduled it or met in an alternate format (online synchronous/asynchronous) to make it work for all."

All in all, the benefits of our organic cohort far exceeded the challenges. While coordinating schedules among team members and the sometime preference of working alone were considered drawbacks, the participant-researchers overwhelmingly reported feeling that the cohort was beneficial. Perhaps the main reason the challenges were also considered beneficial is that participants had the flexibility to join in as little or as much as they needed.

DISCUSSION

The following section contains an analysis of the study's findings. First, the two categories of effects, social-emotional and academic, are investigated side-by-side. Next is a description of the importance of timing in a doctoral cohort, which is followed by an exploration of the role that technology can play within such groups. Finally, the theme of flexibility and its importance is discussed.

SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL AND ACADEMIC EFFECTS: A SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

One theme that emerged from the data was the personal effects each researcher had noted as a result of being a part of the cohort. The research-participants had both individually and collectively noted the continued emphasis and overlap of codes involving social/emotional and academic effects. Therefore, the researchers felt it was worthwhile not only to analyze the codes using a qualitative lens, but also to compare the prevalence of each of these two codes in particular. To complete this analysis, the researchers grouped individual codes into three main categories of effects: social-emotional effects, academic effects, or both. The researchers further analyzed the data to examine the number of times each type of effect was mentioned, and ultimately found a total of 205 such occurrences.

The frequency with which each effect was mentioned by participants is noteworthy (see Figure 1). While it is clear that cohort members found that being a part of such a group had effects on both their social-emotional and their academic growth, the fact that social-emotional effects were mentioned nearly twice as often as academic effects suggests that cohorts may have the greatest influence on doctoral students' emotional well-being, rather than on their academic success. This finding corresponds to Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory, which incorporates social interaction as one of its fundamental principles. This finding also supports Tinto's (1975) claim that a student's social experiences are a critical part of their ability to successfully complete their academic program. Therefore, the numerous statements made by the cohort members stating the importance of aca-

demic support but even more so spending time together is extremely valuable. Doctoral students traditionally experience periods of isolation during the proposal writing, researching, and dissertation writing stages; consequently, this cohort found the friendship and support of their peers to be just as vital as the feedback and academic insight they provided. It is important to note that, due to the small sample size as was part of this study's design, the authors do not assert these findings to necessarily be universal. For the current study, however, the emphasis that was placed on social-emotional effects by all the participants was an important finding.

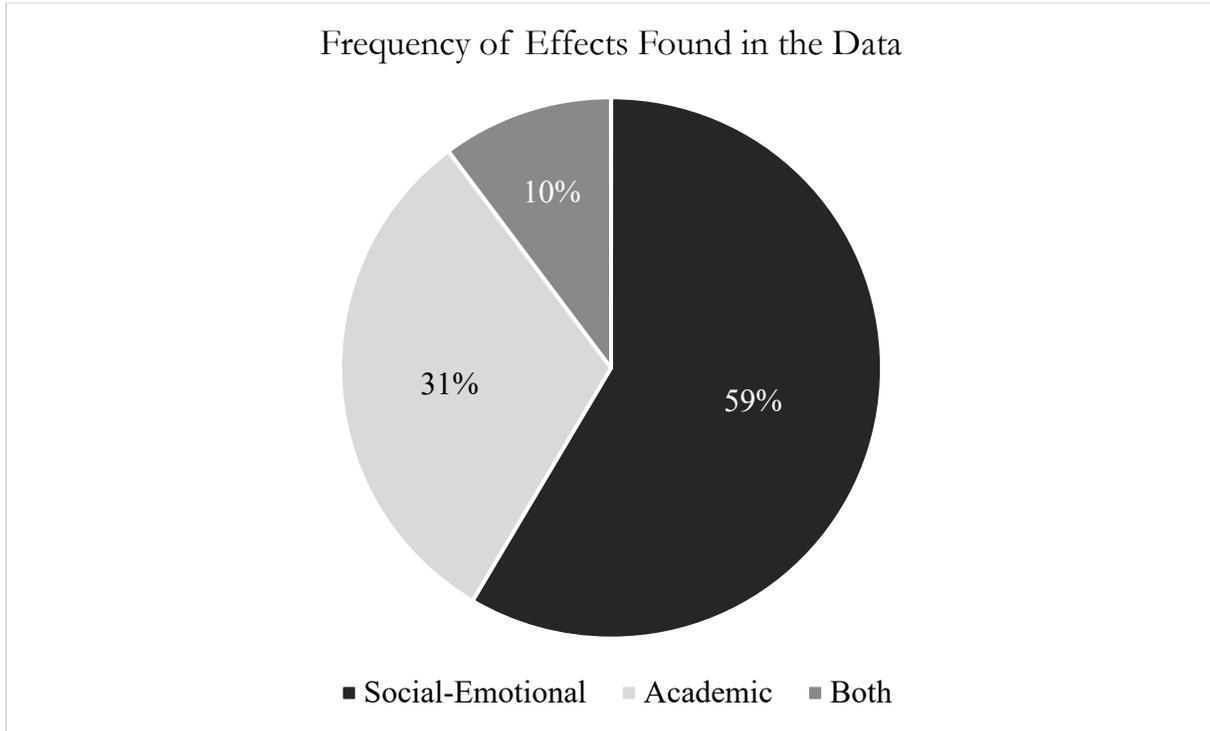


Figure 1. Effect frequency

This pie chart illustrates the frequency of each type of effect within each participant's transcript.

SAME POINT IN PROGRAM

Another theme that emerged from the data was the importance of timing within the program. Most of the participants started the program at different points (Katie and Michael started the same semester), but everyone's program had converged at the time when the cohort formed organically. Thus, our cohort followed an "open" cohort design which allowed the formation of the group to occur when it needed to. Allison stresses this point when she states, "I started the doc program earlier than everyone else in our little group, and had I been forced to work together with the people in my first course [doc seminar], that never would have worked." It is clear from this finding that our cohort could not have worked if it was formed during the beginning of a doctoral program. As was the case with the participants in the study, doctoral students do not work through their courses at the same rate, so their classmates in the beginning stages of their program may no longer be there by the end.

Rather than doctoral students being placed in a cohort with their classmates at the beginning of their program, the findings of this study emphasize the benefits of a cohort that is formed toward the end of the program, specifically as the participants are working in the final course(s) of their program. This is one of the direct benefits of creating an organic cohort, since it can form when the timing is right for each member and the group as a whole. This phase also represents the time at which the participants are working toward candidacy, and then continuing into the dissertation stage, which is

one of the most intense portions of a doctoral program. According to the participants, having their peers' support during such a stressful time proved to be an invaluable part of each individual's success. Katie remarked that the cohort led her to a "have support during our last doctoral courses, comprehensive exams, proposal, dissertating, and defense." Katie's statement furthers Knowles' et al. (2005) underpinnings that adult students must see a purpose and rationale for their work. In this case working with the cohort had a purpose for Katie, as well as other cohort members, because she shared the need for support (Wisker et al., 2007). Christina remembered how she and her peers "vowed to get through the dissertation process together," and that "together we would conquer comps and the entire dissertation process." This echoes the findings of Pemberton and Akkary (2010), whose "findings suggest the need for graduate programs to modify and broaden cohort structures and strategically create space and opportunity for student connection and engagement" (p. 201) at certain key points in a graduate program. Just as the findings of the current study suggest, Pemberton and Akkary's (2010) critical points included the candidacy and dissertation phases.

BENEFITS AND THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The cohort's success is directly related to the fact that its members felt the benefits of being a part of the cohort outweighed any challenges of it. In other words, the group strived to meet the needs of each individual. Each member of the group sought something different from meeting as a group. Some group members were looking for accountability and structure, while others needed a supportive, collegial environment. Yet, the purpose of the cohort for all members was to ensure that each person crossed the graduation finish line. The team became a community that looked out for and championed for one another. Tinto (2003) reports that students participating in learning community experiences had an "increased sense of responsibility to participate in the learning experience, and an awareness of their responsibility for both their learning and the learning of others" (p. 6). Allison described the group as a learning community when she discussed the way in which the group "bonded together" and "bolstered each other through the stressful times."

The most notable challenge, which was also considered a benefit due to the cohort's flexible structure, was balance. Each member had personal commitments outside of the doctoral program which made it difficult for meetings to occur in-person each week for each individual. Due to the group's flexible nature, technology was utilized to enable colleagues to collaborate in the means which best suited their schedule, which more effectively allowed for each individual's school-life balance. Technology such as Google Hangout chats allowed for instant communication within cohort members because anyone could share information, feedback, or a funny word. Additionally, collaborative documents were housed in Google Docs. This enabled instant sharing and feedback on research and ideas. Members of the cohort spanned across three South Florida counties and travel to a common place to meet and work was not always possible. For those with an impossible commute, video conferencing through Google Hangouts still allowed for face-to-face communication. Christina explained 'joining the group on camera through Google Hangouts was sometimes the best option for me because it allowed me to be at home with my daughter without missing out on preparing for comprehensive exams with the group.' Technology integration was central to the flexible design of the cohort, because it decreased many of the challenges and that would have hindered the cohort's success.

FLEXIBILITY

Essential to the formation and both success and benefits of the cohort was the organic and accommodating nature in which it was formed. The organic, student-led, creation of this cohort echoes the findings of Pemberton and Akkary (2010) and Wisker et al. (2007), all of whom described cohorts that were formed because the participants themselves strove to create a community focused on the needs and interests of its members. Michael noted that all of the members of the cohort worked well together in class and that the members then chose to work outside of the classroom together. Chris-

tina stated that creation of the cohort or the process was never “mandated or forced.” Consequently, the group’s authentic and cooperative formation was central its foundation and flexible nature. Additionally, the members of a “naturally emerging” cohort (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010) often highlighted that they benefitted from what they put into it, and therefore the choice was up to each member to seek what he or she needed from the group. Katie stated that each member’s focus on getting what they needed out of the cohort was key to the group’s success; each member was invested in the cohort for his or her own reason. The notion of organic flexibility mirrors what Olson and Clark (2009) refer to as leader-scholar communities, a design which they claim as a best practice in doctoral programs. When the members of a cohort are themselves the leaders they can gain as much from the cohort as they need and want. Therefore, the cohort becomes a dynamic and malleable entity that is not “mandated or forced” but “natural,” as described by Christina. The natural formation of the cohort is at odds with Knowles et al.’s (2005) notion that adult-learners prefer to be independent and self-driven, yet since the cohort members created the cohort themselves they saw value and purpose for their work with the group, which aligns with Knowles et al. (2005). Although the cohort allowed members to work collectively, the decision to participate in the cohort was ultimately each member’s, and each valued the authentic experience that the cohort provided (Voogt et al., 2013). Therefore, the frequent meetings, the continual emails, chats, and texts, and the time set aside to read, and critique other’s work represented a constant choice for each member to engage in a group that required more of them. Consequently, because participation was never required, the flexible nature of the cohort provided each member the opportunity to continually re-engage which echoes Knowles et al.’s (2005) notion that adult-learners are more likely to engage when they are provided an enriching learning experience.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study found that this doctoral cohort was successful because the students were able to form it on their own, not forced or mandated as part of their program. When cohorts are allowed to be created organically, by the members who are interested, then the group can materialize when it is the right time for both the individuals of the group and the cohort itself. The desires of adult students are centered on the practicality and application to their current situation. Knowles et al. (2005) note that adult students have a predisposition towards independent and self-directed learning, and while cohorts may seem counterintuitive to this, organic, and subsequently self-driven, collaborative cohorts more effectively meet the individualized needs of adult learners. This is vastly different from traditional cohorts which usually match students with similar areas of focus. Additionally, our cohort found value in our group’s diversity; our differing subjects and our individual areas of expertise continuously benefited each member of the group.

In order for doctoral students to have a sense of security and trust with their fellow doctoral students, they must lead their own group. This study champions Olson and Clark’s (2009) assertion that leader-scholar cohorts should be a best practice within doctoral programs. It is in such cohorts that doctoral students can create a collaborative environment that is centered on each participant’s needs, but is also open, helpful, and flexible to everyone (Preston et al., 2014; Wisker et al., 2007). As Katie stated, “You have to trust those in your cohort and know they are wanting the best for you and looking out for you.” The continual collaboration, support, and guidance that were reported by cohort members were key to the group’s success. Pemberton and Akkary’s (2010) study was grounded in women’s theory because it examined a naturally emerging cohort of seven women within an educational leadership program over a seven-year period. According to Pemberton and Akkary (2010), formal cohorts are a part of many educational leadership programs’ designs; therefore, the creation of their naturally emerging group, at least for women, was different than the status quo. The current study valued Pemberton and Akkary’s (2010) study because it showed great similarities in how it naturally emerged; however, the methodological approach, the genders of the group members, the program of study, and the time frame of study vastly differed. While the methodological approaches differed, the current study had both men and women in a Curriculum and Instruction program and

examined their cohort over a two-year window. The aforementioned details further demonstrate how the creation of organic cohorts rely more on the willingness and investment of the members, than on their gender or the program of study they pursue.

Furthermore, the cohort's timing was crucial to its formation. Michael, Allison, Christina, and Katie all mentioned the natural and seamless origin of the cohort. Just as Pemberton and Akkary (2010) suggest, doctoral programs should be focused on promoting the organic creation of cohorts at three crucial points in doctoral program. Accordingly, preparing for candidacy, finishing the last semester of coursework, and preparing for comprehensive exams and dissertation proposal was the foundation for the organic creation of the cohort described within this study. As the cohort members continued to rely on each other for feedback and assistance, they realized that they had formed a unique system of support and saw the importance of mentoring others. Katie and Christina shared their cohort experiences with a colleague who at the time recently became a doctoral candidate. She had stated that she felt alone and was growing frustrated because she did not feel supported. Because of Christina and Katie's suggestions, and urging, she reached out to a few colleagues around the same point in the program she was in and created her own system of support. She stated that her cohort was vastly different from ours, they relied on each other for program information and support, but primarily used their group as an important outlet for mingling and spending time together, rather than for feedback and collaboration.

While this study examined the creation of one organically created cohort, more research needs to be done on this phenomenon. The authors do not believe that they are the exception; more likely they are an example of how, when a group of dedicated and driven people decide to work together, they can achieve their goals. Christina said it best, "Organic cohorts are powerful. When a group of individuals self-form and work towards a common goal, I believe there is nothing that can't be accomplished." For this cohort, they created a support system that saw all six members successfully complete their programs. Now that the days of the Ph.D. program are past, what remains is a group of people who continue to support each other in all academic, professional, and personal aspects of each other's lives.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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