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Completion of Educational Doctorates: How Universities Can Foster Persistence

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Abstract

With high attrition and long time-to-degree completion rates in education doctorate programs, it is important to identify ways for program administrators and faculty to foster student persistence. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological inquiry was to examine the beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of individuals who successfully completed doctoral degrees in the field of education in order to identify ways in which academic institutions can encourage persistence. Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory and Tinto's (1975) student integration model were utilized as a framework for the study. From participant narratives of their education doctoral program experiences, five primary themes of doctoral program completion were identified. The themes were the following: (a) relationships with family, faculty and peers; (b) determination, organization skills, and time management; (c) program flexibility and course relevance; (d) career advancement and financial reward; and (e) clear doctoral program expectations. Derived from these themes, recommendations are provided for program administrators and faculty to foster student persistence in their doctorate of education programs.

Keywords: Doctorate Education, Dissertation, Persistence, University, Phenomenology

Introduction

Walker, Gold, Jones, Conklin Bueschel, and Hutchings (2008) stated, "Serious thinking about what works in doctoral education and what no longer works, is an urgent matter" (p. 5), for high attrition rates across disciplines in doctoral programs are high (Golde, 2006; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Attrition within education doctoral programs is very high, with estimated attrition ranging from 50% to 70% (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Further, over the last two decades, time-to-degree completion rates have increased for graduate students in education programs while decreasing in other disciplines (National Science Foundation, 2009; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

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Doctoral attrition is costly to students and universities. Lovitts (2001) summed it up best with the conclusion that "the most important reason to be concerned about graduate student attrition is that it can ruin individuals' lives" (p. 6). While doctoral attrition and increased time-to-completion is clearly

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costly for students on many levels, it is also detrimental to universities. For example, at one university, it is estimated a reduction of doctoral attrition by 10% would reduce the funds lost by a million dollars a year (Smallwood, 2004). Attrition also negatively effects the productivity and prestige of a program. Loss of doctoral students in programs result in loss of student-faculty collaboration and research (Nettles & Millet, 2006). Attrition in doctorate programs leaves a shortage of doctorate credentialed individuals for universities to hire full time faculty positions (Magner, 2009).

Understanding the student-institution interactions that result in persistence, the converse of attrition, can assist universities in fostering doctoral persistence. In understanding doctoral persistence, university administrators and faculty can better set appropriate admissions criteria, plan orientations, set up resources, and develop curriculum. Determining the likelihood a student will be successful in completing the doctoral degree begins during the admissions process. Identifying admissions criteria in order to forecast student success is central to the viability and reputation of a program. Helping students understand the requirements to successfully complete a doctoral program during a program orientation can help them make an informed decision concerning whether to pursue the degree. Further, understanding doctoral persistence can help faculty plan instructional strategies and programs to better support students in the completion of their program.

A number of researchers have focused their attention on identifying variables associated with doctoral *attrition* through quantitative measures and have made practical suggestions to counter these factors (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Brannock, Litten, & Smith, 2000; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). However, the phenomenon of *doctoral persistence* has not been well researched qualitatively. Few researchers have examined individuals who have been successful in their doctoral programs. Even fewer researchers have explored doctoral persistence in the field of education.

Outcomes of qualitative inquiry focused on understanding the phenomenon of doctoral persistence can provide “lessons learned” to universities and programs (Gardner, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose of the present study is to examine the experiences of individuals who successfully completed their doctoral programs in the field of education in order to identify the “lessons learned” when it comes to increasing doctoral persistence. Glasser’s (1998) Choice Theory provides an understanding of human behavior, choice, and the influence of external forces. Thus, it is a useful lens in which to understand why doctoral candidates proceed through doctoral programs. It also gives insight into the role the university plays in guiding that behavior. Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2009) student integration model provides additional insight on the doctoral student’s motivation to complete their programs and the social and academic integration at the university that facilitates completion.

Conceptual Framework

Underlying Glasser’s (1998) Choice Theory are several assumptions. The first assumption is all humans have five basic needs that are derived from their biological systems. The five needs are belonging, power, freedom, fun, and survival. The next assumption is all human behavior is purposeful and is within the control of the individual doing the behavior. A third assumption is all human behavior is aimed at satisfying needs. The final assumption stipulates that, provided with influence and guidance, humans can alter these behaviors.

Doctoral students meet the assumptions of Glasser’s Choice Theory. Doctoral students have basic needs. Doctoral students make a choice to stay or leave a doctoral program and may make this choice in order to satisfy or meet one of the five basic needs. Although doctoral students choose their behavior, the university plays a role in guiding that behavior. University faculty and

administrators have the opportunity to influence doctoral students' needs by providing program resources and services. The influence of these things may ultimately be the factors which determine the student's choice to persist or leave a doctoral program (Bruffee, 1999; Yukl, 2002).

Tinto's (1975) student integration model is an additional framework of study for doctoral student attrition. Tinto theorized student interactions or lack of interactions with the institution could be a determinant on their retention. Tinto's model explores the students' institutional commitment and their integration to the institution. According to Tinto, institutional commitment refers to the degree to which an individual is motivated to graduate. Integration was defined by Tinto as both academic and social. Social integration refers to the relationships that result from day to day interactions and involvement in a variety of activities at the institution. According to Tinto, academic integration occurs when there is sharing of information, perspectives, and values common to members of the community. As Tinto (1997) explained, when there is no integration, "students continue to take courses as detached, individual units, one course separated from another both in content and peer group, one set of understandings unrelated in any intentional fashion to what is learned in another setting" (pp. 601-602). According to Tinto (1975), high levels of student institutional commitment combined with satisfactory interactions with the academic and social systems of the institution lead to greater integration and persistence. More recently, Tinto (2009) called for his model to be utilized to encourage institutions to study the interaction that occurs between retained students in order to help understand what they are doing to help student's succeed.

Background Literature

To date, researchers have identified factors on both the student level and the institutional level that contribute to students' choice to leave doctoral programs (Golde, 2006; Lovitts, 2001). Research supports the conclusion that persistence is the product of the interaction of multiple factors (Nettles & Millet, 2006; Wao, 2010). Persistence can be examined in light of how well institutions establish an environment to meet student's basic needs which in turn motivate their choices and behaviors. A review of the literature indicates the following doctoral student needs: a sense of belonging; a motivation to accomplish; academic integration; autonomy and opportunity for choice; the ability to overcome adversity and personal sacrifice; and financial survival.

Sense of Belonging

Most important of all needs is sense of belonging, as humans are innately social beings (Glasser, 1998). Tinto (1975) included social integration as a main component in his student integration model. Graduate learners self-report a desire for social interaction (Brandes, 2006). Fostering connectedness is essential in light of research revealing doctoral students have described program environments as competitive and non-supportive. Furthermore, evidence has been documented that doctoral student feelings of isolation and depersonalization lead to non-completion (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Willging & Johnson, 2004).

Social support can come from family, peers, or faculty. Research confirms married students are more likely to persist than unmarried students (Lott, Gardner, & Powers, 2009; Price, 2006). Relationships with peers is associated with persistence; however, it varies significantly among universities, disciplines, and types of programs. Researchers (Bolliger & Halupa, 2011) found students enrolled in online doctoral programs desire more peer interaction. Gardner (2010) studied the socialization of doctoral students in six disciplines at a university and stated the "the defining characteristics of institutional and departmental cultures as well as the experiences particular to a specific discipline greatly affect a student's experience while in graduate school" (p. 76). Studies have demonstrated programs implementing cohort models have higher persistence rates (Lovitts, 2001). Cohorts provide opportunities for peer interaction and foster a sense of connectedness and

belonging (Norris & Barnett, 1994; Terrel, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009). Finally, Terrel et al. (2009) purported that student-to-faculty connection is essential to persistence in doctoral programs. In summary, the literature provides evidence of the association of higher doctoral student retention with strong family, faculty, and peer relationships.

A Motivation to Accomplish

As Glasser (1998) noted, within the basic need of power, humans have an internal drive to succeed in all areas of life, including academically. Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration model recognized student motivation as a primary component of retention. Motivation has been confirmed as necessary for doctoral persistence (Grover, 2007; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). Santicola (2013) found the ability of a student to make the doctoral program the top priority in his or her life was important for education doctoral student success. Doctoral students are often selected due to their dedication to precise work and a drive for excellence. Unfortunately, students with these traits are more likely to become unsatisfied and easily frustrated with poor program organization. Any university deficiencies in serving students may cause stress to doctoral students and lead to losses of motivation (Lovitts, 2001).

Academic Integration

Tinto (2009) stated student academic integration is influenced by clarity and consistency of expectations. He also stressed the need for students to understand how classes relate to one another (Tinto, 1997). Unfortunately, ambiguity is a frustration often discussed among students enrolled in doctoral programs. In his study of doctoral programs, Gardner (2010) found students often expressed a lack of knowledge about school regulations, guidelines, and program structure. Furthermore, students in the study reported having to figure out on their own what to do and stated they often encountered arbitrary deadlines and lack of guidance on how to work with their research committee.

Autonomy and Opportunity for Choice

Glasser (1998) noted humans like to have options and the freedom to make choices in every area of their lives. Most doctoral programs have at least two distinct phases, which consist of coursework and dissertation. While course work is usually familiar and structured, the dissertation generally is not. To be successful in the dissertation phase, students need to transition into being self-directed learners (Ponton, 2014). In addition, adult students with numerous responsibilities need flexibility in their coursework as well as program options such as night classes. Online doctoral students recognize program options and flexibility as a key to program satisfaction (Bolliger & Halupa, 2011). In studies across several disciplines of doctoral students, lack of program flexibility was identified as a reason for dropping out (Boes, Ullery, Millner, & Cobia, 1999; Gumport & Snyderman, 2002; Lipschutz, 1993).

Overcoming Adversity and Personal Sacrifice

Glasser (1998) includes enjoyment as one of the basic needs of Choice Theory. Unfortunately, doctoral students rarely describe their journey as pleasant. It is a difficult journey that often requires personal sacrifice. In summarizing how participants explained their doctoral journeys, Spaulding and Rockingson-Szapkiw (2012) stated, "Walking the road to completion of a doctoral degree is clearly an intensely grueling, challenging, and sometimes lonely journey. Candidates clearly experienced adversity" (p. 208). Authors have suggested that adversity is one reason students choose to leave doctoral programs (Lovitts, 2001).

Financial Survival

Glasser (1998) suggested humans are motivated to satisfy their need to survive. Financial survival is central to doctoral program persistence. Research suggests candidates receiving funding such as scholarships and assistantships experience lower levels of stress than those without funding (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Earl-Novell (2006) found doctoral students who have to finance their own education are less likely to persist. Wao and Onwuegbuzie (2011) noted the importance of university sponsored fellowships and assistantships in order to positively influence persistence.

Rationale for the Research

Despite documentation of high doctoral attrition, little progress has been made in the past thirty years (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). While doctoral student attrition rates have been examined for decades (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Smallwood, 2004), and student and institutional factors influencing attrition have been identified (Boes et al., 1999; Gumpport & Snyderman, 2002; Kluever & Green 1998; Lipschutz, 1993; Terrell, 2002), few researchers have examined doctoral persistence in the field of education. Education doctoral programs experience significant attrition and delays in completion compared to other fields. Most peer-reviewed literature has been anecdotal in nature and peer reviewed research has been primarily quantitative (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Qualitative studies have focused on counselor education students (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005) and gender and ethnic specific populations (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Shealey, 2009). This study specifically focuses on exploring and interpreting the phenomenon of education doctoral program persistence. Education doctoral persistence in this study is defined as the completion of a doctoral degree in the field of education.

As doctoral faculty and a student in an education department at a large university in the Southeastern United States, our interest in examining data related to the phenomenon of doctoral persistence was multifaceted. Our initial analysis of the data (76 interviews) was conducted with the objective of understanding the phenomenon of doctoral persistence in order to uncover the individual themes and personal contexts leading to the completion of the doctorate, thereby, providing recommendations for individuals engaged in the doctoral process (see Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). However, aware that institutions play a significant role in doctoral persistence, we were also interested in analyzing the data to inform institutional candidate selection and program development as doctoral faculty and administrators have the potential to positively influence doctoral persistence rates through recruiting intrinsically motivated candidates, providing opportunities for social integration, and structuring programs, resources, and services to fit the unique needs of adult learners. Thus, additional interview transcripts were analyzed with this intent in mind, building upon the analysis and results of the first study.

This study's interest in the phenomenon of doctoral persistence is thus twofold. The analysis of the data collected was conducted with the objective of identifying factors associated with persistence and completion in order to inform institutional candidate selection and program development. Therefore, there are two research questions guiding this study. The first question is how do individuals who completed a terminal degree in the field of education describe their persistence in the doctoral experience as it is related to themselves and their interaction with the university? The second question is how do these individual's attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors of their doctoral experience and interaction with the institution give rise to the consequence of completion?

Methodology

Creswell (1998) stated phenomenological methodology is concerned with “the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51) and with getting beneath how people describe their experience to the structures that underlie consciousness. As such, this study employed a phenomenological research design as our intent was to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of doctoral persistence and the underlying consciousness beneath the experience. By exploring the interactions and contexts associated with doctoral persistence, an understanding of how universities can better facilitate completion of doctoral degrees can be achieved.

As the primary method of data collection for phenomenological studies is interviewing (Creswell, 1998), standardized open-ended interviews were conducted to understand participants’ experiences with the phenomenon. This approach required the careful wording of each question prior to the interview and ensured interviews were done in such a manner that each interviewee was asked a prescribed set of questions in the same sequence (Patton, 1990). Questions asked were those such as “Why do you think you finished the dissertation when the majority of doctoral students finish ABD (all but dissertation)?” and “Explain the hardest part of gaining your doctoral degree and how did you overcome the hardship?” Other questions included ones such as “What advice would you give to people who want to earn their doctoral degree?”

Employing a standardized open-ended interviewing approach enabled increased comparability of responses and ensured focused time between the interviewer and interviewee. Since doctoral students conducted the interviews, the use of a standardized interview helped to compensate for variability in interviewing skills and reduced interviewer bias and effect (Patton, 1990). However, not all bias could be removed and it was recognized, based on the interviewers’ role as a doctoral student, some bias may have entered the interviews. For example, bias may have entered on decisions related to asking probing or follow-up questions.

Participants

The present study used a purposeful sample, in which the interviewees were selected based on two criteria. The first was their completion of a doctoral degree in the academic discipline of education within a United States university. The second was their employment in a K-12 environment or higher education. The Institutional Review Board approved the review of 200 interview transcripts. Thematic saturation, when no new themes emerged after additional analysis of data, was achieved with the review of 89 randomly selected transcripts (Patton, 1990), some overlapping with the previously mentioned study. The sample consisted of 40 (33.71%) males and 59 (66.29%) females. Fifty-nine (66.29%) of the participants were Caucasian, 21 (22.59%) of the participants were African American, five (5.62%) participants were Latino, three (3.03%) participants were Asian, and one (2.47%) participant classified as “other.” Individuals were employed as professors at higher education institutions, K-12 teachers, principals, instructional designers, and school counselors.

Procedures

From April 2011 through March 2012, doctoral students participating in online qualitative research training at a private institution in the Southeastern part of the United States conducted the standardized open-ended interviews. As part of their qualitative research training in phenomenology under the direct supervision of a doctoral faculty member, doctoral students purposively selected two interview participants. Participants were selected based on whom the doctoral student interviewers knew. In some cases, interviewers used snowball sampling to identify cases of interest from individuals who successfully completed a doctoral degree in education. Each interview

was audio recorded and was conducted either by e-conferencing or in person. After the interview, the doctoral students transcribed the interviews verbatim, including all language and unnecessary non-language utterances such as “um” or “ah”. These audio files and transcribed interviews were submitted and archived as part of the qualitative research methods course. The audio files and transcriptions were assessed for quality by the faculty member who taught the course.

Data Analysis

Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological data analytic procedures were used to guide the analysis of data. This included Moustakas’ recommendations for ‘bracketing out’ delineating units of meaning and clustering meaning units into themes.

The purpose of bracketing is to reduce the possibility of the researchers’ personal views and interpretations when entering the participants’ unique worlds (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). We bracketed out our experiences with the phenomenon prior to analysis by discussing with one another our thoughts about the doctoral journey. We discussed our personal experience through the doctoral coursework and dissertation and our experiences as faculty working with doctoral students and candidates in classes and through the dissertation process. This assisted us in making our perceptions conscious about the phenomenon researched so we could be intentional to lay them aside and focus on telling our participants’ stories, rather than our own. Our acknowledgements included beliefs that the doctoral journey is challenging but can be successfully navigated with perseverance. We also acknowledged a belief that the successful doctoral journey requires initiative and the need to be self-directed. However, we also recognized institutional factors such as effective faculty mentors and well laid out policies and procedures contributed to our success in the dissertation journey.

After bracketing, interviews were then reviewed and statements and words illuminating the phenomenon of doctoral persistence were isolated (Creswell, 1998). A list of meaningful units was identified in each interview and redundant or overlapping units removed (Moustakas, 1994). During this process, we continued to consciously bracket out our presuppositions to avoid inappropriate subjective decisions. Examining the list of meaningful units, we extracted the essence of the meaningful units within their holistic context and subsequently grouped units together to create clusters of themes (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Results

The completion of the doctoral degree is inherently challenging. Although participants identified certain parts of the course work as difficult, participants named the dissertation as one of the most challenging aspects of completing their degrees. The dissertation requires a significant individual contribution to the field of knowledge within the discipline. The logistics, the writing, the research, and the work with diverse dissertation committees can be challenging. Primary themes were consistent with the review of literature, Glasser’s Needs Theory (1998) and Tinto’s (1975, 1997, 2009) student integration model.

Relationships with Family, Faculty and Peers

Family relationships played a role and contributed to completion of the doctoral degree. Statements such as “the encouragement of my family,” “the real support that I had in place was my immediate family—my mother, my sister, my friends,” and “I had a supportive spouse” demonstrate participants’ attribution to family as central to their decision to persist in their program.

Faculty were influential throughout various points of the doctoral program. Some individuals believed being invited to assist faculty with research and developing collegial relationships throughout the program helped them persist. They explained the activities of researching, writ-

ing, and presenting with faculty provided a sense of connection with the faculty as well as helped them develop research skills needed for the dissertation process. In developing a sense of connection with the faculty, participants were motivated to persevere. Many participants discussed the importance of thoughtfully selecting a chair and committee members. They said, essential to completion, was their selection of a chair and committee members who worked well together and provided appropriate.

In addition to relationships and a sense of collegiality with faculty, participants identified sense of community and relationships with program peers as important factors contributing to their persistence. Formal and informal discussions, university supported *Facebook* groups, professional collaboration on projects and publications, and road trips to residencies and classes were aspects that contributed to community and relationship building. When discussing the reasons they persisted, participants noted scholarly discussions was significant. Learning from peers was frequently acknowledged; however, non-academic interactions were also noted as important. For example, one participant stated “the best part was the four of us riding back and forth from Virginia Tech, that 100 mile trek. We had a lot of fun, told a lot of stories.” Talking about the emotional, social, and familial aspects of being a doctoral student with those having the same experience helped some to persist and normalize the experience. Many noted that the collegial relationships they formed in their doctoral program were maintained after graduation.

As noted, these relationships were sometimes encouraged and supported by university and programs structures and systems. For example, university supported *Facebook* groups and required professional collaboration on projects and publications for courses were cited. Numerous participants identified the implementation of a cohort model as a significant factor contributing to their persistence in the doctoral program. Participants explained cohorts contributed to needed emotional, social, and academic support. As an example, one participant explained, “We were all struggling together and in the tough times you could look over and say, well there is so and so and if they can do it, so can I. You know we counted on each other and supported each other. . . . We would pray together and we studied together.”

Determination, Organization Skills, and Time Management

Approximately 10% of the participants clearly articulated their success was personal in nature. Many participants explained this drive to persist with words such as “determination”, “disciplined”, “mature”, “self-motivated”, and “perseverance”. Participants made comments such as, “I just had too much of my time in it, and I just was not going to let it defeat me,” and “There was no way that I was going to put all that time and energy into a program and then not finish! That wasn’t an option for me. I was simply determined.”

Skills and abilities also contributed to participants’ completing their degrees. A few noted intelligence was essential in the completion of their degree, while others attributed good communications skills to their success. However, most frequently, participants who compared themselves to others who did not finish their doctoral degrees believed their ability to organize and to manage time differentiated them from non-completers. Some discussed the importance of keeping detailed calendars and schedules during the course work part of the doctoral process. For example, one participant stated “I kept a detailed calendar and usually completed assignments prior to their due date. I believe in being early rather than late.”

Most participants purported that writing the dissertation was the most time-consuming process. Thus, good time management and work ethic was needed to complete it. Participants provided numerous examples of how they organized their time and space to successfully complete the dissertation. Establishing a regular weekly schedule that allotted several hours of concentrated time to work on the dissertation was frequently mentioned. One participant remarked “I just blocked

out time, and I just worked on it on a daily basis basically.” The principle of dividing the dissertation into doable parts was another. Participants recognized that the dissertation considered as a whole was often too challenging and too overwhelming. However tackling it one-step at a time made it doable. Participants also described setting aside special time for dissertation work and a private quiet workspace as critical in completing their dissertations and doctoral degrees.

Program Flexibility and Course Relevance

Many of the participants in this study completed programs that offered online, weekend, and evening courses. In discussing important factors contributing to the decision to pursue a doctoral degree and the completion of the doctoral program, participants reported flexible course options such as online, weekend, and evening classes. Many of the participants noted they would not have been able to complete their degrees had it not been for the convenient location where their courses were offered or the convenient schedules in which the courses were offered. For example, one participant stated, “I just couldn’t move away for four years and pull my kids out of their schools and my husband away from his job. If I had not been able to complete my degree online, I still wouldn’t have accomplished this goal.”

Not only were program and course options relevant to persistence, so was the nature of the courses offered. Individuals were motivated to persist in courses when their learning was experiential, practical, and relevant to their current work. Participants stated they appreciated the practical knowledge gained and content related to their work. One of the participants noted, “When I had an assignment that I could integrate what I was doing at work, I was killing two birds with one stone making it easier to balance my responsibilities and stay in the program.”

Individuals also found it helpful when the courses were structured in a manner that enabled them to build skills and prepare for the dissertation. As one participant described, “I found all courses to hold the same level of relevance throughout my entire course of study. Preparation for dissertation began in the first course. Each class then built upon the next class.” Participants enrolled in courses focusing on the dissertation attributed them to making the dissertation process seem “doable” and prepared them to complete their dissertations. As one interviewee purported, “Each class addressed a part of the dissertation process. It helped having a class that focused on literature reviews and another on research. . . I was clueless about these things and [the classes] gave me direction in the dissertation process.”

Career Advancement and Financial Reward

Career sustainment, career advancement, and a pay raise were prevailing motivations for many who persisted. This was noted by one participant who had a desire to maintain her career in higher education. She stated, “I knew that in my chosen profession of higher education, I needed that [the doctoral degree] as part of my longevity in higher education.” Others wanted to pursue advancement in their career such as educational administration positions and knew a doctoral degree was essential for those opportunities. Monetary incentives were important to some participants. Some participants were motivated to gain pay in order to better provide for their families. One participant explained, “Getting the degree meant my kids would have resources to pursue the future they wanted and I wanted them to have.”

Clear Doctoral Program Expectations

Entering a doctoral program with clear expectations about the time, money, work, and relationship sacrifices was a theme in the interviews. Some interviewees talked about how unclear expectations almost led to their attrition in the program. Other interviewees explained attending required program orientations, talking with friends or individuals who went through their doctoral

program, and having informal discussions with program faculty helped prepare them to have realistic expectations. Clarifying the requirements for completing the doctorate was identified as important to completion and some participants felt the degree granting institutions should have taken more responsibility for communicating these requirements.

Discussion

In the present study, five primary themes were identified as associated with the completion of a doctoral program in education. These themes were the following: (a) relationships with family, faculty and peers; (b) determination, organization skills, and time management; (c) program flexibility and course relevance; (d) career advancement and financial reward; and (e) clear doctoral program expectations. These themes are consistent with previous research suggesting persistence and attrition in doctoral programs are associated with personal needs and institutional factors (Golde, 2006; Lovitts, 2001).

The findings support Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory suggesting individuals are motivated by basic needs that can be influenced by the institution. The themes found in this study involving relationships, career advancement, program flexibility, and financial reward are in alignment with the basic needs in Glasser's theory of belonging, power, freedom, and survival. Participants made the choice to stay in the doctoral program based on their needs and how these needs were supported by the university faculty, programs, and resources.

Findings in this study also support Tinto's (1993) model of student integration. The theme of determination in this study is consistent with Tinto's model, which is based upon student motivation to graduate. The theme of faculty and peer relationships in this study is in alignment with Tinto's concept on the importance of social integration. The themes found in this study regarding course relevance and clear doctoral program expectations are in alignment with Tinto's concept of academic integration and its importance on retention of students.

Most importantly, the findings provide administrators and faculty insight on ways to increase persistence within doctoral programs. Understanding personal factors contributing to persistence can be useful in the recruitment and selection of students for doctoral programs. In understanding variables associated with doctoral persistence, faculty and administrators have the opportunity to structure curriculum and facilitate social and academic integration within doctoral programs to increase the likelihood of persistence and completion.

Recommendations

The following actions, derived from the research findings, taken by doctoral faculty and administration, singly or in combination, have the potential for increasing doctoral persistence:

1. Recruit and select individuals who are internally motivated. Internal motivation, specifically for personal autonomy and accomplishment, was a key factor noted in completion of the doctoral program. Identifying the importance of internal motivation in recruitment and marketing materials may be helpful. Additionally, screening potential doctoral students using instruments that measure motivation in the admissions process could lead to the acceptance of students who are more likely to finish the program (Lovitts, 2005).
2. Provide information to students and their families about the time, money, organization skills, and intellectual rigor required to complete a doctoral program. Universities can accomplish this through faculty meetings, student mentorship or through orientation programs. Pintz and Posey (2013) describe the effective utilization of an online orientation for graduate students consisting of modules focused on things such as time management, academic writing, technology, research, and library skills. The orientation program inte-

grates a fun, graphical sports theme with audio-visual presentations, examples, demonstrations and practice exercises. Clarifying procedures and expectations can assist students in better preparing for the “road ahead” and in setting realistic expectations. Having realistic expectations about requirements when beginning a doctoral program can lessen the potential feelings of frustration, confusion, and disappointment, which quite often lead to attrition (Lovitts, 2001).

3. Adopt a cohort model in which students are admitted, enrolled at the same time, and progress through the same course sequence. Cohorts provide the opportunity for students to foster a sense of belonging and accountability. They also assist in the development of community and a safe environment in which students can critically reflect (Santicola, 2013).
4. Provide opportunities for online peer social integration. In addition to non-academic social engagement such as university sponsored *Facebook* pages and *Skype*, infusing social media into the doctoral curriculum are opportunities for social engagement. Kivunja (2013) demonstrated the use of social technology such as *eFoliospaces* and *Google+Discussion Circles* to enhance social engagement among doctoral students. This social engagement, especially within online distance doctoral programs, can assist students in feeling more socially integrated. The more integrated students are, the more likely they are to complete (Lovitts, 2001).
5. Attend to the role of faculty-student interaction in both recruitment and persistence. Encourage faculty to engage in helpful communication with students on a regular basis and provide timely feedback on work submitted. When faculty communicate concern for the well-being of doctoral candidates, challenge them academically, and critically evaluate their work, students are likely to feel more satisfied with their educational experience and persist (Gabbert, 2008; Lee, 2010). In addition, they are more likely to grow personally as well as professionally (Beck, 2001).
6. Attend to the importance of providing infrastructures to support specialized needs of doctoral candidates (Brandes, 2006). It is important to provide candidates with resources to support them in their course work and dissertation research. This includes study facilities, traditional and online libraries, and computing facilities. Web sites should provide specialized program and dissertation information. It is also important to ensure the availability of technology support and student services. For online doctoral students, it is critical to provide online advising services (Muirhead & Blum, 2006). When doctoral students perceive personnel care it can positively influence persistence (Nwenyi & Baghurst, 2013).
7. Offer courses in a convenient format for adult learners. This may include online, evening, and weekend courses. Jablonski (2001) documented the ongoing trend of doctoral students’ need for programs close in proximity and in flexible formats. Convenience, however, should not take precedence over quality. Emphasizing convenience over quality can result in the perception of impersonal learning and decreased intellectual quality. This can negatively affect climate and reputation which could lead toward attrition rather than persistence.
8. Doctoral students perform better when courses are relevant and practical (Gardner, 2010). Educators should design doctoral level courses that employ context based practices and projects that allow for authentic application. Doctoral students are also more motivated

to learn when information is relevant and of immediate value. For doctoral programs, course content should be created with the question in mind, “How will this course assist students with their dissertations?”

9. Hire faculty with research expertise and encourage faculty research. Faculty who are involved in research are better able to guide students in conducting successful dissertation research. Further, it is important faculty are not overloaded so that they are able to devote time to effectively support and guide doctoral students. In their work with graduate students, Lovitts and Nelson (2000) stated “the single most important factor in student decisions to continue or withdraw is the relationship with a faculty advisor” (p. 48).

Limitations

The utilization of archival data was a limitation of this study. Another limitation was the range of time between the present and time that the participants actually experienced their doctoral programs. Although bracketing was used, our personal experiences with the phenomenon as well as our current interaction with doctoral students may have influenced our interpretation of the data.

Conclusion

With high education doctoral program attrition rates, universities need to initiate change in their practices and structures to better meet the needs of doctoral students and facilitate an increase in persistence. To inform these changes, it is pertinent for researchers to identify structures and supports that foster doctoral persistence. In this study, we examined the phenomenon of doctoral persistence through the words and stories of 89 individuals with earned doctorates in the field of education. From their experiences and recommendations, we identified themes associated with doctoral persistence. Despite the noted limitations, the results render useful information and provide direction for future research. Research needs to be directed at identifying empirically based strategies fostering persistence among doctoral students. Further, to extend this qualitative study, quantitative research is needed to go beyond description to determine the most important predictors of doctoral persistence. Subsequently, program models that most effectively promote persistence can be identified. Further, as this study was delimited to professionals with earned educational doctorates, more research is needed to determine if predictive factors differ between academic disciplines and environments.

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