

FACTORS RELATED TO ONLINE DOCTORAL PROGRAM RETENTION AND
COMPLETION RATES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Paula Rae Dietz

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand doctoral students' experiences participating in an online doctoral program at a university. The study was conducted to answer the central research question: What are the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation? Sub-questions included: (1) Among doctoral candidates in online degree programs, what are the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation? (2) In what ways do online doctoral candidates think the barriers to the dissertation component could be eliminated? The theories guiding this study are Tinto's (1994), theory of student departure and Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy as they can help to explain student persistence and retention regarding their involvement in an online program. Data were obtained through reflective essays, individual interviews, and a focus group. 10 participants were interviewed after they completed a simple questionnaire to ensure compliance with the study. Of these 10 participants, five of them have completed all their doctoral coursework without completing their dissertation and the other five were successful in completing their dissertation and obtaining their doctoral degree. Data were analyzed using Moustakas modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Coding and analysis resulted in three major themes: personal factors, institutional factors, and the dissertation process. The findings of this study indicate that doctoral students experience difficulties while in the dissertation phase of the program and that while there are several personal factors involved with their ability to persist there are also several institutional factors to be considered.

Keywords: attrition, online education, persistence, retention

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family along with many others who have guided me throughout the course of my life. This journey towards a Ph.D. is one that I did not have to travel alone, as my husband Eric and my children Lara, Michael, Zackery, and Brianna were always with me even when we were apart. My sister Stacy also kept me going through prayer, support, laughter, and love.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Acknowledgments.....	6
List of Tables	12
List of Abbreviations	13
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	14
Overview.....	14
Background.....	15
Historical Context.....	16
Social Context.....	17
Theoretical Context.....	18
Situation to Self.....	19
Problem Statement	20
Purpose Statement.....	21
Significance of the Study	22
Practical Significance.....	22
Empirical Significance.....	22
Theoretical Significance	23
Research Questions.....	24
Central Research Question.....	24
Definitions.....	25
Summary	26
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	27
Overview.....	27

Theoretical Framework	28
Student Departure Theory	29
Self-Efficacy Theory	31
Related Literature	32
Doctoral Degree	34
Online Education	34
Retention	38
Institutional Factors	39
Personal Factors	41
Student Persistence	42
Motivation	44
Procrastination	45
Navigation of the Higher Education Process	46
Dissertation	47
Personal Challenges	53
Summary	56
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	58
Overview	58
Design	58
Research Questions	60
Setting	60
Participants	61
Procedures	62

The Researcher's Role.....	63
Data Collection	64
Reflective Essays	65
Interviews.....	66
Interview Questions	67
Focus Groups	69
Data Analysis	71
Trustworthiness.....	72
Credibility	73
Dependability and Confirmability	74
Transferability.....	74
Ethical Considerations	75
Summary.....	75
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	77
Overview.....	77
Participants.....	77
Crystal	78
Kim	79
Robert.....	80
Amy.....	81
Anna.....	82
Christine.....	83
Joseph.....	84

	10
Jennifer.....	85
Rhonda	86
Stephanie.....	87
Results.....	88
Personal Factors	91
Institutional Factors	96
Dissertation Process	100
Outlier Data and Findings.....	104
Research Question Responses.....	105
Central Research Question.....	106
Summary	110
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	112
Overview.....	112
Discussion.....	112
Interpretation of Findings	113
Summary of Thematic Findings.....	113
Implications for Policy or Practice	115
Theoretical and Empirical Implications	116
Limitations and Delimitations.....	118
Recommendations for Future Research	119
Conclusion	119
References.....	121
APPENDIX A: Demographics Questionnaire	135

APPENDIX B: Consent Form	136
APPENDIX C: Interview Questions.....	140
APPENDIX D: Focus Group Questions	142
APPENDIX E: Reflective Essay	143
APPENDIX F: IRB Approval Letter	144
APPENDIX G: Recruitment Email	145
APPENDIX H: Recruitment Social Media Post.....	146
APPENDIX I: Recruitment Verbal.....	147

List of Tables

Table 1	Participants' Demographics	78
Table 2	Open Codes, Enumeration, and Themes.....	90
Table 3	Themes and Subthemes	91
Table 4	Explanation of the Relation of Themes and Research Questions	106

List of Abbreviations

All But Dissertation (ABD)

Department of Education (DOE)

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

Veteran's Administration (VA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Retention rates are an ongoing concern for U.S. institutions, faculty members, and students (Aljohani, 2016). Retention rates are important for establishing an institution's credibility, reputation, sustainability, and ability to access Veteran's Administration (VA) benefits, federal funding, and state funding (Gross et al., 2015). The retention rates for online doctoral programs tend to be lower than those for traditional brick-and-mortar programs (Fiore et al., 2019). The attrition rate for online doctoral programs is as high as 70%, this is significantly lower than that of traditional brick-and-mortar doctoral programs (Ames et al., 2018; Fiore et al., 2019). Some scholars attribute high attrition and low retention rates to low community involvement; others point to low motivation, socioeconomic status, or poor institutional support (Ames et al., 2018; Fiore et al., 2019).

Researchers have investigated retention and completion rates in undergraduate programs; however, a few studies exist on completion rates for online doctoral programs. While data indicate that retention and completion are low in online doctoral programs, research is lacking on the reasons for these trends (Moore & Fetzner, 2019). Because of the distinction and investment associated with doctoral education, it is important to understand ways to improve persistence and completion (Fiore et al., 2019).

While some doctoral students quit within the first few semesters, many students persist through their coursework yet never complete their final dissertation project. These students are often referred to as *all but dissertation* or ABD students; an acronym well known throughout the community since it happens so often to doctoral students (Denman et al., 2018). Why are the

retention rates so low for online doctoral programs and what are the experiences of online doctoral students who attended an online program requiring a dissertation?

This chapter begins with a discussion of the background study, followed by the significance of the study to the researcher. Next, the problem and purpose statements are presented, and the significance of the study and research questions are detailed. This chapter will conclude with definitions, key terms, and will end with a summary.

Background

Technology has an increasingly large influence on the lives of people around the world (Dzobelova et al., 2020). Relationships often rely on communication, and advancements in technology allowing for ease of virtual communication is happening at profound rates (Stanton & Stanton, 2017). With technology advancing, and communication being more virtual, most individuals walk around with a computer in the palm of their hand as a common means of socialization (Joseph, 2020). Living in a virtual space is not limited to social interactions; these virtual spaces are now encompassing the work force as well as some of society's everyday functions (Stanton & Stanton, 2017). The virtual nature of communication has also had a significant influence on education as many institutions now offer online courses and degree programs. Chatham-Carpenter and Spadaro (2019) reported that 29.7% of college students are taking at least one online course. While some higher education institutions are offering courses and degrees whereas students must be on campus for part of the time, others are offering courses and degrees where students never have to physically attend (Kennedy & Gray, 2016). With all the latest technological advances, higher education courses are now offered online at an astounding rate, and candidates looking to pursue their degrees are now finding it easier to balance a household and career while also pursuing higher education (Kozar & Lum, 2017). The

presence of online learning extends past the undergraduate level and present-day individuals are often obtaining their doctorate degree online (Ames et al., 2018). Through this online education delivery, students rarely, if ever, must attend the campus in person (Byrd, 2016). Demand for online postsecondary degree programs is not limited to undergraduates; enrollment in online doctoral programs has grown at an overwhelming and rapid pace (Berry, 2017; Moore & Fetzner, 2019).

Doctoral level education is expensive, and many students finance these costs through the utilization of private or government loans; this incurred debt along with other personal investments can cause extra stress on an individual to complete his or her program (Ames et al., 2018; Gittings et al., 2018). With students looking to obtain an esteemed degree and have the label of doctor bestowed upon them, they must first be successful in their classes, remain enrolled, and complete an independent research component (Ames et al., 2018).

Historical Context

Higher education in the United States began in the 1600s with the opening of Harvard College (Lucas, 2016). Since the inception of higher education there has been a multitude of growth documented by notable changes to include expanded curriculum, enhanced degrees, and online training that dates to as early as 1979 (Lucas, 2016). The history of distance education dates to the mid-1800s when individuals received education training through self-taught textbook readings or radio broadcast education. Distance education has expanded with technological advancement and is now offered through online means (Kennedy & Gray, 2016). The term online education refers more recently to education that is received through the online platform of the internet. This concept of online education affords individuals the opportunity to obtain a degree during their own schedule at a convenient pace to both the student and the institution

(Lee, 2017). This online system of learning has become widely utilized throughout the varying levels of education and has offered convenience to individuals wishing to pursue graduate-level degrees to include degrees at the doctoral level.

The education system's evolution shows that student enrollment in higher education has increased by 46% in the past thirty years while college retention has remained stagnant with approximately 60% of college students completing their terminal award (Barbera et al., 2020). The growth in student enrollment has been attributed to both changing cultural perspectives and the need for college-educated individuals in the workforce, however, the data show that a higher instance of enrollment does not equate to a higher instance of retention (Barbera et al., 2020). Retention has become a historical problem and is being monitored through federal guidelines to hold institutions accountable for not only enrollment, but also in assisting students through graduation (Williams et al., 2018).

Social Context

In the United States, it takes the average student over 7 years to obtain their Ph.D. once selecting and enrolling in a doctoral program, and many of these students are devoting their time to full-time jobs while seeking this higher level of education (Bekova, 2019; Geven et al., 2017). Researchers also show that approximately 60% of all students attending a doctoral program quit before completing their dissertation phase (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). With a busy lifestyle and a large amount of time between starting and finishing a doctoral degree, students may suffer many interruptions in their academic process. These interruptions have been attributed to various personal reasons, with some students stating that the lack of belonging makes it difficult to stay engaged (Williams et al., 2019). With a larger percentage of students

working toward their Doctoral degrees through online education, this sense of belonging has become more challenging and could cause low retention rates.

While persistence can be related to personal motivation, it is noted that a variety of institutional measures can be responsible for persistence as well. Research shows that peer connections to include faculty connections are often a concern for online doctoral students (Bireda, 2018). Research also reports that students struggle to understand doctoral expectations due to a difference in instructional expectations (Roumell & Bolliger, 2017). Students also report that as a distance education student, the support is not as readily available as it is if a student attended a brick-and-mortar campus, and this makes it easier for a student to become less participatory in a course or program of study without notice (Castelló et al., 2017).

Theoretical Context

Research regarding student retention has been conducted with most of the current research focusing on undergraduate or traditional brick-and-mortar studies (Millea et al., 2018). The overarching theoretical context is based on how low student retention and graduation rates are at online doctoral programs since the research shows that doctoral programs overall have a lower retention rate than undergraduate programs and then the retention rate drops even lower with online versus brick-and-mortar doctoral programs. Vincent Tinto (1994) has theorized about student retention to include reasons why students did not persist to completion in school through his theory on student departure. While Tinto (1994) derived his theory of student departure based on undergraduate data, the theory can be applied to doctoral graduate work for this study. Tinto's departure theory (1994) discusses the importance of formal and informal integration. Formal integration can be reviewed as the student's integration into the institution to include access to advising, library services, and various other on-campus support. Informal integration can be

viewed as the student's social experiences, including participation in peer groups and social campus life. (Tinto, 1994). Tinto's (1994) research shows that retention rates are a concern for institutions. Researching the experiences of online doctoral students can assist in further research to involve student retention.

Situation to Self

As a student enrolled in an online Doctoral Program and as a Program Director of an associate degree Healthcare Program that seeks to assist future doctoral students and institutions with their retention and graduation rates, I need to have a clear understanding of why some students have graduate persistence and others do not. My motivation for this study is to understand online doctoral students' experiences of those who persist through their doctoral program. I hope that by completing this research and sharing my participants' experiences, it will assist future online doctoral students and online doctoral institutions.

Additionally, as a doctoral student who has completed her didactic requirements and who is currently in the dissertation process, I would like to understand why some students persist all the way through degree matriculation, and others remain in the (ABD) phase of their education. Understanding the doctoral experience of students at my current institution and other institutions may assist both students and institutions in implementing ways to build persistence, retain students, and matriculate students through to graduation without leaving them stuck in the ABD phase of their education.

Going into this research study, a social constructivism paradigm will be guiding my study with ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs. Social Constructivism is a qualitative framework that can be used to understand the world in which the researcher lives and works (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Researching doctoral students and their persistence to completion can

be achieved by using this social constructivism framework as I will be able to position myself with personal experiences into the interviews and interpret the meanings behind each interview (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I have ontological assumptions going into this study. When interviewing participants and researcher the topic, I know that there will be various lived experiences or realities between the participants, and each participant will have a different perspective on their doctoral experiences. By going into the research, knowing that each participant will have a different reality, I can take an ontological philosophical belief in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The epistemological assumptions that I have are there because I am experiencing the same phenomenon as my participants; ultimately, we share a common reality of attending an online doctoral program (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Each participant will have had a different outcome to their doctoral completion whether they remained in the ABD phase or continued onto scholar, and these results will be different based on a variety of experiences in the program (Creswell & Poth, 2016). My axiological assumptions will be important to this research as there should not be any subjective data added that could lead to bias (Creswell & Poth, 2016). While my own information has been used to form interest in this study, the roles of value will be used to ensure that the data is not skewed by the situation to self.

Problem Statement

The problem is that online doctoral programs have low retention and completion rates. The average completion rate for undergraduate institutions is 56.9%, and research shows that as students move up the academic rung, the completion rate declines even further (Shapiro et al., 2017). Degree completion rates for online doctoral schools are 37%, significantly lower than brick-and-mortar doctoral programs with a documented completion rate of 50% (Fiore et al., 2019). This level of poor retention could be a threat to these doctoral programs' viability as it

could ultimately impact the institution in various ways, including losing the ability to receive Federal loan dollars or even ultimate closure. These documented low completion rates are a concern to both students and institutions alike, and research is necessary to see why the problem exists and solicit corrective measures. These low retention and completion rates for doctoral students are ones that must be researched and corrected. While research exists on ABD status rates, little is known about why so many students in online degree programs fail to complete their dissertation (Bagaka's et al., 2015). The study aimed to address the gap in the literature by exploring perceived barriers to dissertation completion among students in online doctoral degree programs with a dissertation component and how those barriers may be minimized.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand doctoral student's experiences participating in an online doctoral program at a university. At this stage in the research, it is important to consider retention, attrition, and persistence in online doctoral programs. Retention is defined as the number of students who remain enrolled and retained by their institution while attrition is often referred to as the institution's dropout rate (Crosling, 2017; Geven et al., 2017). The theories that will guide this study are Tinto's (1994) student departure theory and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory. Tinto's (1994) student departure theory will be integrated into the study as it explains the various reasons for students exiting school before completion. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory explains the importance of believing in oneself when faced with challenges. Researching how and why students stay engaged and reasons behind their persistence may help uncover why some students complete their education and receive their terminal degree and others remain in all but dissertation phase of their doctoral journey (Thompson et al., 2018).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this phenomenological study of students participating in an online doctoral program and the barriers associated with it was examined for the practical, empirical, and theoretical significance for U.S. institutions with online doctoral programs. The purpose of this study is to assist future students and institutions by shedding light on possible reasons for poor retention. Administrators, faculty members, students, and future researchers will benefit from this study as retention has been reviewed in research, but not specifically to online doctoral programs.

Practical Significance

Through the interviews and research, the researcher can provide insight into why online doctoral students do not persist through to graduation. For current or emerging doctoral students, this research should provide them with information on how to be more successful when choosing an online doctoral program, as well as when completing the dissertation process. For doctoral faculty to include dissertation chairs, this research should assist in knowing student perceived barriers so that they may be proactive if they notice a student is struggling. The research should also enable institutions to find ways to assist future students through program completion. This research is provided to discover why persistence and graduation are low, but it does have its limitations as it does not compare students at traditional brick and mortar campuses.

Empirical Significance

Empirically, this phenomenological study will use interviews of participants to uncover motivators and barriers to student success and completion of online doctoral programs (Bandura, 1997; Moustakas, 1994; Tinto, 1994). Through interviews and analysis of participant experiences, the research can trend common themes from participants to verify common barriers

hindering online doctoral completion (Moustakas, 1994). The findings of this study will assist future students, faculty, and institutions in understanding prior students' experiences and the reasons why they were or were not able to persist to completion.

Theoretical Significance

This study's theoretical significance is that previous online doctoral students will be able to express their opinions with their online doctoral program experience. Research regarding online Doctoral retention and completion rates is limited to quantitative studies dictating the numbers regarding retention. While there is some published qualitative literature about student persistence in higher education, the research is limited to higher education, whereas this study focuses on online doctoral level education. Additionally, this study will not research faculty and institutional reports; rather it will research students whose persistence with online doctoral programs faltered.

It is important to understand why online doctoral programs have such low retention and completion rates. The average doctoral program in the United States reports approximately 50% completion, with some schools reporting even lower, with only 30% completion (Locke & Boyle, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Tinto's (1994) theory of student departure and Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy have significance in this study. With a fully online program, students do not need to come to campus; therefore, they do not have to integrate with their peers or the campus. Additionally, as a fully online student, the lack of peer support could pose challenges for positive emotions while facing challenges. Tinto's (1994) theory, which deals with student departure and Bandura's (1997) theory which deals with self-belief is applicable to this study and other doctoral persistence studies. Tinto's (1994) theory of student departure states that students need to be integrated both formally and informally into academic

and social systems so that they can persist and be successful in higher education. This theory applies to the current study as the research is trying to discover why some students persist and others do not in online doctoral programs. With a fully online doctoral program, this theory is significant to review as online students, without daily campus life, may suffer from the lack of integration (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory discusses the importance of believing in oneself and how this personal belief can assist them in executing their plan. With the current study examining doctoral students and their completion rates it is important to research students and their own self-efficacy in addition to the institution and its processes. Research shows that students who have peer support and integration have more positive thoughts as they feel connected to others who are going through the same experience (Berry, 2017). This study will look at student experiences to see if the lack of resources and integration and student self-belief play a part in the low retention and completion rates.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative phenomenological study on retention and completion rates for students attending online doctoral programs. There is a central research question along with two sub-research questions. The central research question will guide the study, and the sub-research questions will answer additional questions and assist with additional information for future researchers.

Central Research Question

The central research question is: What are the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation?

Doctoral students must be independent in the dissertation phase and the amount of guidance varies based on the chair and the institution (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019).

Sub-Research Question. One Sub-research question one is: Among doctoral candidates in online degree programs, what are the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation?

The dissertation process is known as the biggest challenge throughout a doctoral journey and one that causes emotional strain on doctoral students (Loss & Ryan, 2017).

Sub-Research Question Two. Sub-research question two is: In what ways do online doctoral candidates think the barriers to the dissertation component could be eliminated?

Barriers in writing the dissertation consist of a variety of things, some of which can be controlled by the student, the dissertation, or the institution, but mostly dissertation barriers come from a variety of these sources (O'Connor, 2017).

Definitions

1. *Attrition* - Attrition is the dropout rate of an institution. This is the percentage of students who enroll and do not continue with their education (Geven et al., 2017)
2. *Doctoral Degree Completion* – Successful degree completion includes completing all didactic coursework as well as any comprehensive exams and/or dissertation as required by the institution (Gittings et al., 2018)
3. *Online Education* – A virtual learning space that can be held synchronous or asynchronous, whereas the students are not in the same building as the faculty for learning. This type of education allows some autonomy on the part of the student's schedule of classes (Berry, 2017; Bireda, 2018; Lee, 2017)
4. *Persistence* - Continuance in an activity to include continuing in a Doctoral Program without attrition. Persistence usually correlates to motivation and engagement (Bancroft, 2018; Van der Linden et al., 2018).

5. *Retention* – Retention is the number of students who remain enrolled and retained by their institution (Crosling, 2017).
6. *Self-efficacy* – The belief in oneself to complete a specific task or reach a goal (Bandura, 1997).

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of individuals who attended an online doctoral program that included a dissertation component. With doctoral programs in the United States reporting that completion rates are at approximately 50%, there is a need to research why these retention rates are so low (Fiore et al., 2019). Institutions wish to retain students through the dissertation phase and into graduation for their reputation and accreditation standards while students wish to complete their degree and obtain their doctorate to enhance their careers and feel accomplished (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter two will provide an overview of the literature related to online doctoral education, retention, and completion while uncovering the gap in literature. This chapter will give an overview on current online doctoral education programs, discuss important theoretical theories, synthesize current literature related to the topic, and end with a summary. The purpose of this chapter is to provide background information related to the topic while also explaining the importance of further research into online doctoral completion rates. Tinto's (1994) student departure theory and Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory will be used to provide insight into reasons why college retention is a problem. The related literature includes a) an overview of online education, b) an explanation of college retention, c) discussion of student persistence, d) navigation of the higher education system, and f) the dissertation phase of a doctoral program. The use of Tinto's Student Departure Theory (1994) as well as Bandura's Self-Efficacy theory (1977) are applicable to the research because they have both been previously applied to research regarding student retention rates (Aljohani, 2016; Ames et al., 2018; Ayuk & Jacobs, 2018; Bekova, 2019). Chapter two will conclude with a summary of the research topic and discuss the gap in literature that the research is attempting to fill.

Although online education has made completing a doctorate more manageable for students while also maintaining a busy lifestyle, it has not lessened the amount of time and dedication needed to achieve the degree (Elmore, 2021; Jameson & Torres, 2019; Owens et al., 2020; Smith, 2016). An institution's retention and completion rates can be weighed against the institution as well as the student, however the reporting numbers do not always explicitly state the reasoning behind the data (Moore & Fetzner, 2019). Since these completion rates can weigh

heavily on an institution's accreditation status, reputation, and federal funding dollars, institutions must be diligent in working towards constantly improving their retention status (Millea et al., 2018). This research study aims to identify why student retention and completion rates are low in online doctoral programs with a dissertation component. Online doctoral programs report an average of 30% completion rates compared to that of brick-and-mortar doctoral programs that report approximately a 50% completion rate (Fiore et al., 2019; Loss & Ryan, 2017; Marshall et al., 2017). By publishing research on online doctoral retention and completion rates, it may be beneficial to future online doctoral students as well as online doctoral programs. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview on student retention and self-efficacy as well as provide an overview on theories related to student retention, involvement, persistence, navigation of the higher education process, and the dissertation component. Additionally, this chapter aims to synthesize existing literature so that the researcher can gain insight into retention and completion of online doctoral students. Utilizing existent literature to find common themes and gaps will assist the researcher in constructing interview questions for the study. The audience can also utilize the existing literature when reviewing the research methods and analysis section of the study to ensure the information is valid (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Not all students are ready for the challenge of completing a doctoral program and based on the statistics, even less seem prepared to complete a doctoral program solely online (Fiore et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2017). Theorists and researchers have shown that students must believe in their abilities to be successful while also reaching out to the varying resources available to them to ensure that success (Bandura, 1977; Blacksmith, 2017; Lepp et al., 2019; Russell-Pinson

& Harris, 2019). The ability to integrate is something that students must embrace to be successful in college and this need for integration has been proven to be even more challenging for online students (Marshall et al., 2017). There are many theories central to student success and completion of college, however they are not fully conclusive to online doctoral programs. Whether a student can integrate solely and believe in themselves to succeed has been theorized by previous scholars, with some scholars theorizing about student success and completion rates; however, no single theory gives evidence to the completion rates of an online doctoral program (Bandura, 1997; Marshall et al., 2017; Tinto, 1994). Theories related to the phenomenon of student departure by Vincent Tinto (1994) and self-efficacy by Albert Bandura (1977) will be the theoretical frameworks behind this study. More specifically these theories can be applied toward the current research to show student persistence to complete their dissertation and how it may ultimately impact their ability to graduate from their doctoral program (Denman et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2020).

Student Departure Theory

Serval researchers have tried to discover why some students ultimately choose to discontinue their education, and while many reasons have been attributed to Tinto's theory on student departure, there has not been one concrete reason for this phenomenon (Tinto, 1994). Subsequently, the terms drop out, fail, and withdraw are commonly spoken regarding attrition, although Vincent Tinto (1994) theorized that combining these terms into a simple means of researching "student departure" would be more widely accepted with less negative stigmatism. Until Tinto's introduction to the theory of student departure, researchers had viewed student success and departure as a singular issue without any changing stimuli (Tinto, 1988). Tinto

(1988) viewed and researched these prior theories then delved further into students and their every changing environment.

While there are many theories such as Tinto's that look at student departure and there is research that analyzes why some students enroll without matriculating through to graduation, there is not much research published regarding why doctoral graduation rates are so low; especially that of online doctoral students (Alexander & Davis, 2019; Loss & Ryan, 2017; Owens et al., 2020; Strong & Sekayi, 2018). Tinto (1994) noted that almost half of the students entering a two-year institution failed to complete their first year of education and that when reviewing students trying to obtain a four-year degree, the numbers decreased even further with less than 29% of those students advancing past the first year (Braxton et al., 1997). Students who make it through the first six months of college have an increased chance of completing, and if they stay enrolled for the entire first year then their chances of graduation are even higher (Tinto, 1988).

Tinto's theory of student departure is often cited when researching and analyzing student persistence and can be applied to various levels of education, to include this current research study on online doctoral student retention and completion (Braxton, 1997). When developing his theory on student departure, Tinto used prior research related to social anthropology to guide his need to discover why students often concede when it comes to education (Tinto, 1994). During his research, he consulted existent studies and discovered that students move through their higher education system looking for rites of passage (Tinto, 1994). Tinto based this theory on an existing theory by Van Gennep who theorized individuals move through rites of passage when transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Tinto, 1994). While most of Tinto's research on student departure relates to undergraduate studies, he has offered some assistance in the form of

a longitudinal study in his appendix related to doctoral students (Ruud et al., 2018). With this model of student departure, Tinto theorized that students had a natural desire to feel connection throughout their educational process and without this connection they have less interest in staying enrolled (Ruud et al., 2018). This connection sought after by students is necessary in the classroom to include academic and connections with their instructors, but Tinto theorized that students need to feel a social connection with their peers as well (Milem & Berger, 1997; Tinto, 1994).

Applying the theoretical lens of Tinto's (1994) student departure theory is one that will assist greatly in this phenomenological study as the researcher is currently experiencing this phenomenon and can relate to this theory (Creswell & Poth, 2016). When looking through this lens while creating interview questions and conducting the interview, the researcher can be sure to focus on questions that specifically relate to students and their sense of belonging (Tinto, 1994). The researcher will apply the student departure lens when discovering if students were successful through coursework, yet ultimately unsuccessful in their dissertation.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Albert Bandura's (1977) theory on self-efficacy was used to describe the importance of one believing in their own abilities. His research with self-efficacy extends to a variety of vast areas including phobias, depression, selection of careers, and management roles (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) believed that for a student to have self-efficacy, they must believe in their own ability to succeed. Bandura (1977) theorized that individuals are more confident that they can master a skill when they see that others before them were successful in completing the same skill thus showing that self-efficacy comes from seeing something happen and then believing they too can also do that same thing. His research in self-efficacy can be applied to student persistence

and motivation when it comes to staying organized and completing coursework that is required to obtain their degree. In addition to completing didactic coursework, some doctoral students are also tasked with completing a dissertation research project. Dissertation research projects require students to be meticulous, organized, self-motivated, and disciplined with the ability to follow timelines (Smith, 2016). Students in a doctoral program may have support and guidance from their peers and faculty, but more importantly, they must believe in their own abilities to complete their coursework and dissertation (Tinto, 1994). While faculty and advisors can offer reassurance and guidance, they do not have the ability to instill beliefs into the student, and therefore Bandura's self-efficacy theory is one that can resonate with doctoral students who may discredit their abilities and give up. By not believing in oneself and conceding, they will not only leave the institution with decreased retention statistics, but they may also be left in the ABD stage of their degree.

Utilizing Albert Bandura's (1977) theoretical lens of self-efficacy when researching retention and completion rates can give the researcher a different perspective while conducting interviews and analyzing the data. With the research considering Bandura's theory about the importance of self-belief, the researcher can ask the participants specific questions into how they felt they were doing in the program and if they felt that they were able to complete the program to include the dissertation research project. By eliciting responses about the student and their own perceptions of whether they felt they were capable of completion it may shine more light into the actuality of their ability to complete the program (Bandura, 1977).

Related Literature

Reviewing existing literature about college retention and completion rates is important before the research begins a new research study. By reviewing the existing literature, it will

assist the researcher in preparing the methods for their research project as well as focusing on gaps in the current literature (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A recent quantitative study completed on doctoral completion and the time it takes to get a degree showed that various program and faculty characteristics such as smaller class sizes, and communication with faculty weighed heavily on completion (Loss & Ryan, 2017; Zhou & Okahana, 2019). Another recent study showed that online doctoral programs have much lower retention than that of brick-and-mortar programs (Ames et al., 2018). Reviewing these two research studies we can see an evident need to review online doctoral retention. Completing a thorough search of current literature shows that there is limited literature specifically regarding online doctoral retention and completion rates, therefore the review of literature is on a broader scope of existing doctoral program retention and completion rates which also encompasses brick and mortar institutions.

When reviewing current literature, it is shown that both institutional factors as well as personal factors can contribute to a student's lack of continuance or completion in a program of higher education (Ames et al., 2018; Bagaka's et al., 2015; Crosling, 2017; Jameson & Torres, 2019; Turhan & Karadağ, 2019; Lepp et al., 2019; Russel-Pinson et al., 2019). While reviewing the literature regarding doctoral completion rates, there are gaps in the literature pertaining specifically to completion rates of doctoral students who attend online doctoral programs, and this will be researched during the study. While the concept of retention at any educational level is not new to research, the researcher hopes to discover more about the reasons why online doctoral students are unable to be successful and complete their program of study to obtain an esteemed degree. In the literature review included below, the doctoral degree, online learning, college retention, institutional and personal factors related to retention, student persistence to include both motivation, procrastination and time management, navigation of the Higher

Education process, and the Dissertation phase to include the process and possible impediments will be discussed.

Doctoral Degree

The doctoral degree is held with high regard; most individuals feel that their educationally journey has reached full peak once that attainment is met while outsiders perceive a doctoral graduate as an expert in their field (Alexander & Davis, 2019; Birks & Watson, 2018; Ghoston et al., 2020). Obtaining a doctoral degree is something that one can often be proud of, and this accomplishment is often completed for a variety of reason to include an increase in wages, self-satisfaction, or assertion (Ames et al., 2018; Boone et al., 2020; Ruud et al., 2018). It is reported that each year in the United States approximately 100,000 individuals will be enrolled in a doctoral program working toward their degree (Ghoston et al., 2020). A doctoral degree is not something to be taken lightly as the average American Ph. D candidate is enrolled in their doctoral program for approximately 8 years, and the number of doctoral student enrollments has been steadily increasing each year (Bekova, 2019; Castelló et al., 2017; Geven et al., 2017; Loss & Ryan, 2017; Marshall et al., 2017). When enrolling in a doctoral program, students are making an investment in themselves psychologically and this investment can highly pay off by advancing their abilities in their current career path (Ames et al., 2018; Boone et al., 2020). More specifically, many doctoral students who complete a dissertation component during their studies are aiming to achieve roles in academics and research (Birks & Watson, 2018; Loss & Ryan, 2017).

Online Education

Online education is not something new; it stems from historical forms of distance education whereas students were able to independently learn without constant oversight by their

professors (Ames et al., 2018; Kennedy & Gray, 2016; Lee, 2017). Historical distance education means were brought about to accommodate those individuals who were unable to attend traditional on ground institutions; these students often consisted of women, farmers, and racial minorities (Lee, 2017). The interest in distance education grew throughout the years and the introduction of technological advances to include the internet made it possible for institutions to expand their horizons (Jameson & Torres, 2019; Lepp et al., 2019). This expansion of distance education, with a society connected by the internet, made it possible for institutions to educate more students with less campus space implementing a new form of learning known as online education (Byrd, 2016; Lee, 2017). It has been proven that in the current higher education system, approximately 14% of all students have taken at least one class outside of campus and fully online (Kumar & Johnson, 2019; Lepp et al., 2019).

When reviewing doctoral educational delivery methods, it is noted that some programs offer fully online delivery methods, others offer fully on ground delivery methods, and yet some institutions offer a blended approach to their delivery (Elmore, 2021; Jameson & Torres, 2019; Lepp et al., 2019). In addition, online programs may offer a variety of synchronous or asynchronous courses during their online delivery (dos Santos & Cechinel, 2019; Peterson et al., 2018). For this research, synchronous learning will be defined as students receiving information at the exact same time the instructor is delivering the information; this can be in person or through a web-based teleconferencing application (dos Santos & Cechinel, 2019; Peterson et al., 2018). Additionally, asynchronous learning will be defined as students receiving information at different times typically through pre-recorded lectures or announcements (dos Santos & Cechinel, 2019; Peterson et al., 2018). With synchronous education, students can interact with their instructors and classmates, ask questions when they arise and receive instantaneous

feedback, yet research shows that most online institutions are not synchronous in nature (dos Santos & Cechinel, 2019; Peterson et al., 2018). Research shows that students who attend online learning through synchronous means are more likely to retain the information that is disseminated over those students who attend asynchronous courses (dos Santos & Cechinel, 2019).

Institutions offering online education are increasing in number and while not all these institutions offer a fully online model, most institutions have now incorporated some portion of an online education component (Ames et al., 2018; Elmore, 2021; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017; Slagle et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2018; Turner & Turner, 2017). One reason for the exponential growth of online education delivery methods is that it has shown to save the institution money on expenses such overhead costs related to space necessary on the campus and without the need for increased campus space, the institution is able to increase enrollment (Ames et al., 2018; Turner & Turner, 2017). Studies have shown that online education is comparable of that to brick-and-mortar education while many scholars are still skeptical of the effectiveness of online education (Ames et al., 2018; Elmore, 2021; Slagle et al., 2020). Reasons stated for students choosing online programs over brick-and-mortar programs include the need for flexibility with their career, travel, and family (Elmore, 2021). However, when attending an online program, students state that they want to receive comparable amenities and therefore institutions need to ensure that they have sufficient access to resources (Elmore, 2021; Jameson & Torres, 2019; Lepp et al., 2019). With research showing that students in online Ph.D. programs are less likely to complete their programs over brick-and-mortar students, institutions and students should be concerned when offering or choosing a program method of delivery (Fiore et al., 2019).

In a quantitative research study conducted by Turner and Turner (2017), it was proven that there is a difference between the various platforms of education delivery. In this study, data from a single course offered through three different platforms was collected throughout the semester. The course had the same elements to include assignments and grading criteria, so the only difference was the platform of delivery. The various platforms students were able to enroll in were on-ground face-to-face instruction, fully online instruction, or through a synchronous hybrid method whereas students attended lecture via video communications. When analyzing the data, researchers found that there was not much difference in short term memory retention as graded assignments that were completed in conjunction with the delivery content were comparable across all three delivery methods. What was noticeable though was the amount of interaction that the on-ground students had with their faculty versus the online students. Through this faculty student relationship, students were noted to discuss the material more carrying concepts from the beginning of the course through the end of the course. The research data showed that this communication made a significant impact on knowledge retention as the on-ground students did significantly better on the final comprehensive exam versus the online students.

Another research study conducted by Ames et al., (2018) as the researcher noted that there was tremendous growth in doctoral program enrollment and there was an increase in online doctoral programs, yet the attrition rate for doctoral programs was significantly high. This study was conducted on 698 doctoral students actively working on their dissertation; the participants all came from the same institution, yet they were spread out globally and attending courses online. The purpose of the study was to see if the students found any benefit in the University offering an online community for doctoral students to work, communicate, and collaborate in.

The researcher hoped to publish information to assist future students and institutions by offering a way to improve retention rates for online doctoral students. The researcher distributed three surveys to doctoral students over the course of three years and found that students really enjoyed having an active doctoral community. In addition, the research showed that the doctoral students used the community for advice as well as camaraderie, yet the research did also show that students still felt isolated in their online program.

Retention

Retention in higher education is the factor of how many students continued in the program versus how many enrolled (Crosling, 2017; Marshall et al., 2017). Institutions of higher education must document and report retention and completion rates to their varying accreditors as well as any bodies of interest (Fiore et al., 2019). These statistics are published as part of the public institutional record and are often discussed and even scrutinized (Ayuk & Jacobs, 2018; Dixon, 2018). When Ph.D candidates look into programs, they often will review the retention and completion rates prior to making a decision on the institution they want to attend, and sometimes will ultimately choose a different institution if the retention rates are considerable to low or a gamble to the applicant (Horn & Moesta, 2019). It is important to note that while applicants may review retention rates when making their decision to attend an institution, it is not always the most accurate way of choosing a program. While retention rates may look good statistically, they do not always equate to the production of high-quality Ph.D students (Geven et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2017). Retention in higher education has caused concern in researchers for close to half a decade with retention in doctoral programs having an alarmingly poor rate stating that less than 57% of students complete their doctoral degree over a ten-year span (Dixon, 2018; Ruud et al., 2018). While this retention statistic is directed to all doctoral students, it is

noted that the retention number declines even further to approximately 35-50% when viewing online doctoral programs (Hoven et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2019).

College retention has been a concern since the beginning of formal education (Aljohani, 2016). College retention can be contributed by both institutional as well as student personal factors. When reviewing institutional retention and completion rates, it is important to note that the number of students that were retained may have done so due to the institution's ability to assist students as well as the student's own self-efficacy and persistence (Aljohani, 2016; Ames et al., 2018). Since the institution must publish the data for retention, individuals may come to their own conclusion for poor retention which can mar the institution's reputation as well as their accreditation status and federal funding (Aljohani, 2016). Students enroll in higher education with an initial belief in themselves that they can complete the program, and yet sometimes personal life situations outside of school cause them to withdraw without completing the course. Research shows that student withdrawal is not necessarily an indication of the institution's ability to retain students, however it is still documented as student attrition and may look negative for the institution (Aljohani, 2016; Geven et al., 2017). With online programs being more prevalent, there is a concern that retention rates will decrease and therefore institutions, especially those with online components should be diligent and proactive to ensure that they have plans for retaining students (Skelcher et al., 2020).

Institutional Factors

While lack of student persistence and motivation can affect completion rates, institutional factors can also be attributed to student success and completion of a doctoral program (Alexander & Davis, 2019; Jameson & Torres, 2019; Marshall et al., 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Roksa et al., 2018; Strong & Sekayi, 2018). The amount and quality of, or lack of,

support services offered by the institution, program delivery and curriculum, as well as instruction are also important factors in student success and should not be eliminated when researching retention (Kozar & Lum, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Zhou & Okahana, 2019). With the lack of traditional in class interactions with instructors, research shows that online students could benefit from additional and more comprehensive support services to include faculty interaction and advising, yet they are often receiving less than that of on ground students (Bekova, 2019; Fiore et al., 2019; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017).

Online students report that they feel their academic advising is not the same as a traditional on ground students and research shows that this could be one reason that students lose persistence and motivation in their program (Berry, 2017; Fiore et al., 2019). The amount of time an institution spends on supporting the student as well as the quality of that support and advisement have proven to be a great impact on student success (Kozar & Lum, 2017; Van der Linden et al., 2018; Zhou & Okahana, 2019). Delivery of instruction in Ph.D. programs as previously discussed may be fully online, fully on ground, or blended and this method of instruction needs to be viable for the student's ability to be self-motivated and navigate through the material (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Van der Linden et al., 2018). Research derived from Humphrey and Simpson (2012) noted that students in a doctoral program are more likely to be successful when program coursework followed a general method of processes. By offering students coursework that is comprehensive and cumulative in nature, they can secure more confidence while navigating the process (Humphrey & Simpson, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

Personal Factors

Doctoral students in an online environment have a variety of considerations to consider while working to obtain their doctorate degree. These students have various personal factors to consider such as: finances, self-motivation, interpersonal struggles on their belief to succeed, and other external commitments (Bekova, 2019; Boone et al., 2020). In addition, other psychological struggles such as depression, loneliness, and isolation are often endured by online students during their education due to the lack of socialization with peers and faculty (Bireda, 2018). Students enrolled in a doctoral program cannot justify their financial expenses until their degree is obtained, therefore causing individuals to withdraw early on to save money, or to linger in the program with little to no advancement for many years until they either graduate or become ineligible for completion (Bekova, 2019; Boone et al., 2020). A quantitative research study conducted by Destin and Svoboda (2017) reported that student stress over financial burden can impair student performance throughout their education.

Self-motivation requires students to oversee their own deadlines as well as work-life balance. While doctoral programs still afford students with assignment instruction, rubrics, and deadlines, the student is ultimately responsible for completing those tasks with autonomy (Van der Linden et al., 2018). In an online program, self-motivation is highly depended upon, and research shows that students tend to find it more difficult to find motivation when attending online courses versus on ground courses (Boone et al., 2020; Denman et al., 2018). Many students venture into a doctoral program with apprehension which continues and extends to confusion throughout the didactic portion of the program into the dissertation phase (Boone et al., 2020). This apprehension and confusion may cause the student to doubt themselves having second thoughts on their ability to succeed (Bandura, 1997; Geven et al., 2017).

External commitments can add additional stress and challenges for students of higher education (Denman et al., 2018; Geven et al., 2017). Many students are trying to complete their doctorate while also trying to maintain social relationships, care for a family, and maintain or excel in their career while also trying to maintain financial wellness (Ames et al., 2018; Bekova, 2019). Social integration is an important part of the educational process and a quantitative study completed in 2003 it was proven that students with peer involvement were more likely to persist and complete a program than those who did not have peer interactions (Devos et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). Online students tend to feel more isolated than on ground students reporting that without being in the classroom; stating they feel they are losing peer connection and support (Boone et al., 2020; Denman et al., 2018). A study conducted by Williams et al. (2019) utilized survey responses from 87 participants and concluded that peer interactions were important in an online learning environment and that social interactions often replaced familial support as a student progress through the higher educational system. While students have reported being able to form relationships with their instructors in an online environment, they state the bonds were not as strong as they were in an on-ground setting and the bond with peers is completely absent (Denman et al., 2018).

Student Persistence

Student persistence accounts for a student's ability to complete a program of study, and it may also be defined as the motivation that one has toward completing their goals (Bancroft, 2018; Tinto, 1994; Van der Linden et al., 2018). Since student satisfaction is often weighed by accrediting agencies and since this data is published publicly for potential students, institutions actively try to find ways to increase persistence (Crosling, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Tinto, 1994). Student persistence has been linked to students feeling as part of their

institution's community and it is noted that with greater involvement in the community students have higher persistence (Aljohani, 2016; Boone et al., 2020; Fiore et al., 2019; Ruud et al., 2018). Strong student persistence happens when students can fully embrace their institution and detach themselves from previous educational experiences; this includes detaching oneself from the didactic portion of a doctoral program and moving into independent research during the dissertation phase (Aljohani, 2016; Ames et al., 2018; Bancroft, 2018). In a research study conducted on student persistence and progression, 53% of participants stated that peers and faculty were the motivators that helped them persist and this same study showed that 88% of students stated that they needed face to face interaction for their persistence (Boone et al., 2020). Many students report that their decision to pursue a doctoral degree is often accredited to friends and family members, and they state that if those friends and family members remain in tune with their education as constant motivators that their persistence is even more heightened (Aljohani, 2016; Bancroft, 2018; Boone et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2019). While student persistence is influenced by more than just the student, one's motivation and procrastination can weigh heavily on the outcomes of being successful or completing a task (Basko & McCabe, 2018; Fiore et al., 2019; Jameson & Torres, 2019; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019).

Boone et al., (2020) wanted to know what it was that caused students to persist and conducted research to find out what were motivators for doctoral students and what faculty perceived as the best way to contribute to a doctoral student's education to help them persist. During this research study, 21 doctoral students completed open-ended survey questions halfway through their doctor journey and then completed an additional survey at the end of their initial research course. The data from the students showed that students felt less isolated when they received more face-to-face interaction with their faculty and peers and this lessened isolation

motivated them to continue to persist. These students also reported that they felt timely and constructive feedback was an integral part of their ability to keep advancing. Additionally, 18 faculty completed questionnaires and it was found that 50% of these faculty members felt that forming a relationship with their students assisted with their persistence and success. When the data from the students and the faculty was triangulated, it was found that 88% of students had thoughts of withdrawing from the program but continued to persist due to the motivation and communication they received from the faculty members.

Motivation

Motivation in higher education is as an individual's ability to find things to keep them focused on completing their degree as well as strategic ways to stay organized and on task when completing assignments (Devos et al., 2017). The ability to persist to doctoral completion is a complex framework, and since students have different challenges and obstacles, their motivation, or lack thereof, may be affected in a variety of ways (Tinto, 1988). While motivation can either be from within or from external factors, it is noted that it is an important factor to keep doctoral students interested and continuing their studies (Jameson & Torres, 2019). With many online doctoral students working and taking care of their family while attending school, motivation becomes an important tool towards success (Bekova, 2019; Turhan & Karadağ, 2019; Marshall et al., 2017). One important assignment that many doctoral students must stay on task with, is that of completing the lengthy and meticulous practice of completing a doctoral dissertation (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019; Elmore, 2021; Goodman et al., 2020; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019). Student motivation can relate to one's self-efficacy, that is their belief that they are able to complete a task and be successful, and therefore it is an important trait when working toward a goal as labor intensive as a doctorate. with a dissertation component (Jameson & Torres, 2019;

Turhan & Karadağ, 2019; Tinto, 1994). In a research study conducted on doctoral students it was noted that 18.9% of students lost motivation when conducting their research stating that they could not find meaning in their studies as they had a poor understanding of what they were to be completing (Castelló et al., 2017).

Procrastination

Procrastination is a prevalent phenomenon in adults with research reporting 16-32% of adults suffering from task avoidance (Beutel et al., 2016). Procrastination in college happens when a student postpones or completely ignores an assignment (Korstange et al., 2019; Kutchler et al., 2019; Sari & Fakhruddiana, 2019). Procrastination leads to late or missed assignments that can affect a student's grade and cause them to fail courses (Korstange et al., 2019). Students who procrastinate on assignments often find themselves distracted with working on other non-school related tasks that provide emotional gratification (Korstange et al., 2019; Kutchler et al., 2019; Lepp et al., 2019). Postponing school assignments allows a student to focus on distractions while avoiding things that are necessary for success; this ultimately leads to a negative response and is reported to cause depression (Korstange et al., 2019; Kutchler et al., 2019; Lepp et al., 2019). It is noted that students may lessen procrastination if they are given specific deadlines and goals (Kuchler et al., 2019). While doctoral students are enrolled in traditional courses of academia, they are given structured outcomes, schedules, and deadlines; and it is reported that these structured courses make it more challenging for procrastination (Denman et al., 2018; Geven et al., 2017).

Doctoral students in the dissertation phase are considered independent learners under the supervision of a dissertation mentor (Andrews, 2016; Bagaka's et al., 2015; Bancroft, 2018; Lim et al., 2019; Ruud et al., 2018; Sverdlik et al., 2018). The dissertation mentor is responsible for

assisting with submission edits, navigating the process of the dissertation, and serving as a liaison between the dissertation student and the institution, however dissertation chairs do not typically assist students with deadlines and goals which can threaten to hinder a procrastinator's progress (Andrews, 2016; Lim et al., 2019). To assist with procrastination, students should schedule tasks with realistic timeframes and deadlines (Marshall et al., 2017; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019).

Another way to reduce procrastination is to reduce multitasking (Lepp et al., 2019). A quantitative research study conducted by Lepp et al., (2019) was completed on undergraduate college students to find out if students multitasked more in online or on-ground courses and whether this multitasking negatively affected their ability to learn. In this study, the researcher used a convenience sample of 296 undergraduate students who had completed at least one online class in college. The participants completed a demographic survey, an assessment survey of five items on a 5-point Likert scale to assess the tendency to multi-task, and an assessment survey of twenty items on a 5-point Likert scale to assess problematic internet use. The research showed that when students have access to the internet, then tend to complete several tasks at once; with online education placing students in direct access of the internet it is shown that they become distracted by things such as emails, paying bills, looking up information related to hobbies and other ancillary tasks (Lepp et al., 2019). "There is ample research to support the theory that multitasking during educational activities negatively affects learning and academic performance" (Lepp et al., 2019, p. 5).

Navigation of the Higher Education Process

Doctoral Programs are not easily explained as they differ by country, institution, and specialty (Alexander & Davis, 2019). Just as the educational institutions differ, students also

differ and do not come from a homogenous group (Yale, 2019). While some students are well prepared for their doctoral journey others do not know what to expect as they have may have only had a thought as to what doctoral schooling entails from short conversations with others (Yale, 2019). Doctoral students are not new to education and many of them report being successful in their undergraduate programs, however they also report being lost in their doctoral studies (Blacksmith, 2017). While undergraduate studies are typically comprised of discussion boards, papers, quizzes and projects, doctoral programs often include comprehensive exams and a final research project in the form of a dissertation (Blacksmith, 2017). Research suggests that there are three main phases of a doctoral candidate's academic program which consist of socialization, beginning coursework, and then moving into the dissertation phase (Roksa et al., 2018). During the initial phase of socialization, students become familiar with an institution, meet their instructors, and become familiarized with their expectations (Roksa et al., 2018). Once coursework begins, many students find themselves in a familiar situation as the coursework often mirrors tasks which they completed in their undergrad studies (Roksa et al., 2018). The challenge arises with the dissertation component and navigating a complex series of steps, independent research, and approvals (Roksa et al., 2018).

Dissertation

The dissertation phase of education has been in the United States since the 1870s and evolved from a Germany system of research-based education (Loss & Ryan, 2017). This phase is considered an end goal for doctoral candidates and held with high regards (Ghoston et al., 2020). After successful completion of structured didactic coursework, doctoral candidates move into an unstructured phase of their education to complete their dissertation (Ames et al., 2018; Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019). This unstructured phase is typical in the United States and requires a final research

project often in the form of a dissertation (Ames et al., 2018; Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019; Jameson & Torres, 2109; Joyner et al., 2018). The dissertation is a formal, objective, and scholarly piece of research that is well documented with supporting facts and reviewed by a panel before being accepted as a scholarly piece of research deserving of a doctoral degree (Black, 2017; Joyner et al., 2018). This piece of research, known as a dissertation, is an important part of the doctoral journey and requires that a student use the knowledge they have gained throughout their program; this heavily includes literature review and statistics (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019; Joyner et al., 2018).

A dissertation can be the most challenging portion of a doctoral student's education and while the format is organized and prescribed by an institution, research shows that many students fail to complete the process with this final step being the riskiest time for student withdraw or failure (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019; Denman et al., 2018; Elmore, 2021; Joyner et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2019; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019). Having students withdraw or fail out during the dissertation phase can cause a lot of stress for the student. The dissertation process is different from one institution to the next, however they follow a similar process and challenge for students (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019). Dissertation impediments need to be reviewed when trying to assist students overcoming this obstacle as they are the common challenges that may keep a student in all but dissertation phase (Denman et al., 2018; Elmore, 2021).

Dissertation Process. While the dissertation process varies throughout institutions, the purpose remains the same; to have doctoral candidates complete a research project utilizing scholarly writing and research (Ames et al., 2018; Black, 2017). The dissertation project, depending on the institution, can be quantitative, qualitative, or applied research and is done to fill a void or gap in literature on a topic (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Since

doctoral students need to write their research in a way that they will find an answer to a gap in the current literature, they often sift through tons of literature regarding an interesting topic (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019). When completing a dissertation, students begin with writing a prospectus whereas they define and clarify their research project. The prospectus allows the student to work with their dissertation chair to clearly set a problem statement, purpose statement and research questions (Ames et al., 2018; Black, 2017). Once a student has completed their prospectus, they will begin working on their dissertation proposal (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019). The proposal allows the student to further adapt their research plan by conducting a detailed literature review on the existing research surrounding their study. Once the student and their chair accept the proposal it is generally sent to a board at the institution where the proposal and purpose for the research is defended (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019; Ghoston et al., 2020). If the proposal is successfully defended, then the student is given permission to begin their research while following all institution and research guidelines. Once the research is conducted and resulted, the final dissertation is written, submitted, and defended. If a student successfully defends their research, then they will be rewarded with the esteemed title of Doctor.

Dissertation Impediments. While research points to a variety of barriers that could potentially prevent a student from being successful, the dissertation phase is listed as one of the largest impediments to success for a doctoral student with students reporting that it is undoubtedly the most difficult writing assignment throughout their journey (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2019; Denman et al., 2018; Elmore, 2021). The dissertation is inarguably the most difficult challenge for a doctoral student, and it is stated to be even more difficult for online students versus on ground students (Denman et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2019). The phenomenon of students in a doctoral program completing all of their coursework, but not completing their dissertation

happens so abundantly that it has been given a nickname of *all, but dissertation* and some students never get out of this phase by completing the process (Denman et al., 2018; Locke & Boyle, 2016). Some reported impediments to the dissertation process are unclear expectations, the relationship with the student with their Dissertation chair, and various other personal challenges (Geven et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2019; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

Expectations. When completing a doctoral program with a dissertation component, students report that unclear communication about expectations lends them to feeling unsupported ultimately causing them to give up and withdraw or drop out of the program (Ames et al., 2018; Devos et al., 2017; Fiore et al., 2019; Joyner et al., 2018). Students state that there is often unclear expectation of them in the process and while institutions have a handbook or dissertation policy in place, it is often difficult to self-navigate (Ghoston et al., 2020; Young et al., 2019). Communication is comprised of 70% nonverbal, 23% tone of voice, and 7% chosen word, online students may only receive 7% of an electronic message with no human component (McCorry & Mason, 2020). With written instructions, it is possible for students to misunderstand given there is no paralanguage or body language for reinforcement; this can lead to both student frustration when completing the assignment and instructor frustration when grading the assignment (Waggoner Denton & Veloso, 2018).

Dissertation Chair Relationship. Another important support system for the dissertation student is their dissertation committee who can provide feedback and assistance with the research and writing process (Ames et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2019; Zhou & Okahana, 2019). The dissertation committee is often derived of a dissertation chair and other various members as required by the institution (Young et al., 2019). Research shows that more students drop out of their doctoral program due to poor relationships and lack of assistance from their dissertation

chair than of their academic ability lending the chair to be one of the most important components to doctoral success (Alexander & Davis, 2019; Andrews, 2016; Turhan & Karadağ, 2019; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019; Zhou & Okahana, 2019). While students may have felt secure during the didactic portion of their program, students report that the change from structured coursework to independent scholar is scary and challenging and therefore a supportive dissertation chair is necessary (Ames et al., 2018; Black, 2017). Research also shows that if the student has a good mentor, they can increase their chances of matriculating to graduation by almost twenty percent (Andrews, 2016; Zhou & Okahana, 2019).

One way to ensure good support for students as a chair is to offer encouraging and consistent feedback (Ames et al., 2018; Black, 2017). Students report that when the chair allows them to break the dissertation project down into smaller manageable chunks then they feel more motivated toward completion; with many students reporting that waiting for feedback after an entire chapter was overwhelming and unmanageable (Strong & Sekayi, 2018; Young et al., 2019). Mentor feedback is important for doctoral students in their dissertation phase and students and mentors need to discuss the importance of short feedback versus feedback on full chapters or the entire manuscript; these short conversations can elicit student productivity while also allowing the edits to be more manageable (Lim et al., 2019). Another way to ensure good support as a chair is effective and personable communication (Ghoston et al., 2020; Jameson & Torres, 2019; Marshall; et al., 2017; Young et al., 2019). Research shows that dissertation chairs who invest time in getting to know their doctoral candidate are vital for doctoral progression (Jameson & Torres, 2019; Strong & Sekayi, 2018; Young et al., 2019). In addition to getting to know the candidate, dissertation chairs need to be empathetic to the student's personal challenges and be able to tell when they need additional input or an encouraging talk (Jameson & Torres,

2019). Lastly, a supportive and proactive chair will help to encourage open communication and collaboration (Jameson & Torres, 2019; Strong & Sekayi, 2018). Research shows that chairs who reach out consistently and make suggestions for improvement on the student's manuscript are monumental and that by reaching out consistently through phone calls and personal meetings, the student is more likely to be successful (Young et al., 2019). Research has shown that dissertation chairs who consistently reach out to their students were seen to be helpful and collaborative and these short meetings helped to invigorate the students desire to continue with their research and prevent them from being stuck (Ghoston et al., 2020; Young et al., 2019).

A research study conducted by Kumar and Johnson (2019) was completed to find which online mentoring strategies worked best for online doctoral students during their dissertation. During this study, 10 faculty members teaching for two different online programs at the same institution agreed to participate in interviews regarding their mentoring strategies. Each of the participants had a minimum of two years online teaching experience and versed in the online communication environment and eight of the participants had experience with mentoring doctoral students in a prior brick-and-mortar learning environment. The institution for this research enrolled professional non-traditional students who had commitments in addition to their doctoral studies. During the phenomenological research study, interviews were conducted, and analysis was run utilizing an inductive analysis method. The analysis of data resulted in two major themes in the study to include the importance of structure when mentoring in the online environment as well as the importance of structure while assisting doctoral students with research. The study showed that the type of communication with students should be varied based on the student and the message to convey. The research found that it was important for the faculty mentors to contact their doctoral students frequently so they would not feel secluded nor

lose focus on their research. In addition, the results also found that mentors should use small activities to assist their doctoral students to understand how to complete each step of the research. While this study had the limitation of only interviewing faculty from one institution, it did the job of proving that mentor relationships are valuable to doctoral students.

When researching dissertation supervisors, Roumell and Bolliger (2017) found that many dissertation chairs were not effectively trained in mentoring doctoral students. In this study, 55 faculty who served as dissertation chairs were asked to complete surveys about their relationship with their doctoral mentees. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with thirteen chairs as a follow-up to the survey to gain further insight into the challenges of mentoring students throughout their dissertation phase. The results showed that the dissertation chairs were overall not happy with institutional support as they felt they received little training on how to assist a doctoral student through the research phase. 68.5% of the faculty stated that they communicated with their dissertation mentee via email and a mere 1.9% of the faculty admitted to ever meeting their doctoral candidate in person. When asked how long they took to return edits to their candidate, chairs gave a range from three to thirty days with most chairs stating that they returned edits within 14 days. The chairs stated that when working with online doctoral students there were additional obstacles such as different time zones and knowing that their students often had work schedules in addition to school. They felt that these challenges made communication difficult and that it hindered the personal one-on-one attention they could give if they saw the student on a more consistent basis. Many mentors did state that while they did see online dissertation mentoring as a challenge, they also saw the benefit that more individuals could continue their education with flexible means.

Personal Challenges

The dissertation process can add additional stress on doctoral students that affects themselves, individuals outside of the institution, as well as those individuals employed by the institution (Geven et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2019; Loss & Ryan, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019). Research has found that peer support groups are paramount when completing the dissertation process through an online Ph.D. program and therefore students will need to rely on friends, family members, and other students for support and guidance (Ames et al., 2018; Berry, 2017; Boone et al., 2020; Denman et al., 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

A recent study by Russell-Pinson and Harris (2019) was conducted on students participating in dissertation support groups to discover whether the support groups were effective in helping doctoral students with coping skills. The research reflected on transcripts of discussion that took place between six dissertation students and notes from the researcher. The group met weekly for six weeks and was a time for students to communicate with others who had similar struggles or triumphs while working on their dissertation. Students noted that while working on their dissertation they had a variety of stressors to include things such as perfectionism, competing priorities, poor time management, writing anxiety, challenges with supervisors, poor cognitive habits, and a variety of other non—academic stressors. While some of the participants focused on their stressors stating that it caused their dissertation work to suffer, other participants stated that having discussions with other students in similar situations encouraged them to move forward. Additionally, students stated that each meeting included mindfulness practice and every participant stated that they found this time to be peaceful and a relaxing time to reflect. Each support group meeting also included an activity where participants helped each other to create

measurable goals for the next week, and the participants stated that this helped them to focus on small tasks to keep on track.

This social support can come in the form of emotional or physical assistance including things such as being a positive motivator or working on non-school related tasks the student is having difficulty achieving (Boone et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2019). Many doctoral students have additional tasks in addition to their studies such as work and family, and these tasks make it challenging for students to devote enough time to the dissertation (Marshall et al., 2017; Young et al., 2019). Writing anxiety and the fear of failure are also personal challenges reported by doctoral candidates as many of them state that they hold themselves to high standards and they are also their own worst critic (Marshall et al., 2017; O'Connor, 2017; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019). Students report that their anxiety toward writing stems from the time it takes to organize their thoughts with many students saying that they too often focus on how much they have written counting page by page which leads them to have psychological challenges with completing their work (Loss & Ryan, 2017; O'Connor, 2017).

Lastly, financial constraints are listed as a personal challenge when it comes to doctoral degrees as many students start to question if education itself is worth the time and money that they are investing (Loss & Ryan, 2017). With many doctoral students using financial assist through loans with interest, there is a real need to ensure that students are completing their education and utilizing the degree they obtained (Backlund, 2017; Bryan & Guccione, 2018). With all these personal constraints, it is noted that many doctoral students suffer from mental health problems that are exasperated by the dissertation process (Levecque et al., 2017). Mental health triggers are a concern as they may cause a student to be unsuccessful, or more importantly they may cause inaccuracies or insufficiencies in their research study (Levecque et al., 2017).

Summary

A review of the literature on student retention and completion of doctoral programs affirms that there is a need to research retention and completion rates of doctoral students more specifically regarding students attending online doctoral programs. While there is current literature related to retention and completion rates, they are more specifically regarding undergraduate programs. There is little research on retention and completion for doctoral programs and even less research regarding doctoral programs that are fully online. In addition, while the research offers possibilities into why students are unsuccessful in completing their doctoral programs, there does not appear to be one specific reason for student attrition rather it appears to be a variety of reasons dependent on the student and institution. This variety of variables seems to be a barrier when attempting to pinpoint a specific cause of low retention and completion. From the existing literature, a conclusion can be drawn that student persistence and self-motivation along with institutional support are possible predictors in student success although, the reasons why some do not possess the ability to graduate should be researched further. In addition, the theoretical framework of student departure, student involvement, and self-efficacy rest on factors to conclude that students may be unsuccessful although these beliefs may not be the only basis for the low completion rates. To discover if future theories can be dispelled, further research should be conducted to fill in the gaps.

While research shows that the average completion rates for online doctoral programs is 30%, there is little research stating why the retention rates are so low. This phenomenological research study will work with past students who lived the experience of being enrolled in an online doctoral program with a dissertation component. Through the experiences of these individual participants, the research hopes to uncover reasons why the retention rates are so low.

With the current terminology, applied theories, and literature review being discussed in chapter two, this gives background to move forward with the research study. Chapter three will review the methods to be utilized for the research study to include the design, data collection and data analysis tools necessary.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

While completion rates for doctoral students are reported at approximately 50%, online doctoral programs report a much lower completion rating of approximately 30 -37% (Dixon, 2018; Ruud et al., 2018). One of the reasons reported for student attrition and failure to complete the Ph.D. program is the comprehensive portion of the dissertation research project (Denman et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2019). The purpose of this phenomenological study aimed to describe the experiences of individuals who attended an online doctoral program that included a dissertation component. This chapter focuses on the research design that was used to view the perceptions that participants have with their online doctoral programs. In addition, the research methods will work to discover perceived barriers of online doctoral students when completing their dissertation as well as review possible ways that these doctoral candidates feel the barriers could be eliminated. The second section of this chapter restates the research questions, while sections three through seven discuss the settings, participants, procedures, researcher's role, and data collection. Section eight includes all the data analysis to include tables and graphs. The final section of the chapter will discuss the importance of trustworthiness during the research.

Design

This study was conducted using qualitative research methods. A qualitative study allows for the researcher to collect sensitive participant data about a personal topic that has purpose and meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Characteristics of qualitative research include using multiple methods, focusing on participant perspectives, and presenting a solution in a manner that can assist a multitude of entities involved with the problem through a holistic approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Qualitative research is the best fit for this study as the research is trying to uncover

the reason why the retention and completion rates are so low. Qualitative research can be used to collect data in a natural setting through interviews of participants when trying to establish a pattern or theme, also known as a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A phenomenological qualitative approach was used for this study as it is the best fit to focus on the absence or gap in literature when it comes to reasons why candidates are unable to persist through the dissertation process of an online doctoral program. The qualitative research approach that was used is phenomenology which will allow the participant to share his or her experiences of attending an online doctoral program (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell and Poth (2016) state that phenomenology is used to elicit common experiences and purposes that participants share from a specific phenomenon, in this case their experience with a doctoral program. Although I share this common phenomenon with the participants as the researcher it will be important that I refrain from making any inferences and approach the research interviews from a non-emotional perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing a phenomenological approach, the researcher was able to gather descriptive experiences from participants who share the common experience of attending a doctoral Program fully online; these experiences can be through the didactic phase as well as the dissertation phase. With this research study looking at online doctoral student barriers to completing their dissertation, there were interviews conducted to illicit facts and perceptions, but no quantifiable data were collected to show analytical quantitative trends. In addition, a phenomenological approach was chosen as it is a means for the researcher to collect information to describe trends that participants have in common while going through similar experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Research Questions

The following research question will guide this qualitative phenomenological study: What are the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation?

Additionally, the research will include the following two sub-research questions:

1. Among doctoral candidates in online degree programs, what are the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation?
2. In what ways do online doctoral candidates think the barriers to the dissertation component could be eliminated?

Setting

The setting will include 10 participants who have attended online doctoral programs within the United States that require a dissertation component for completion. The participants resided in a variety of states and their only connection was that they each attended an online doctoral program with a dissertation component. The setting of participants is informal and has no direct leadership or institution. Each participant will have been enrolled in an online doctoral program with a dissertation component and either withdrawn while in all but dissertation stage or successfully completed and defended their dissertation. The setting for the interviews of this research study was face-to-face interviews through a multimedia platform known as Zoom. The meeting was password protected for security. Data on the institutions the individual attended was collected from the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), as necessary for correlation with published retention and completion averages. It was important to obtain the data on the retention of these specific institutions in addition to the participants' experiences to highlight information that arose from the interviews. The setting for the focus group was also secured web-based Zoom meetings where everyone can interact together.

Participants

The research study consisted of 10 participants chosen through intentional purposeful sampling. The participants were considered intentional and purposeful as they met the criteria of having attended an online doctoral program (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Phenomenological studies should elicit a sample between three and 10 participants, however sample sizes of up to 30 are acceptable (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Staying in alignment with recommended sample sizes, research participation included 10 purposeful participants which were selected from thirteen eligible recruited participants that met the criteria of the study. By utilizing 10 participants, the research elicited meaningful responses without overwhelming the data to triangulate (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). The first five participants for the study were online doctoral students who completed their didactic courses, without finishing their dissertation project, leaving them in the ABD phase of their degree. The other five participants were students who completed completion of their dissertation during an online doctoral program lending them the ability to receive the esteemed doctoral title. By utilizing 10 participants for the study, the researcher is remaining in line with the number of recommended participants for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 55 and were from a variety of ethnical backgrounds and genders. Their institutions were coded by region in the United States and information on their level of doctoral education and the years they were enrolled will be noted.

A demographics questionnaire for this study was used to ensure that participants met the criteria of either completing a fully online doctoral program with a dissertation phase or they have remained in ABD phase of a fully online doctoral program. Additional information to include age, gender, and institutional location will also be collected. The researcher worked with

the dissertation committee to ensure that the questionnaire was valid prior to administering it to participants. Additionally, the researcher reviewed the questionnaires to ensure that the participants met the criteria to participate in the study.

Procedures

To minimize ethical questions to the research, the researcher completed all training necessary for working with human participants through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) modules provided by Liberty University. An application to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) will be submitted and I will ensure that all approvals are granted before any research is conducted. Securing potential participants will be done through email solicitations. By posting about the research in several places, the researcher can reach current and former online doctoral students. Participants receiving an email will be asked to pass the email along to anyone they know that may qualify for the study. The email will include contact information for the researcher as well as an explanation about the purpose and procedures of the study.

Once participants have been selected and elect to take part in the study, they will be given a written explanation of the study to be conducted as well as how their information will be obtained and disseminated. These participants will be asked to sign release forms consenting their participation in the study as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants will be informed that if they are selected as a research participant, their interviews will be recorded, and each interview will be transcribed verbatim. Once individuals have signed the consent form, they will complete a demographic/screening questionnaire to ensure participation eligibility. This eligibility questionnaire will be disseminated through Google forms with data only accessible by the researcher and their committee. To ensure eligibility, the researchers will ensure that each participant was enrolled in an online doctoral program and that

they either completed and graduated or they did not complete their program and remained in the ABD phase. Once eligibility is established, the researcher will contact each participant via email to schedule a face-to-face semi-structured interview. These face-to-face interviews will be held either in person via a web-based application with video and audio. Zoom will be used as the primary web-based application, but the researcher will also utilize WebEx as a backup. The interviews will be recorded on the web-based application using their cloud recording service and a backup recording will be done utilizing a pocket-sized digital recorder. After the interviews are transcribed, the participants will be asked to review their transcripts through email delivery for accuracy. If participants wish to have a written copy of the transcript versus email delivery, one will be sent to them through certified mail. Participants must review and sign that they agree to the transcript of their interview prior to analysis. If the participants feel there are inaccuracies with the transcript, they will be asked to meet with the researcher to correct the issues.

Prior to the scheduled interviews, the researcher will print a copy of the interview questions to be used for note taking and later transcription. The researcher will also ensure that all devices required for holding and recording the interview are working. After each interview is conducted, the researcher will transcribe the interviews and journal any biases they may have felt during the interview or during the transcription of the interview. It is important to note that questionnaire responses, interview transcriptions and researcher journaling will be digitally stored on a password protected device to ensure research is kept confidential. Once all interviews have been conducted and transcribed, data analysis will begin using coding.

The Researcher's Role

As the researcher for this project as well as a student currently enrolled in an online Ph.D. program working on my dissertation, I will serve as the primary human instrument for data

collection and analysis (Moustakas, 1994). I am a middle-aged female with a fulltime career in healthcare education who can benefit from the flexibility of attending an online asynchronous program. As a candidate for a doctoral degree in Higher Education Leadership, I see the various challenges that doctoral students face in an online program and can relate to challenges with the dissertation. I have an interest in this research along with the theories that will come from the analysis as they apply to my own current challenges. I have struggled with a variety of challenges with completing the degree and the challenges seem to be more compounded now that I am in the dissertation phase. Some personal challenges have been placing my goal of this degree before my family, placing my career before my degree, financial constraints, and lack of communication, and understanding with advising from the institution. Since I have such a close personal involvement with this phenomenon, I will need to place my own judgments and biases aside by bracketing out my own personal experiences when interviewing and analyzing data (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). To keep my personal experiences from clouding interviews, one bracketing approach I will use is to epoch by keeping a personal notebook where I can write about my personal biases or reflections with each participant (Moustakas, 1994). This journal can be used when completing the analysis section of my research to ensure that I do not factor in my own feelings with the participants. Additionally, I am hopeful that this research will shed some light on ways for students and institutions to lessen or eliminate possible barriers to the dissertation process.

Data Collection

Gathering data from various participants about their experiences will require multiple types of data collection for triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Data triangulation involves using various types of data that will provide supportive evidence for research validation

(Creswell & Poth, 2016). To achieve data triangulation, data collection will include interviews, focus groups, and short reflective essays. Each prospective participant will receive an initial questionnaire that will serve to ensure that they are eligible for the study. Once eligibility is determined, the researcher will use three data collection instruments throughout the research study. The researcher will have participants complete reflective essays, conduct semi-structured interviews with each participant, and hold focus groups. By using three data collection methods to include reflective essays, interviews, and focus groups then the data can be triangulated which will ensure that published data is reliable (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The reflective essays will be the first step in the data collection process followed by the interviews. The focus groups will be the last step and themes discussed in these focus groups will enhance the interview topics. Interviews will assist the researcher in documenting each participant's experience which will help to establish common phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Each interview will be scheduled to last one hour, and the researcher will maintain control of the questions to remain in this timeframe. Focus Groups will be scheduled for two hours with the understanding that they may not last this long. The Focus Groups will be held to enhance the current phenomenon discovered during interviews as well as given the opportunity for any new experiences to be highlighted (Gill & Baillie, 2018).

Reflective Essays

Journaling can be used as a data collection method whereas the participant journals about their experiences before, during, and after the phenomenon being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Since the participants for this research study will no longer be enrolled in their doctoral program, they will be asked to write a reflective essay about their online experiences in their doctoral program. By allowing participants to write about their own experiences data can be

collected on the participants' experiences with their doctoral program without having a traditional observation performed (Lutz & Paretti, 2019). For the reflective essay, participants will be given a writing prompt and asked to submit a one-to-two-page paper addressing their experiences with their doctoral program. The participants will be asked to use a 12-pt Times New Roman Font with one-inch margins and double spacing. The writing prompt given will be: If you could go back and redo your doctoral program, what would you change and why? This writing prompt question will relate back to the central research question as well as sub-research question one.

Participants will be asked to complete and email the reflective essay back to me within two weeks of the completed one-on-one interview. To ensure that the essays are completed, I will send reminder emails to the participants and explain the importance of the deadline. Once the reflective essays are collected, they will be used in conjunction with the interviews and focus groups to triangulate the data. By allowing students to write this reflective essay on their privately and non-verbally, I may collect valuable information that may have not become apparent during a scripted interview.

Interviews

Interviews as described by Creswell and Poth (2016) are the “core of the interview protocol” and are a way to see something based off those participants view on the topic (p. 164). Face-to-face structured interviews will be conducted via video conferencing with 10 individuals. These face-to-face interviews will be scheduled for sixty-minute increments and will be recorded for later transcription through a paid transcription service. The interviews will be recorded on the video conferencing application known as Zoom as well as a portable handheld recording device as a backup. To ensure proper functioning of the devices, I will

complete a mock interview beforehand with a colleague. These interviews will be conducted to gather historical information from the participant and will allow the researcher more control of the questions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Open-ended interview questions will be utilized so that the participant will not be led when giving their answers (Weller et al., 2018). The interview questions were created so that they will answer questions that relate to the topic of interest (Moustakas, 1994). By allowing the participants to let the problems unfold in their interviews, the researcher will be able to publish the concerns that may be part of the low graduation rate problem.

Interview Questions

Opening Questions

1. Please tell me your name and a little bit about yourself.
2. What do you currently do for work?
3. Describe your educational background prior to working on your Ph.D.
4. Tell me how your doctoral program prepared you for your current career.

Questions Related to Personal Student Persistence

5. Please tell me about your responsibilities while working on your Ph.D. – job, children, schooling.
6. What were your desires/motivations for obtaining your doctorate?
7. What personal challenges did you face while obtaining your degree? You do not have to go into in depth details of your personal experiences, more a general idea of personal challenges.
8. What type of outside support did you have while going through your doctoral program (friends, family, employer, etc.)?

Questions Related to Experience

9. Describe your overall experience with your doctoral program.
10. Describe your experiences with the coursework in your program.

11. Describe your experiences with the dissertation process of your program.

Questions Related to Institutional Support

12. Explain your process with obtaining a topic and committee?

13. Tell me the differences you experienced between the coursework phase and the dissertation phase of the program.

14. Describe any resources offered to you by the institution such as library, advising, committee member selection?

15. What do you feel that Ph.D. programs can do to foster student persistence in the dissertation phase?

16. More specifically, is there anything you feel that online students need in addition when reaching the dissertation phase of their program?

Questions Related to Self-Efficacy

17. Explain why you persisted [or did not persist] through the dissertation phase to completion.

18. Can you explain the emotions you felt when you completed [or did not complete] your dissertation?

19. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share regarding your experience with your doctoral program?

Questions one through four serves as background questions to encourage the participant to disclose more about their busy life while working toward their doctoral degree. These opening questions will serve as icebreakers to build a relaxing atmosphere for the interviewer as well as the interviewee (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2018). Question one will be used to allow the participant to settle in and feel more comfortable with the research process. In addition to being ice breaker questions, questions two through four will be asked to gain a sense of whether the student's past education or career role was related to their doctoral studies. Questions five through eight will be asked to determine the student's personal persistence, motivations and challenges while also managing their doctoral studies. Asking about the student's own persistence in these questions will help the researcher relate the research to Tinto's theory about

student departure (Tinto, 1994). Questions nine through eleven will serve as open-ended questions about the student's experience with their program. These questions will give the participant the ability to speak freely about their personal experience; these questions may certainly elicit responses about additional theories to retention that have not yet been published or reviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Questions twelve through sixteen will be asked to gain insight into the support the student received from the institution during their course of studies. Question seventeen is a reflective question where the participant can reflect on reasons as to why they may or may not have persisted throughout the dissertation, by allowing the participant time to reflect on this question, they should offer a truthful insight into the barriers they encountered. Questions eighteen is personal and one where the participant must explain their emotions, these emotions may be positive or negative in nature and will allow the researcher the ability to relate the responses to Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory. During this question, the researcher will be able to uncover whether the individual believed in their ability to succeed. Question nineteen will allow the participant to expand upon questions that they already answered and contribute any additional information they may feel necessary.

Focus Groups

In addition to participant interviews, the research will include focus groups. Research focus group will allow for interviewing multiple participants at once who can answer questions in a cooperative way leading to information that may not have been elicited from individual participant interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These focus groups will assist the research in finding out more information that may be related to the phenomenon. The purpose of utilizing focus groups as part of the data collection is in hopes that participants may be more willing to speak up about experiences they had, or other conversations may trigger them to remember a

specific experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These focus groups will be semi-structured and conducted through a video teleconferencing application known as Zoom just as the interviews were conducted. By hosting the focus groups through Zoom, a higher participation rate may be obtained since individuals may attend from a variety of geographical locations (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In having multiple participants together in the same virtual meeting room, it will allow them the ability to speak freely and collaborate about their experiences together (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The focus group meetings will be recorded through the Zoom application as well as through a portable handheld device and all participants will be informed of the recording prior to the start of the focus group. At the beginning of the focus group, participants will be asked to introduce themselves to others and they will all be informed that it is important they share openly. Through this opening introduction the goal is to create an atmosphere where individuals will collaborate openly and where everyone will participate (Creswell & Poth, 2016). During the focus group, my job will be to ask questions that will entice individuals to speak about their experiences as well as monitor the chat to ensure that everyone is actively engaged and no one participant monopolizes the discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Focus Group Questions

1. Can you state your name and let everyone know a little bit about the institution you attended, the degree you were seeking (or received) and whether you completed your doctorate or remained in the ABD-phase?
2. How would you describe your experiences with your online doctoral program?
3. How would you describe your experience with the structure and layout of your didactic courses?
4. How would you describe your experience with obtaining a dissertation committee?
5. How would you describe your experience with the dissertation phase of your online doctoral program?

6. Can you discuss the emotions you felt while going through the program?
7. Can you share with me how completing (or not completing) your doctorate has impacted you emotionally?
8. If you could go back and do it again, what would you want to change personally?
9. If you could go back and do it again, what do you wish the institution would have done differently?
10. What emotions did you leave with after the experience?

These questions allowed the participants time to discuss their experiences more openly than during the one-on-one interviews. While some of the questions were a slight reiteration from the interviews, they were asked again in a different way for further clarification and elaboration (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Question one is an introductory and icebreaker question, this question serves to relax the participants and get them speaking openly in front of each other. Questions two through seven are reiterations from the interviews but allow the individuals time to express additional feelings and to elaborate on other participants' comments. Questions eight and nine allow the participants the opportunity to express barriers that they saw or experienced while attending their online doctoral program. At the conclusion of the questions, the focus group will be given an opportunity to express any additional feelings or thoughts in a round robin type situation.

Data Analysis

Moustakas's approach to phenomenological qualitative research procedures is recommended for data analysis of this proposed research study since the data is derived of interviews and focus groups about a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research questions will be reviewed and transcribed similarly with the focus group interactions. The interest of phenomenon was chosen with all participants being those who have either completed or who have remained in the ABD phase of an online doctoral program. Data collection will be

completed to include interview transcription, focus group transcription, and journal biases reviewed. The data will be analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) method of organizing, analyzing and synthesizing data prior to summarizing the data and seeing how the experiences are related.

Organizing the data will consist of completing all interviews and focus group transcriptions. Once the transcriptions are complete, each question must be organized with the responses outlined and coded (Moustakas, 1994). Analyzing the data will consist of synthesizing the information given into common themes or experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method for analysis will be used to analyze the responses of the reflective essay, interviews, and focus group interview. This method of data analysis will allow me to provide my own experiences with the phenomenon while also composing a list of significant horizontal statements from the interviews and focus groups. Once I have these significant statements, I will be able to group them into larger units of information to gather a description of my participants experiences with their online doctoral program and the dissertation phase (Moustakas, 1994). From the significant statements and themes, I will be able to review the data to ensure that it is essential in understanding the phenomenon of online doctoral students and I will also be able to eliminate any data that is too vague or subjective.

Trustworthiness

When collecting data regarding a qualitative research study, the researcher must ensure trustworthiness throughout the process (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Trustworthiness defines whether one's research and information can be trusted; it is the quality of the study and results (Schwandt, 2014). In qualitative research, it is important to ensure that the data is coded accurately to ensure a trustworthy study (Van den Berg & Struwig, 2017). To complete a quality

check on trustworthiness, one can review the credibility, transferability, and dependability of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The purpose behind credibility, dependability and transferability will be taken into consideration by the researcher with the utmost respect regarding ethics. The name of the institutions where participants attended as well as the participants themselves will be treated to full confidentiality. Participants will be given full disclosure of the process so that they can trust me as the researcher. Additionally, all research will be conducted using three data collection points and analyzed to ensure that triangulation can validate the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Credibility

Establishing credibility as a researcher is important as it is the researcher's way of showing validity in the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). When ensuring credibility, it is important for the researcher to correctly interpret the participants' views, this ensures that an individual's views are represented truthfully without falsification (Schwandt, 2014). To ensure credibility of the research, participants will have attended a variety of institutions regardless of the institution's reputation or reported outcomes. In addition, participant interview transcripts will be given to the participants for review as part so that they may review it and give feedback regarding the accuracy (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). By having the participants review their interview transcript, they can clarify if their words were recorded as intended. The credibility of the research will begin with reviewing the audio recordings against the interview transcripts to ensure accuracy before plotting the information. In addition, the data collected will be triangulated by comparing results and patterns and focusing on key trends (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is the ability of the researcher to remain consistent in their research methods and analysis while confirmability ensures that the researcher remains neutral through the process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure that this study is both dependable and confirmable, the researcher will conduct an audit trail along with the dissertation committee. This audit trail will serve as a way of record keeping making sure the methods were followed in accordance with Liberty University and the IRB. By documenting any approvals and changes throughout the process and keeping records of these changes, the research team, can go back and verify that the entire study was completed as stated and approved. For confirmability, the research methods will be thoroughly detailed so that the study could be replicated in the future with similar participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability to the ability that the current research could be applied to further research in similar contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). To ensure transferability of the research study, the researcher will ensure that the gap in literature is stated and researched throughout the dissertation. In addition, an introduction to prior research will be included to give the reader a transparent background as to why the study is being conducted. All methods of the study will be thoroughly dictated so that the study can be used to benefit other studies through modified replication. By keeping the participants confined to individuals who have attended online doctoral programs and who were either successful to ABD or to final conferment, the research may be easily transferred.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical dilemmas should be considered by researchers when conducting their studies. While researchers may know right from wrong, it is also important that they identify any moral dilemmas that may hinder their research. To protect the data for this research and ensure that the research is conducted and protected with all regards to ethics, various measures will be taken. Participants will be given verbal and written disclosure of the study and will be asked to complete a consent form prior to any data collection, in addition study participants will be given the opportunity to withdraw at any time. As required by Liberty University, all IRB guidelines will be strictly adhered to. IRB approval will be taken seriously, and nothing will be altered regarding the research method once IRB approval has been granted. All signed release forms will be scanned onto a password protected removable hard drive with the originals stored in a locked filing cabinet until the research is completed and the dissertation is defended. Interview responses will be kept anonymous without any publication of the participant's full names. All information discussed regarding the research will be protected and confined to the standards set forth by the IRB and Liberty University and respected and adhered to by the researcher and dissertation committee.

Summary

Through data collection and analysis, the researcher can produce a phenomenological qualitative study to research areas where gaps in literature exist. The purpose of this research is to explore the persistence, retention, and graduation rates of online doctoral students. Lock and Boyle (2019) found that the dissertation phase of a doctoral program was one of the biggest challenges for doctoral students and the phenomenon is so common that it has even been labeled with the stigmatized acronym of ABD for *all but dissertation*, but what their research does not

show is why the dissertation phase is more challenging for online students versus on ground brick-and-mortar students. The review of current literature indicates that there is gap in the literature when discussing retention and completion rates of doctoral students specifically those that attend fully online programs requiring a dissertation. This chapter outlined the type of research design utilized and why the phenomenological approach will be used. The methods for the research, the analysis of data and the way that the researcher was able to establish trustworthiness will be crucial to the study and its acceptance (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This chapter will conclude by sharing the methods used when creating the study and will be concise enough to recreate the study by future researchers.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand doctoral students' experiences participating in an online doctoral program at a university. The study was done through data collection of 10 participants consisting of one-on-one interviews, reflective essays, and a focus group. Participants were either graduates of an online doctoral program with a dissertation component or they completed their coursework and never finished their dissertation remaining in the ABD phase. Chapter four offers a brief description of each participant (using a pseudonym) and presents themes and sub-themes that were recognized through data analysis. Additionally, this chapter reviews the research questions correlating the themed data into answers.

Participants

10 participants were identified and interviewed through intentional purposeful criterion. Of these 10 participants, five have successfully completed their online doctoral programs and dissertations earning the title of Doctor. The other five participants completed their coursework through an online doctoral program; however, they never completed their dissertations, keeping them in the category of All But Dissertation (ABD). To find participants, emails, social media posts and calls were made using the recruitment forms approved by the IRB. Each participant completed a questionnaire prior to their participation to ensure that they met the criteria for the study. Upon approval for the study, participants signed and submitted their consent forms before being interviewed or participating in the focus group. The participant's demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Participants' Demographics*

Participant's Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Region of Institution	ABD/ Graduate
Crystal	55	F	West	ABD
Kim	29	F	Midwest	ABD
Robert	55	M	West	ABD
Amy	44	F	Midwest	ABD
Anna	40	F	West	ABD
Christine	35	F	South	Graduate
Joseph	46	M	Midwest	Graduate
Jennifer	36	F	South	Graduate
Rhonda	54	F	Midwest	Graduate
Stephanie	39	F	South	Graduate

The following information is a more detailed description of each participant to include education prior to starting their online doctoral program.

Crystal

Crystal is a 55-year-old mother of spouse and mother working as a licensed marriage and family therapist. She has an associate in liberal arts Degree, a bachelor's in business Degree, a master's in counseling Degree and began work toward her Doctorate of Philosophy at an online university. Crystal completed her coursework, but she did not complete her dissertation although she did state that she would consider completing if she knew she could attend an institution that would give her the support she needed to finish. Crystal stated that she had a strong outside support system which mainly consisted of a doctoral prepared co-worker. She stated that with his support and advice, she was able to start navigating the process as she felt her institution did not explain the process to her well enough. Some personal factors that attributed to Crystal not completing her dissertation were a busy work and social life, transferring institutions as her first institution closed, and self-discipline. Crystal had positive things to say about the coursework and when comparing and contrasting coursework to the dissertation phases she stated:

The dissertation part of the doctoral program is the hardest. Getting accepted into the program means you are academically capable, but another element of getting a doctorate almost seems like a hazing process versus a learning process.

She stated that the institution offered a variety of resources to include an excellent online library of resources and synchronous webinars on certain dissertation aspects, however she did note that she was unaware of the resources until having attended for almost three years and wished the institution had some sort of orientation to help students navigate through the available resources. When asked if there was anything that online institutions could do [versus on-ground] to foster student persistence, Crystal discussed that without face-to-face contact it is easy to get lost in the program and she truly felt that weekly video conferencing should be added for students during their dissertation phase. She stated:

And I think within that orientation that I've been talking about, they should make that part of the program for people because in one environment, you're left on your own completely, and, and, and if you don't check in, or whatever, you know, you'll just be dropped from the program.

Kim

Kim is a single woman with a variety of responsibilities to include working at a full-time job, teaching adjunct at four universities, serving on the board for a professional society, and running a non-profit organization. While she does not have any children of her own, she is very involved in her niece and nephew's lives which does take up a bit of her free time. She has an excellent support system that consists of family and friends and states that she also sees a therapist biweekly which helped her navigate through schooling and ultimately not finishing her doctoral dissertation. When asked to explain why she felt she did not persist through the

dissertation, she placed blame on the institution as well as the doctoral committee stating that her first chair was fired, her second chair left the institution and one of her committee members left the institution as well. Kim also stated that she wished the online program offered some sort of community as the brick-and-mortar schools. She stated:

I think it would've been beneficial in my, uh, dissertation group if we would've had maybe like a monthly meeting or biweekly meeting, something to where not also are we able to get support from one another, we're able to vent, but we're also able to come collectively, share resources, share information.

Robert

Robert has remained ABD after a ten-year journey of trying to obtain his doctorate degree. He is a disabled Military Veteran and while in school he had several other responsibilities including being a father, a spouse, a business owner, and volunteer for local youth. He has a variety of degrees with two graduate degrees in studies of human resource and business management. In addition to physical challenges, Robert states that he was diagnosed with a mental disability while in Elementary school whereas his parents were told he would have learning challenges and difficulty in completing grade school. He stated that his venture toward a Doctorate began due to his questionable familial background. He grew up in a home with drugs, alcoholism, and a lack of education and as he became a father himself, he wanted to secure the highest level of education possible to be a role model for his own children. When asked about his emotions toward not finishing, Robert said "I am angry that I am spending money and getting nowhere."

Amy

Amy lives in another country as part of her service in the Army. She has been working on her doctorate for over 10 years and has had two separate enrollments. Living in another country has made online education essential while pursuing her doctorate, however she stated that she is “not as huge of a fan of online courses.” She felt she would be more successful with a traditional brick and mortar campus where there was a community to build relationships. When speaking about on-ground education Amy stated that “that was kind of nice, to be part of a class, you know, and we all read each other's papers and things.” Amy stated that she felt she was more successful in coursework versus her dissertation since the courses had strict assignments with rubrics and deadlines making it more manageable whereas the dissertation was unstructured and without deadlines, she did not have a guide or standards to hold herself to which made her not do anything. Her biggest barrier with her education was that she had a personal diagnosis of cancer and was going through chemotherapy just as she had received IRB approval and she had to stop all her research as she was alone going through treatments and could not continue at the time. This caused her to end up withdrawing from her doctoral program after spending many semesters of zero advancement. She was frustrated with repaying for dissertation courses semester after semester and stated:

You have six hours and if you need more, you need to go through this process to get more. But now that I'm so far beyond that, it's just like [the school thought] that was thrown out the window and we'll just let her pay for as many hours as she needs to keep paying on.

Anna

Anna has a full-time job and owns her own company. She has enrolled in her doctoral program twice at the same University and invested 18 years working toward her doctorate, however she has ultimately remained ABD. She has several responsibilities in addition to working to include being a full-time caregiver to an ill family member, being a mother, and having a variety of pets. Her inspiration for completing a doctorate began after she completed a master's in business realizing that if she continued on with her educational journey, she would be the first in her family with a doctoral degree. She has a strong support system through her husband, and she stated that it is because of him that she may ultimately go back for a third attempt and finish doctorate degree. When asked about the coursework in the program, Anna stated that it was pretty easy and that "coursework went a little quick." She said that when she got to the dissertation phase, she assumed that she was prepared, however she quickly found out that even though she was pulling together research designs and literature review in her coursework, the institution never fully prepared her for the dissertations. She stated, "I think that at the beginning, if it's better realized what the work entails, I think people will have a better understanding of what's expected of them."

Anna said that the first challenge she really encountered with her dissertation was finding a topic as her school library had published research, but they did not have a good way for her to research the hot topics that had a gap in literature. The second challenge she encountered was with her dissertation committee whereas her first chair retired, her second chair quit, and her third chair and her butted heads. Her third and final challenge which caused her to ultimately cave was when the COVID19 pandemic hit and ultimately caused her topic to be a moot point.

Christine

Christine completed her doctorate in 2021 and it took her almost five years to complete. During the time she was enrolled in her doctoral program, Christine had a fourteen-month-old child at home and her husband was also enrolled in a program working on his master's degree. Her main reasoning for starting her doctoral journey was for career advancement. As an instructor at a college, she knew that having her Doctor of Philosophy would allow for advancement and a more valuable tenure track. Working, going to school, being a mom and wife were already a large task for Christine to handle all at once, but she stated that her biggest challenge came when her mental health became a barrier. She began to see her therapist, was placed on medication, and often questioned if she should continue with her doctoral journey, however with the help of her physicians she was able to feel better and continue her studies. Her favorite part of her coursework was learning material that she could implement into her role such as video introductions and videos explaining content and assignments. She stated that in addition to creating useful material to use in her job, that her program had her "start early in non-dissertation classes discussing potential topics" which she felt was beneficial. She contrasted coursework with the dissertation stating that:

Coursework phase is more objective. I'm in a course. I have set objectives. I have set assignments. I know how many points each assignment is worth based on the syllabus. And as I get each assignment graded, I can kind of figure out where I'm sitting and, uh, how well I need to do on my final paper to get the grade that I want.

She expanded upon this by stating that she really needed an objective grade for her dissertation and since she did not receive one as she turned in pieces of chapters or even whole chapters that it really caused her to question if she was doing it correctly. She stated that without

strict guidelines and a rubric that it was depressing to receive chapter feedback noting that when she read her chair's comments she thought "my God, I spent ten hours writing three pages and they just wrote all over it and told me, you know, the only words that were good were and, the, is." She said that more than learning anything about research during the dissertation phase, she learned more about herself, and that the dissertation phase of the program helped her work on her own issues with perfectionism.

When asked how institutions could foster persistence during the dissertation phase, Christine stated that if the institution were to initiate deadline such as certain sections of dissertation chapters by certain dates, that she felt she would have completed sooner.

Joseph

Joseph is a 46-year-old male working as an educator at the associate degree level. He had two motivators for obtaining his doctorate which included self-acknowledgment that he could complete a rigorous program and career advancement. He stated that throughout his program he had a lot of support including his parents and spouse; his parents funded his education and his spouse had already completed a doctoral program. When he initially looked for a doctoral program, he looked at traditional brick and mortar programs as he did not feel that an online program would be a good fit for him, but ultimately, he chose an online program that he could balance with his career. His favorite part of the doctoral journey was the coursework as he felt it helped him to develop more strategic and insight that he was able to use in his career. When he progressed to the dissertation, he stated that his anxiety got the best of him, and he was always nervous about turning in his chapter work to his chair. He stated that as he would procrastinate with turning in his work, his chair would say "you need to send what you have written now" and then he would get constructive feedback to keep him going. He stated that while the writing gave

him anxiety that his dissertation committee was supportive and his favorite part was when he defended and they recognized him as doctor, he stated that the recognition made him feel ecstatic. When asked if there was anything that the institution could do to foster persistence, Joseph stated that he felt that:

some type of connection or, or, um, some type of scenario, doesn't necessarily have to be face-to-face meeting, but some type of event where you get a sense of community might behoove, you know, an online program, or it might help persistence because it, it would be, you know, maybe community building.

Jennifer

Jennifer is a thirty-six-year-old mother of two working as a professor in a bachelor's degree program. She began working in healthcare in her early twenties and knew by the age of twenty-eight that she wanted to obtain her doctorate and be an educator. Jennifer stated that she had several personal challenges while in her doctoral program which almost made quit; this included the passing of a parent, a pregnancy and the COVID19 pandemic. She also stated that her spouse traveled a lot for work which left her alone to working, keeping up the household, and raising her children all while trying to finish her dissertation. Jennifer felt one of the best things her school offered was to keep students moving along in cohorts. She stated, "having that cohort experience, um, and that bonding and support from other people that knew exactly what you were going through, it was invaluable."

When asked about the dissertation process, Jennifer stated that she struggled with procrastination which delayed her progress. She stated that she "put it off for a whole year because I felt like there were things that required my attention at work or other things that it made it really easy to put it off." To assist with her procrastination, she began meeting with her

advisor and her dissertation committee for weekly meetings to encourage and motivate her while reviewing her progress. These weekly meetings kept her going and re-energized her on her writing and topic and she attributes her final successes to this added motivation. Jennifer's institution had valuable resources such as a library and advisors, but she felt that the most valuable resources were being part of a cohort and the face-to-face virtual meetings with her committee and advisor. She stated that she has recommended her institution to others

because that connection with my peers helped me even in the dissertation phase. You know, we constantly checked in with each other, where are y'all at, what are y'all working on, you know, and it was more difficult because everybody was in their own lane, you know, so to speak, but we still tried to check in with each other once a, at least once a month, uh, if not more often in our little group chat and stuff just to make sure everybody was working and stuff like that. So that is something that I would recommend, um, programs foster from the beginning because I think that that helps with persistence.

Rhonda

Rhonda's doctoral journey was six years long with the dissertation phases lasting four years. When working on her doctorate, she was already in a leadership role at a college but needed to secure higher education to move into her role as the Executive Director. When asked about her experience with the doctoral program she felt the dissertation process was the only thing that the institution needed to improve upon. She said "otherwise, I would not make any changes to the classwork, quality of instruction, resources provided, or personnel encountered in my program or school."

She enjoyed her didactic courses and uses the knowledge from her various classes in her everyday role, which she stated has been helpful. She stated that her doctoral program prepared

her in a way that her master's degree did not stating that it "certainly gave me the foundation for research and what is good quality research versus what's, uh, you know, just, um, a quality improvement project."

When asked more about her dissertation phase and why she thought the institution needed to improve this area, she stated that she really felt that dissertation chairs needed better training to assist students with persistence. She felt that the institution needs to "really set expectations for chairs" and give the chairs a "timeline and checklist of what needs to be done to move a student through the process." She also added that the process needs to hinge on the chair to where it is not fully student driven. She stated that the only reason she finished her dissertation is due to her own stubborn personality and that once she did finish, it was a huge relief.

Stephanie

Stephanie's goal for obtaining her doctorate was to become an educator in corporate America. She stated that as a clinician, she was too often surprised by the incompetency of other clinicians in her field and wanted to have the education and knowledge to make a change in the clinical profession. She knew that she could also continue working in the field as a clinician and that her doctorate would also allow her to teach clinicians, but she had a bigger goal of educating the educators and creating policies. Stephanie stated that if she were to go back and repeat the doctoral process over again, she would get involved in research projects throughout her doctoral journey so that she would get to use the information she learned in her research classes before getting to her dissertation. She stated that even though she took the research courses that she did not fully understand as the "terminology is extremely foreign" and that she "second guessed the coding several times, resulting in her starting over and deleting the codes she had previously completed."

Community was another aspect that Stephanie wishes she had engaged while in her program. She stated that while she knew her classmates' names and had access to chat with them in discussions, that she wished she would have reached out to make connections whether through calls, emails, or video chat. She said, "the doctoral process can be lonely, and even more lonely in the dissertation process." She did have support from family and friends, but they were not able to relate to the dissertation process and assist her, so she went online and found a writing group of ladies and they would meet up on Saturdays to encourage each other and write.

Stephanie's experience with coursework was what she expected with content, assignments, feedback, and grades, however she felt alone without guidance during the dissertation. She stated that through the process she only had a deadline for chapters one through three and then another deadline for chapters four and five. The rest of the dissertation class felt like menial work that did not enhance her finished project. She stated that to enhance dissertation persistence there should be more periodic check-ins with what the student has done on the dissertation so that they know if they are on the right path, and they are motivated.

Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand doctoral students' experiences participating in an online doctoral program at a university. Participant data included transcripts of individual one-on-one interviews, reflective essays, and a transcript of the collaborative focus group. Each transcript was reviewed and all participant statements that were pertinent to the research were coded through open coding. Statements were coded based on repetition throughout the transcripts and then the codes were organized into themes. This was all done using a spreadsheet-based interface whereas the data could be sorted based on codes, themes, participant, and types of data (interview, focus group, or reflective essay). Having three

data collection tools allowed for triangulation of the data and were analyzed using steps identified by Moustakas (1994) for the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis. Through horizontalization of the data and reviewing transcript quotes and their codes, themes developed showing similar comments or experiences for the participants. Participant data were coded and categorized with Table 2 summarizing the open-codes, enumeration of appearance, and themes that emerged.

Table 2*Open Codes, Enumeration, and Themes*

Open-Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets	Themes
Persistence	72	Personal Factors
Support	145	
Self-Care	16	
Other Responsibilities	89	
Procrastination	23	
Motivation	49	
Emotions	137	
Burnout	25	
Growth (mental and personal)	22	
Reasons to Pursue	40	
Career Advancement	37	Institutional Factors
Personal Barriers	31	
Online Education	16	
Community	46	
Doctoral Process/Navigation	52	
Resources	54	
Coursework	83	
Research	18	
Structure	85	
General	62	
Expense	32	Dissertation
Accreditation/School Closing	3	
Degree Path	8	
Institutional Barriers	49	
Length/Time	52	
IRB	5	
Topic	47	
Chair/Committee	154	
Process/General	107	

Once the open codes were placed into themes, the number of times that those codes appeared throughout the data were reviewed to look for outliers. Once the outliers were eliminated the codes were reviewed to look for commonalities to see if they could be combined into sub-themes as listed in Table 3.

Table 3*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Sub-themes
Personal Factors	Persistence
	Intrinsic Motivation
	Procrastination
	Support
	Self-Care
	Other Responsibilities
	Emotions and Burnout
	Online Education
Institutional Factors	Doctoral Process and Navigation
	Resources
	Coursework
Dissertation Process	Length of Time
	Topic
	Committee

Personal Factors

One major theme that was common among all participants was personal factors. These personal factors were derived from codes and sub-themes related to persistence, intrinsic motivation, procrastination, support, self-care, various other responsibilities and emotion and burnout. When asked about personal challenges throughout her doctoral program, Stephanie laughed and said “what [personal challenges] haven’t I had?”

Persistence. Many participants noted that the dissertation phase was lonely and self-driven. Rhonda stated that she was driven to finish her degree as “it was going to lead to an occupational objective,” she also stated that she was “stubborn” and “something she wanted to get done.” Jennifer wanted to finish the degree for her mother who passed during her program, knowing “she would have never wanted me to quit” and “knows she is super proud she finished.” In addition to persisting for her mother, she stated she has “a mindset of perseverance

and persistence and a desire to finish” and she is “a person that doesn’t quit.” Joseph made mention of how he had to persist by saying:

You've already invested so much time, energy, money, whatever. You have to complete it. Think of everybody you've already told everybody on Facebook that you're doing this, so you have to do it, because everybody will ask, and then that'll be awkward.

While going through the program, Anna often wondered “is there ever going to be light at the end of the tunnel” and “is it ever going to end” and she said that she just kept going because she wanted to be “the first one in my family ever to have a doctorate degree.”

Intrinsic Motivation. While persistence and motivation are similar, the themes and codes had a clear delineation between the two with intrinsic motivators being the internal force behind an individual’s persistence. Kim always knew she wanted to be addressed by the title of Doctor, but more importantly she wanted to “have the skills that come with having a doctoral degree” which motivated her to really delve into her doctoral program versus completing it. When she researched more and learned “the different avenues that you can use your doctoral degree for,” she stated that was her “motivation.” Jennifer stated, “I wanted to better myself as an educator and take the things that I was learning and apply them so that my students could get a better education.” Anna stated that she enjoyed being a role model and stated that one major motivating factor was “the pride that I see from my husband and from my children, because I’m setting the tone for them as well.”

Procrastination. Procrastination was a common code while theming. During her one-on-one interview, Jennifer stated “I let life and discouragement get in the way, and I am a procrastinator;” she elaborated on this by saying:

when we got to dissertation phase, you know, you're in the driver's seat and so it was a struggle for me personally because it was really easy for me to put it off. Like I said, I put it off for a whole year because I felt like there were things that required my attention at work or other things that it made it really easy to put it off.

Amy stated that time with work and life passed so quickly and during the interview she stated that quite often she would say "I'm gonna get to something, but then by the time I get to it, like two months have passed." Rhonda admitted to procrastination and during the interview noted that "if more proactive, I could have lessened the dissertation portion by at least 20 weeks."

Support. One of the interview questions asked participants about any outside support they received through the program which was highly coded. Robert discussed support from family and friends and noted that some of his family was not supportive and perceived his doctoral goals as "arrogance." He did state that he had a good friend who worked as a professor in a doctoral program in another country who he would speak and use as a "mentor." Rhonda stated that her coworkers were "very supportive and helpful in any way they could, which included just being there if she needed a sounding board." She also stated that her parents, husband, and kids were supportive when "every single Sunday became a school day versus a family day." She stated that on Sundays, her parents would cook for the family and her husband and kids would leave the house so she could have uninterrupted quiet time. During the interview, Kim stated "I have a boyfriend and I also have a therapist I see every other week; my parents are also a great support system." Jennifer and I discussed the fact that she had two young kids while completing her doctorate and she mentioned that she "had a lot of family and friend support that would help with the kids when I was overwhelmed or need to write a paper or whatever." Joseph

stated that he had “several friends external of the program that he could vent with. A lot of them friends who are doctorly prepared so that helped.” Crystal had a close coworker who “chaired a few dissertations and stuff, so he kind of was supportive in the process and someone to talk to.”

Self-Care. Self-care was discussed by seven participants during their individual interviews and during the focus group. During the focus group, Stephanie stated that she found it important to “take time to really pay attention and take care of myself,” but she also admitted that she did not always do so stating that “there were times when I was in the hospital still in class, logging in to do work.” Christine found her dissertation to add stress and anxiety, so she began to take anxiety medications and stated that she “started a journey on my mental health.” She stated that whenever she would want to work on her dissertation, she would first ensure she had a “10-minute walk or workout.” Crystal admitted that the program took a “psychological toll” on her and that she had to put her dissertation on hold for her own mental health. Amy stated that “taking care of your mental health is as important as your physical health and that she ensures to read, do yoga, or meditate daily.”

Emotions and Burnout. The reality of emotions, both positive and negative, coupled with burnout during the doctoral journey came to light during the interviews, reflective essay, and focus group. In the interview Anna stated, “I like the challenge, but then again when you're going through it, it's, like, "Oh my gosh, is this ever going to end?" She said at one point she was ready to give up and so she talked to her husband and said “I should probably just quit. I'm just sad and I'm tired.” She said this was during a time when she felt “anger,” “great sadness,” and thought to herself “you're not going to finish, you're not going to do this.” Christine also discussed in her interview that there were times when she almost gave up, she said she would get so frustrated when she received feedback from her chair and thought to herself “I spent 10 hours

writing three pages and they just wrote all over it and told me, you know, the only words that were good were and, the, is.” She followed this up by saying the negative feedback would cause her such stress that she would then “write five pages and delete two.” Crystal said the process has “overall been miserable” and her “emotions were all over the place.” When asked about getting to the dissertation phase, she said,

I panicked. I panicked. I panicked. I got sick. Um, I had, uh, a stress reaction that happened for the very first time, and that periodically happens now since I've had it that first time, because that was the most stressful, scariest thing I've been through.

Joseph spoke during the focus group and let everyone know that during the dissertation phase he began questioning his decision and wished he never started his doctoral program. He stated “I would start questioning everything. I'm gonna quit. I can't do this.”

Other Responsibilities. When interviewing participants, it was evident that these individuals were non-traditional learners with a variety of other responsibilities. While enrolled in their doctoral program, these individuals were also busy being parents, spouses, full-time career individuals, and volunteers. Robert stated that when he started his dissertation he was married, they had “just adopted a new puppy, and he was a handful,” and he was “coaching American football” in addition to “owning my own consultant business and being a dad.” Rhonda stated that she was working full-time as “an Executive Director” at a college and “serving on several accreditation agencies and committees.” Kim stated that while she was pursuing her doctorate that she had just “finished her clinical hours and requirements for her professional license, so I was studying to take that test.”

She also stated that she had her own “non-profit organization which has her in the local high schools two days a week” while working full-time as a clinical director. Jennifer was

pregnant when she started her doctoral program, so she laughed when she said, “I had a toddler and a newborn while trying to finish up my doctorate.” Anna stated that she and her “husband own our company” and she “worked outside of the home as well.” Along with her jobs she also had a “geriatric dog with special needs to take care of and a father with a lot of medical issues I help with as well.” She also stated that she was a “mama first” and “helped take care of her mother-in-law with dementia.” Amy said that in addition to “doing chemo” and being “in the hospital for a while” during her dissertation that she also was “working full time and doing laundry and shopping for groceries and taking her dog for walks.” Joseph summed out being a doctoral student in a simple statement:

the amount of things that you have to juggle, the workload, but then also the household, and then also then the, um, doctoral classes, or recognizing for, you know, two years at least while you're taking all of the core and then the elective courses, you basically have no life, you know?

Institutional Factors

Success takes self-persistence and motivation, but there are also factors out of a student’s control that can cause challenges. Institutional factors were noted throughout the interviews, essays and focus group and were coded as the following sub-themes: Online education, the doctoral process and navigation, resources, and coursework.

Online Education. Online education was a major component of this research study, and each participant attended a doctoral program that was offered through distance education via an online platform. When speaking with participants about online education, many of them discussed the challenges of online education and equated it to a lack of community and communication. During the focus group, Jennifer stated that she is “a big fan of the cohort thin

because I think it kept a lot of us from quitting because we didn't feel alone." She elaborated on the cohort group by providing "we constantly checked in with each other to make sure everybody was working and for encouragement."

She recommended that "programs foster collaboration from the beginning to help with persistence. She did state that one big difference for her taking an online program was that:

since the dissertation phase is so self, you know, like student driven, um, students that are on campus, they can just make an appointment and go meet with a professor, you know, face to face or they can be on campus to sit through a class or do whatever, but distance students already face a gap, uh, and a disconnect because they are at a distance, and so there are steps that have to be taken to bridge that gap so that they don't feel like they're disconnected and that's even more important in the dissertation phase

Kim said the recent pandemic really opened her eye to audiovisual communications and that if her school has "used similar platforms to engage more, I think that would've helped me." She also stated, "sometimes you are able to get more from your peers than from your committee, so I think a bi-weekly meeting for support would have been beneficial." Joseph said that:

I think some type of connection or, or, um, some type of scenario, doesn't necessarily have to be face-to-face meeting, but some type of event where you get a sense of community might behoove, you know, an online program, or it might help persistence because it, it would be, you know, maybe community building across.

Joseph also stated that the relationships he made in his doctoral program are longstanding and that the "support is still there" and that he even connects with his former faculty for continual collaboration. While Christine recognized that not everyone moves through the process at the same rate, she stated that institutions could "increase peer support by keeping a cohort together

through the program” and elaborated with saying that “if I was in the same classes with the same peers every semester, it would have really helped as far as communicating, building trust and reliance on my peers to get through the program.” In the reflective essay, Stephanie stated that she “would have engaged more with classmates” and even suggested that they “see each other on camera” to make more connections. Kim said that for flexibility “online programs are great,” however “going from a traditional school setting to a complete on-line school you can often feel alone.” When talking about institutions, she said, “I think they have some work that they need to do compared to brick and mortar schools” and that they need to “utilize their technology resources to better meet the students.”

Doctoral Process and Navigation. While doctoral students have been educated in undergraduate and graduate programs, they are not always sure what is expected of them in a doctoral program including a dissertation component. Anna phrased this by saying “I think that at the beginning, if it’s better realized what the work entails, I think people will have a better understanding of what to do and what is expected of them.” Kim stated that she felt that her degree to longer to achieve than it should have by stating “I needed more instruction, and if that would have been offered, I would have been done by now.” She stated that she was going through the motions during the coursework, and it felt like all her prior education, however she “went into the dissertation blind and I feel like it was a lot of things that I had to teach myself during the process.” She suggested that “some type of video that actually talked about the steps of the dissertation” could have been helpful. Jennifer offered a different experience and said that the “good thing about our program is they kind of led us into the dissertation throughout the coursework.” Joseph also shared a similar experience to Jennifer and said that his program was “quite structured” he said there were not only “manuals that laid out each step,” but that they had

a big “virtual launch for each person in the cohort that explained the process, and we could ask questions.” Crystal felt the process was unclear and felt institutions could hire someone for the role; she said:

That, that could be a job, instead of a recruiter, so that people can be orientated to the process... Oriented to the process, you know? Yeah. 'Cause it's been really difficult because there's a lot of ambiguity.

She also stated that if they did not have a specific person for the role, they should still focus on “a very specific orientation to the process, very intentional, that everyone should go through online, and they can do that now with Zoom.”

Resources. Resources available to online doctoral students seemed to be similar across participants discussing the online library, advising, and the writing center. While the resources were standard, there were a few that were unique. Kim stated that her institution not only offered sample dissertations for review, but you could also watch recordings of dissertation defenses to “see people go through their defense and things to get an idea.” Joseph said that his institution offered virtual workshops of sorts where they would cover topics of the dissertation to include “research questions,” “using a dry erase board to brainstorm,” or just writing and people were there to help you with questions.” Amy stated that she wished she knew what resources were available to her and that “they probably offer a lot more than I take advantage of.”

Coursework. During the one-one-one interviews, participants were asked to discuss their overall experience with the coursework phase of their doctoral program before being asked to discuss their overall experience with the dissertation phase. Analysis of the transcripts in this code showed that participants overall found the coursework very manageable and enjoyable. Kim said, “the coursework was really easy because it was familiar.” Stephanie said she started

her doctoral program scared as she had heard “horror stories” but when she was in it, “it wasn’t as heavy as I thought it would be.” Rhonda said she had “good quality courses” and “the ones that stood out were the ones that were focused on research and research methods.” Amy did discuss a negative point about the coursework saying that she did not really enjoy the discussion posts and that “there’s only so many things you can say about somebody’s comments on something, and by the time few other people have commented it is hard to find anything new to say.” Christine said that “most of the assignments I was doing I felt good about doing” and elaborated to say they would “really help me with my job.” During her one-on-one interview, Crystal stated that “the coursework was good because the interaction with the teacher, and the fellow students was really helpful in gaining bigger ideas.” Joseph was impressed with the knowledge he gained in the coursework and stated that they help him “develop a little bit more strategic vision and insight.” Robert compared the coursework with prior education saying, “it was pretty much the same as in the master’s level.” During the Focus Group, one of the participants stated that the “coursework was no problem” and others chimed in with “it was exactly,” “that was the easy part,” “easy peasy,” and “it was very structured.”

Dissertation Process

While the dissertation process could have been classified as a sub-theme of institutional factors, it was given its own major theme as participants had a lot to say related to this topic. The dissertation process was regarded with the majority of the negative comments and is sub-themed by the coded: length of time, topic, and committee.

Length of Time. While doctoral programs are not a prescribed length, many institutions do hold individuals to a standard of time that they can be enrolled in their dissertation phase. Individuals who do not complete their dissertation during this time frame may be withdrawn

from school remaining in the ABD phase. Speaking with the participants it was noted that each remained in their dissertation phase longer than they intended or they withdrew without completion. Rhonda stated that “the last four-years [of my doctoral program] were the dissertation process” and that it just “kept getting drawn out.” Jennifer stated that the program lasted “five years of her life” with “three years of it just dissertation.” Joseph said that once he entered the dissertation phase “it didn’t matter if it took one year or five years; you’d just register for another dissertation credit until finished.” Amy stated that “it took me an entire year to come up with a topic” so she just “kept paying for an additional credit hour.” She also said that “everything just kind of ends up taking longer than I expected it to” and elaborated that the “IRB was undergoing reviews of its own, and due to that, reviews were delayed, and this wasted a summer of my time.”

Topic. The topic is supposed to be one in which there is a gap in literature. The participants seemed to have varying processes when it came to their topics. Robert said that going into his dissertation phase that he really wanted a great topic,

I was romantically inclined with this- this concept of being a pioneer, you know, doing something new and unusual or saving the world, you know, and- and it took me a long time to find a topic.

He said that he “finally discovered my project in year three,” but then just stopped working and remained in ABD. Rhonda said her institution had them choose a topic “early on in my didactic courses” and that “in each one of those research courses and colloquium that we did, you were supposed to really work on honing that topic.” She stated that her topic was specific to the field she worked and that “the topic that I did was very foreign to the majority of my committee members” which caused the committee to “try and change my topic.” Kim stated that

her committee would not approve her topic stating that she was “too involved in that topic because of the world I worked in,” and therefore she switched topics multiple times before settling on one.

Committee. The dissertation committee was discussed in all data collection points by all participants, and it was evident that the dissertation committee played a crucial role in the participant’s dissertation. Rhonda had turnover in her dissertation committee and stated that due to this she “had a few quarters where I got absolutely nothing done.” It was not until she “got that steady chair” that she was getting “feedback and finding out what she needed to be doing.” She stated that her chair was a real advocate and “would coach the other committee members” to assist and offer suggestions rather than trying to change her dissertation. Rhonda said, “it’s funny because my final chair was my initial advisor” and “she really did help guide things.” She talked about her committee members and the role each served saying that “some members gave great feedback, which really helped me to narrow my topic, and others were giving me more edits on paper.” She suggested that committee members have “set expectations” when guiding doctoral students and that they were “timely with interactions” utilizing meetings that were “a physical as possible” through platforms such as “Zoom, Teams, or whatever.”

Kim also had a variety of committee members stating that her “chair was fired” and her second committee member just stopped responding to all communication. Kim found a new chair by emailing a previous professor who agreed, and for her missing member, she said the “school just picked” them. During the interview she said, “in the dissertation process, which is the token to graduate, this is the stage where you need the most support, but for me, I did not get it.” Jennifer and her chair had a good connection and she stated, “my chair finally started giving me due dates and we started having weekly meetings, so it almost restructured my dissertation phase

into like a course because that was the only way to keep me on track.” She said that her chair realized that she was not intrinsically motivated and would constantly send her little texts and emails saying, “you need to be doing this, you need to be doing that, so that I didn’t slip off the radar completely” and she contributed her finishing the dissertation a lot to this external motivation saying her chair was “very supportive.” Joseph felt lucky that he had such a great committee and said, “they were always way better than I had anticipated as far as editing and their comments.” He said his “chair was great by encouraging” and telling him to “just send the paper” no matter where he was at in the process. Crystal was “assigned three chairs” throughout her process and stated that “because of constant turnover, nobody saw it to completion” which she partially equates to remaining in ABD. She felt that there should have been “better oversight of consistency with the chair and committee standards” and that the committee should be “familiar with your area of interest and be individuals who want to provide guidance.” She continued by saying she felt committee members should “communicate clearly about deliverables” and if they did, then she feels she would have done better. She stated that she wished she had “insisted on her chair communicating and providing constructive assistance” and that she also wished she “would have changed my chair sooner.”

Christine had a personal relationship with her chair saying that “I would text my dissertation chair and she would text me” and elaborated onto the whole committee saying, “I have those four awesome women programmed into my cell phone and we have basically become friends.” She said that on time she felt like she could not continue and “every time I emailed them, you know, the feeling like I could not go on, at least one of them got back to me pretty quickly saying you can do this.” She knew she did not have that intrinsic motivation and she knew she “need support mentally” and said her committee was always there and that they were

“phenomenal academic people who are, of course, going to find ways to improve my paper every time I submit it.” Initially, Anna felt that her and her chair had a “rocky start” and that they “kinda butted heads a little bit, and then after a conversation, I couldn’t ask for a better person to be my chair.” She said the rest of her committee was “appointed” and that “they’ve been very hands on, very nit-picky” and she appreciated it and knew it was “what I need.” She did have some advice for committee members saying that when giving feedback and criticism, they should not just focus on the negative, but to “say something that’s great about it also and even offer suggestions.” Amy had turnover in her chair and stated that one chair gave her “just silence, nothing. I did not hear anything from him,” so she stated she wasted several weeks trying to get ahold of her chair before reaching out and discovering he left the institution. Robert stated that “of my chairs ghosted me” and another “resigned as I did not meet their performance expectation.”

During the Focus Group, participants discussed how they received their chair. Some participants reported that their chair was selected for them while others stated that they had to find their chair. For the individuals that had to find their own chair, it was said that “my biggest hurdle was really finding a chair and then a committee that would stand with me through the process.” Others stated that they had to “write pretty much a sales letter selling ourselves” and felt often rejected.

Outlier Data and Findings

During data analysis, two outlier themes were identified and coded. This first outlier was expense of a doctoral program and was mentioned throughout the interviews and personal reflection. The second outlier related to schools losing accreditation and closing; this was mentioned by two participants.

Expense. When it came to expenses some participants stated that this was directly related to persistence while others just casually mentioned that schooling was costly. When talking about why she persisted, Jennifer stated “if I’m paying that kind of money for it, I am not going to let it go to waste.” Amy questioned the dissertation process wondering if the institution was not explicit on the dissertation process so that they could just “let her pay for as many hours as she needs to keep going and paying.” Robert stated that he was “certainly disappointed that there was no support [in the dissertation phase] other than to show you how quickly and easily you can get student aid, loans, and financing.” Kim felt that “since only about 3% of the world has a doctoral degree that there should be more affordable opportunities” and expanded with “Many people like myself who want to get into higher education will have at least 100k in loan debt for a job that may pay 50k.”

School Closing. Two participants stated that while in their doctoral program their institution closed, and both participants happened to be in the ABD category. Kim was attending an institution that was bought out by another company and stated, “it’s been a lot of changes with the school.” Crystal stated that her reason for not persisting was due to the fact “the school closed.”

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand doctoral student’s experiences participating in an online doctoral program at a university. Using one-on-one interviews, reflective essays, and a focus group, the analyzed data developed themes which answered the research questions. The transcripts of these research methods were used to provide answers to the research questions through the perspective of participants detailing their

lived experiences. The relation of themes and research questions they supported are listed in a brief overview in table 4.

Table 4

Explanation of the Relation of Themes and Research Questions

Themes	Research Questions	Relation
Personal Factors	CRQ: What are the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation SQ1: Among doctoral candidates in online degree programs, what are the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation? SQ2: In what ways do online doctoral candidates think the barriers to the dissertation component could be eliminated?	Participants described a variety of personal factors unrelated to schooling that impacted their ability to give full attention to their education.
Institutional Factors	CRQ: What are the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation SQ1: Among doctoral candidates in online degree programs, what are the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation? SQ2: In what ways do online doctoral candidates think the barriers to the dissertation component could be eliminated?	Participants identified challenges that they had with their institution which caused them to have setbacks with their education.
Dissertation Process	CRQ: What are the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation SQ1: Among doctoral candidates in online degree programs, what are the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation? SQ2: In what ways do online doctoral candidates think the barriers to the dissertation component could be eliminated?	Challenges and frustration with the dissertation component of the doctoral process were shared by all participants.

Central Research Question

The central research question of this study was “what are the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation” and it is the main focus of the study. It was important to delve into the experiences of both doctoral graduates and ABD individuals to compare and contrast their experiences. The participants of the study were comprised of five individuals who obtained their doctorate degree and five individuals who completed their doctoral coursework yet remained ABD. The study’s findings showed that many of the participants shared similar experiences with participants describing a positive experience

with the coursework phase of the doctorate and a contrasting that with a challenge and even negative qualities with the dissertation phase of the degree.

When discussing coursework, Amy stated that “coursework is much more structured [than the dissertation]” while Kim stated, “coursework was a breeze” and that is “was really easy because it was familiar.” Rhonda elaborated on her coursework stating that “the course were courses; this is the start and this is the stop, and these are the assignments, and it was very much just a typical academic environment.” Stephanie stated that coursework was easy to follow as long as you followed the program guides, she stated “I started paying attention to the syllabus” as she noted this was a great guide full of information. Jennifer felt coursework assisted students as “there’s due dates, and discussions, and things that were very much structured” she elaborated with saying the regime of having that structure “was good for me because I knew what I had to do and when it needed to be done by, so I would do it accordingly.”

When describing experiences of the dissertation phase, words filled with emotion were often include in the transcript. Rhonda stated that her dissertation “just kept getting drawn out; it was the lengthy part” while Kim stated that she “didn’t understand the dissertation and the way it worked.” Kim also stated that she felt the institution “just put the dissertation out there and it’s your responsibility to take care of it.” Jennifer stated that she felt alone in the dissertation phase and said when she made it to that milestone “nobody’s harping on you to make sure you’re doing what you’re supposed to do; nobody’s checking on you and you do not have grades.” She added that this was a challenge for her as she is “very much a procrastinator.” Crystal echoed other sentiments by stating that “the dissertation phases is very isolated and is very independent,” and she felt “like there was little guidance or direction.” Rhonda felt that “the actual dissertation process was a less efficient process” and Kim agreed and stating that “in the dissertation process

which is the token to graduate this is the stage where you need the most support, but for me I did not get it”.

Sub-Question One. Sub-research question one was “among doctoral candidates in online degree programs, what are the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation?” Barriers from participants varied with several common factors listed among participants and some unique outliers. Barriers listed included: work/life balance, the COVID19 pandemic, health problems, family issues, and the dissertation committee. All 10 participants cited that they were working while attempting their doctorate and that this was a challenge. Robert stated that he’d “stay up overnight working on schoolwork and then go to work the next day.” Joseph elaborated on his work including:

The amount of things that you have to juggle, the workload, but then also the household, and then also then the, um, doctoral classes, or recognizing for, you know, two years at least while you're taking all of the core and then the elective courses, you basically have no life, you know?

Five participants discussed the Covid19 pandemic as a barrier to their research. Anna stated that “because of Covid-19 and people being out of work, I lost all of my participants; so, my research was on hold.” Jennifer was working as a healthcare educator when Covid-19 surfaced and therefore had to switch more time and attention into her career placing her dissertation on the backburner; she stated, “there was that but ultimately we pushed through and git it done.”

Health problems were listed as another barrier to the dissertation process. Robert stated that he was a disabled veteran and often “had physical challenges with moving or sitting in a chair to complete his coursework.” Amy stated that she received a cancer diagnosis during her

doctoral program which “derailed me for a while” and that “doing chemo was a challenge as it made me even spacier than normal.” While her physical health was fine through the program, Christine stated that the doctoral program was so challenging at times causing her to start “a journey to work on my mental health.” She stated that working on her dissertation was difficult during the mental health challenges as she “was on a couple different mental health medications and it took a while to figure out the type and dose needed which caused me to be fuzzy and not care so much about the process.” A challenge for Stephanie was:

dealing with MS, a new diagnosis, a hospital stay, um, throughout my program, throughout this entire degree, I've had three hospital stays for different reasons, a major surgery, new diagnosis

While several participants discussed their own issues with mental and physical health, several participants had family issues that caused a barrier to their success. Jennifer stated that “three weeks into my PhD, I lost my mom suddenly so that, um, almost derailed the whole thing.” Anna stated that while she worked and went to school she also has “a father who has a lot of medical issues, so I go over, and I help my mother take care of him.”

Dissertation committee barriers were discussed at length during the interviews and focus group. Rhonda stated that “and then my committee members... I don't know, they probably changed another three or four times.” Kim had a similar situation where “my second committee member maybe at like year one and a half, um, she just went MIA” and her “chair was fired.” Crystal had “three different chairs” and stated, “if you don't have someone consistent, it's not gonna work.”

Sub-Question Two. Sub-research question two was “in what ways do online doctoral candidates think the barriers to the dissertation component could be eliminated?” This question

was a way of speaking to the individuals who had these lived experiences and seeing the doctoral process through their lens. Community and personal interaction along with the structure of the process were heavily discussed. Anna stated she felt “more verbal encouragement would make student more persistent.” Christine stated that she wished the dissertation phase was less lonely and the process incorporated “hard deadlines.” Christine admitted to receiving regular email communications from her chair but stated that she thought “regular communication that is verbal like Zoom or a phone call would be more beneficial.” Joseph talked about the dissertation structure stating, “you just register for another dissertation course over and over again until you finished” and he followed this up by saying “I do think maybe a better structured dissertation course might be advantageous.” Additionally, Joseph felt that lack of communication was also a barrier stating that:

I think some type of connection or, or, um, some type of scenario, doesn't necessarily have to be face-to-face meeting, but some type of event where you get a sense of community might behoove, you know, an online program, or it might help persistence because it, it would be, you know, maybe community building.

Rhonda stated that one of the ways to eliminate barriers would be to “really set expectations for chairs giving them very specific duties and responsibilities.” She also felt that having a “timeline checklist of what needs to be done and how quickly to move a student learner through the process” would be beneficial.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to garner the experiences of doctoral students enrolled in an online program with a dissertation component. Ten participants were chosen to complete personal reflections, take part in one-on-one interviews and take part in

a focus group. Upon approval and consent for the study, data were collected and transcribed verbatim. Once transcribed, data were reviewed and each statement from participants was coded into themes by using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis that was described by Moustakas (1994). Three major themes and several sub-themes developed and were discussed. The major themes included: personal factors, institutional factors, and the dissertation. The answer to the central research question and sub questions were given through themed patterns and participant statements and the interpretation and summary of these findings to include limitations are discussed in chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand doctoral students' experiences participating in an online doctoral program at a university. This study includes 10 participants with five participants having completed their doctoral program and the other five participants remaining in the ABD phase. This study and its research methods were designed to uncover the experiences of both groups of participants while they were in their doctoral program. This chapter discusses the interpretation of findings while summarizing the thematic findings and is followed by a discussion of implications for policy and practice. Theoretical and empirical implications will be followed by research limitations and delimitations of the study. Finally, this chapter discusses recommendations for future research that could be enhance the study.

Discussion

This phenomenological study was guided through central research questions and two sub-questions. Since the study was geared toward finding possible reasons why retention and graduation rates were low for online doctoral programs though learning about the experiences of online doctoral students, the phenomenological research design was an excellent option. Using the phenomenological research design allowed for the research to be conducted through open-ended questions in one-on-one interviews and a focus group with an additional method for gathering data by allowing participants to reflect on their experience in an essay. In the discussion section, the interpretation of findings, summary of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delineations, and recommendations will be merged to give a full understanding of the research.

Interpretation of Findings

Ten participants were chosen for this research study with five participants graduating from an online doctoral program with a dissertation component and the other five participants completing their doctoral coursework, but never finishing their dissertation leaving them ABD. Each individual completed a one-on-one interview, a personal reflective essay, and were invited to participate in the focus group. Once transcribed and coded, the data were analyzed and revealed that the most challenging portion of the doctoral program was the dissertation component. Additionally, the data showed that online students seemed to lack persistence citing both personal and institutional factors.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Chapter four discussed three major themes including personal factors, institutional factors, and the dissertation component. Personal factors included subthemes of persistence, intrinsic motivation, support, self-care, other responsibilities, and emotions and burnout. Institutional factors had the subthemes to include online education, doctoral process and navigation, resources, and coursework. While the dissertation component could have been a sub-theme of the institutional factors, it was so heavily discussed and coded it was given its own theme with the subthemes of length of time, topic, and committee.

Support and Guidance. Personal support, institutional guidance and an academic community may all help online doctoral students persist to completion (Lim et al., 2019; Zhou & Okahana, 2019). Having the student's perspective on support and guidance was a crucial part of this study discussing personal support through family, friends and coworkers, institutional guidance via advisors and the dissertation committee and an academic community of peers going through the same process. Stephanie stated, "I was able to find support through one other

colleague that had recently graduated, but it would've been better to have some support from those in the process as well." Jennifer stated, "my chair and advisor checked in on me regularly" and "I got a lot of support from my colleagues." She also stated that she "had a lot of family support and friend support" and when discussing her cohort, she said "these relative strangers just embraced me and took me in and helped me figure out what I needed to do." Joseph stated that his biggest support came from his parent because "they actually paid for it." Robert focused on support when discussing his committee member saying, "I'm deeply disappointed here with my journey, specifically the poor support I had."

Drive, Passion, and Burnout. While burnout can refer to chronic stress, it is noted that the cause of burnout is usually derived from lack of control when one has too much work that needs to be accomplished (Jaremka et al., 2020). Jennifer discussed her doctoral experience saying, "with the kids, I was overwhelmed" and I still had "service obligations, committee obligations and things around the university." She elaborated by saying:

between small children and being married and working and then doing something I'd never done before, learning stuff I'd ever learned, you know, or knew anything about before, so that was, that was probably the biggest challenge."

Kim stated that she had a lot that she was doing all while trying to obtain her doctorate. She said she had her "hands in like every pie" elaborating that she is "an aunt, a godmother, a girlfriend and a daughter, and so I have the obligations to help the family as needed" all this in addition to a full-time role, studying for a national licensure exam, and running a non-profit organization. When discussing all her responsibilities, she said "the anxiety and anxiousness surrounded around, like always being asked about it [her doctorate]." Joseph stated that he was a full-time educator, married, in school and served on several professional society positions. He said the

courses were “eight weeks in length and so any time typically around midterm is when I would have a typical meltdown and think I’m gonna quit, I can’t do this.” In addition to school, a full-time job, and owning her own business, Anna was a caregiver to two family members and a pet with special needs. She said that there were times during school that she thought “I’m stuck at this point. I feel like everything’s over, I’m not going to succeed” and she would tell herself “you’re not going to finish, you’re not going to do this”

Implications for Policy or Practice

Nontraditional students are trying to gain further education while continuing to have various other responsibilities. Doctoral students, institutions, and dissertation committees all have a vested interest in student success. The research findings have shown importance toward implications for policy and practice.

Implications for Policy. The results of this research study show that the dissertation component of the doctoral degree is the most challenging portion, and that the committee makes an impact on the student’s success. With students often receiving federal funding for their education, it is important for institution to monitor their retention and graduation benchmarks. By monitoring these benchmarks and implementing to changes, it can be shown that institutions are assisting students to matriculation and not just allowing them to pay for courses. With educational institution expanding upon online programs, it is significant to note that online doctoral programs tend to high attrition rates (Ames et al., 2018). If policies were implemented to hold institutions at a perceived benchmark for graduate retention, then they take more of a vested interest in helping students.

Implications for Practice. Findings from this study show that future doctoral students can use this information to assist them in ways to persist to completion. It also shows that

institutions can use this information to enhance their role in student success. Multiple participants stated that they began their dissertation topic during their coursework phase while others shared that their coursework phase was not integrated with their dissertation topic. Humphrey and Simpson (2012) have research to show that the progression of building upon concepts when working toward the dissertation shows more success than those who do coursework and then try to incorporate past concepts into their dissertation. This information can be used by future students informing them that coming up with a topic early and using it throughout their coursework will give them an edge on their research. Institutions can use this information to guide students through the dissertation phase better by adapting components of the research into the coursework assignments. Lastly, dissertation committee members can use this research to enhance the ways that they guide and motivate students through the process. Prior literature shows that more students withdraw from the dissertation phase due to poor committee relationships (Turhan & Karadağ, 2019; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019) and this research study showed that students have a clear frustration and barrier when it comes to their committee. Maybe what needs to be researched is the training given to dissertation committee members and whether or not they volunteer for the position or are forced into serving to secure their tenure.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This study's findings support Tinto's theory for student departure and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. Tinto's theory for student departure named three main reasons that students depart including academics, not having institutions invested in their goals, and feeling isolated and without community (Tinto, 1994). While Tinto's theory for student departure has been relied on in undergraduate studies, this research study applied the theory to departure of online doctoral

students. Through Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, this study was able to look at students' confidence and motivation throughout the doctoral journey and reliably note that students are ultimately responsible for their own persistence.

While sharing their personal experiences through their doctoral journey, participants discussed reasons for persisting to completion or reasons that led to them remaining ABD ultimately departing their doctoral journey. Academics as one of Tinto's reasons for departure was not discussed as a reason for departure by any of the participants as they all noted that the graded coursework was the easy part of their program. Buy in and investment by the institution and professors was discussed as it related to the dissertation committee with individuals who persisted to the doctorate degree stating that their chairs and committee members stayed in close contact with them, sent them regular encouragement, and even gave them miniature deadlines to keep their research moving. Participants within the ABD phase cited that their chairs and committee did not communicate nor have scheduled meetings; it was also noted that the ABD participants did not discuss any motivators given to them by their chairs. Lastly, Tinto (1994) stated that individuals depart when they do not feel like part of a community, and this was expressed by the participants especially when asked of them what institutions could do to foster persistence in online doctoral programs. Participants stated that they would like to be involved in a cohort where they had classmates to collaborate with as well as audiovisual meetings with their peers and faculty. Self-efficacy is the ability of one to persist during a stressful situation (Graham, 2022). During participant interviews participants expressed stress while in their doctoral program leading to Bandura's self-efficacy theory to being a great theory to guide this research. The research had sub-themes coded for emotions, persistence, procrastination, motivation, and other responsibilities which can challenge one's self-efficacy. This study fills an

existing gap in literature where self-efficacy and student departure are intertwined when assessing why some online doctoral students persist while others do not.

Limitations and Delimitations

In this phenomenological qualitative research study, there are limitations and delimitations that should be discussed. Limitations are not necessarily problems; however, they are noted concerns that were not in my control as the researcher (Akanle et al., 2020). One limitation of this study was gender as only two of the 10 participants were male providing experiences that are more derivative of a female. Another limitation of the study is that all the doctoral graduates happened to have a clinical background whereas only one of the ABD participants had a clinical background. The delimitations of research are those choices that were made prior to the study being conducted as the boundaries that I set prior to the research (Akanle et al., 2020). The institutions attended by the participants, the type of doctoral degree, and the participant's age were all identified as delimitations going into the study. The participants were chosen with intentional purposeful sampling ensuring that each was between the ages of 25-55, each attended an online doctoral program with a dissertation component and each either completed their program or remained in ABD. With a variety of institutions operating under different accreditation, leadership, and structure, this gave some bias when comparing and contrasting experiences. Additionally, the requirements of the type of doctoral degree were vague, only requiring that the program be online, a dissertation component included, and a terminal degree of some type of doctorate obtained. If the doctoral type such as a Doctor of Psychology in Education were required, this may have also led to a more meaningful comparison of experiences. The age chosen for the study was individuals between the age of 25-55 which ended up being a delimitation as many individuals were over the age of 55, however they were younger

while in enrolled in their doctoral program. The age requirement results in the exclusion of many individuals who were wanting and willing to participate in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations and delimitations of this research show that the study could benefit from a more diverse sample as well as interviewing participants from equivalent institutions. I believed that choosing individuals in the 25-55 age range would solicit the non-traditional student who had a variety of outside responsibilities such as jobs, pets, etc., however a new research study could benefit from expanding the age range as I found several potential participants were disqualified due to their age. I also feel that the sample would benefit from including dissertation chairs in addition to students as they may offer a different perspective on student success and retention. Additionally, it would be interesting to see if the themes would be lessened if all participants came from the same online institution as the responses varied greatly per institution. Additionally, while a phenomenological study was conducted, a case study could also be interesting. Knowing that the research varies in published retention rates a quantitative study could also be conducted giving explicit retention rates at a specific type of online doctoral institution.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand doctoral student's experiences participating in an online doctoral program at a university. Through understanding the participant's experiences, one could garner why the retention and graduation rates of online doctoral programs were low. The participants in this study were individuals aged 25-55 who attended an online doctoral program with a dissertation component and either graduated with their doctorate or remained in the ABD phase. Participants included both graduates and ABD

individuals to see if their lived experiences were similar. Through one-on-one interviews, reflective essays, and a focus group session, data were collected, transcribed, and coded using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method described by Moustakas (1994). The analysis of the data identified three major themes with a variety of subthemes which answered the research questions. The major themes identified were personal factors, institutional factors, and the dissertation process. A variety of experiences were expressed with many experiences sounding familiar. The participants agreed that the coursework portion of the doctoral process was overall positive while the dissertation process elicited more negative responses. Participants cited personal and institutional factors that caused the process to be challenging. Previous literature supports the study's findings on personal and institutional factors, also elaborating on specific causes for these factors. According to the findings, the dissertation component was what ultimately caused individuals to remain in ABD while strong persistence and motivation is what allowed some to graduate. Recommendations for future research would be to compare and contrast participants with more similar experiences. The participants' responses to this study could assist future doctoral students, doctoral institutions, and doctoral dissertation committee members when trying to assist students to persist to graduation.

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APPENDIX A:**Demographics Questionnaire**

1. First and Last name:
2. Gender:
3. Age:
4. Please list the name of the Institution that you attended for you Doctoral Education

5. Please list the state in which the institution is located

6. What type of doctoral program did you attend?
 - Online
 - On campus
7. Did your doctoral program require that you complete a dissertation?
 - Yes
 - No
8. Did you complete your doctoral degree?
 - Yes
 - No
9. If you did not complete your doctoral degree, did you remain in the all-but-dissertation (ABD) phase of the program?
10. If you *did* complete your Doctoral Degree, please list the date you graduated and type of doctorate obtained (Ph.D, Ed. D, etc.)

11. If you *did not* complete your Doctoral Degree, did you enter your dissertation phase?
 - Yes
 - No

APPENDIX B:

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Factors Related to Online Doctoral Program Retention and Completion Rates: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Paula R. Dietz, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be ages 25 to 55 and have attended an online doctoral program with a dissertation component. You cannot have attended Liberty University for your doctoral program. You could have either graduated successfully from the program or remained in the all-but-dissertation (ABD) phase of your program. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation. Additionally, the research aims to uncover the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation and ways to eliminate these barriers.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a one-on-one interview – 60 minutes. This will be completed through a virtual platform such as Zoom and the interview will be audio- and video-recorded. The recording will be used for transcription purposes and not posted or shared.
2. Complete a 1-2-page paper with a writing prompt – 30 minutes. Participants will be asked to complete and email the reflective essay back to me within two weeks of the completed one-on-one interview.
3. Attend and participate in a focus group meeting – 60 minutes. All participants will be asked to attend a focus group meeting, which will be scheduled at a time for maximum participation. The focus group meeting will be completed through a virtual platform such as Zoom and the interview will be audio- and video-recorded. The recording will be used for transcription purposes and not posted or shared.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include increased awareness to potential students, faculty, institutions, and department chairs, which could result in improvement in retention.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study include a breach in confidentiality, which would be considered a slight risk. The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. A transcriptionist will have access to the audio-recordings but a confidentiality agreement will be signed by the transcriptionist.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-protected hard drive and in a locked drawer. The data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all physical records will be shredded.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on either a password-protected web application or a password-protected hard drive for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and the transcriptionist will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Paula Dietz. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Kevin White.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX C:

Interview Questions

One-On-One Interview Questions

Opening Questions

1. Please tell me your name and a little bit about yourself.
2. What do you currently do for work?
3. Describe your educational background prior to working on your Ph.D.
4. Tell me how your doctoral program prepared you for your current career.

Questions Related to Personal Student Persistence

5. Please tell me about your responsibilities while working on your Ph.D. (e.g., job, children, and schooling).
6. What were your desires/motivations for obtaining your doctorate?
7. What personal challenges did you face while obtaining your degree? You do not have to go into in-depth details of your personal experiences, but provide more a general idea of your personal challenges.
8. What type of outside support did you have while going through your doctoral program (e.g., friends, family, employer, etc.)?

Questions Related to Experience

9. Describe your overall experience with your doctoral program.
10. Describe your experiences with the coursework in your program.
11. Describe your experiences with the dissertation process of your program.

Questions Related to Institutional Support

12. Explain your experience with the process of obtaining a topic and committee.

13. Tell me the differences you experienced between the coursework phase and the dissertation phase of the program.
14. Describe any resources offered to you by the institution such as library access, advising, and committee member selection.
15. What do you feel Ph.D. programs can do to foster student persistence in the dissertation phase?
16. More specifically, is there anything additional that you feel that online students need when reaching the dissertation phase of their program?

Questions Related to Self-Efficacy

17. Explain why you persisted, or did not persist, through the dissertation phase to completion.
18. Can you explain the emotions you felt when you completed, or did not complete, your dissertation?
19. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share regarding your experience with your doctoral program?

APPENDIX D:

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. Can you state your name and let everyone know a little bit about the institution you attended, the degree you were seeking (or received), and whether you completed your doctorate or remained in the all-but-dissertation (ABD) phase?
2. How would you describe your experiences with your online doctoral program?
3. How would you describe your experience with the structure and layout of your didactic courses?
4. How would you describe your experience with obtaining a dissertation committee?
5. How would you describe your experience with the dissertation phase of your online doctoral program?
6. Can you discuss the emotions you felt while going through the program?
7. Can you share with me how completing (or not completing) your doctorate has impacted you emotionally?
8. If you could go back and do it again, what would you want to change personally?
9. If you could go back and do it again, what do you wish the institution would have done differently?
10. What emotions were you left with after your experience?

APPENDIX E:
Reflective Essay

Reflective Essay

For the reflective essay, participants will be given a writing prompt and asked to submit a one-to-two-page paper addressing their experiences with their doctoral program. The participants will be asked to use a 12-pt Times New Roman Font with one-inch margins and double spacing. Participants will be asked to complete and email the reflective essay back to me within two weeks of the completed one-on-one interview.

The writing prompt given will be:

If you could go back and redo your doctoral program, what would you change and why?

APPENDIX F:
IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 7, 2022

Paula Dietz
Kevin White

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-494 Factors Related to Online Doctoral Program Retention and Completion Rates: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Paula Dietz, Kevin White,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX G:
Recruitment Email

Dear Recipient:

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation. Additionally, the research aims to uncover the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation and ways to eliminate these barriers, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be ages 25 to 55 and have attended an online doctoral program with a dissertation component. They cannot have attended Liberty University for their doctoral program. These participants could have either graduated successfully from their program or remained in the all-but-dissertation (ABD) phase of their program. Participants, if willing, will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-on-one interview – 60 minutes
- Complete a 1-2-page paper with a writing prompt – 30 minutes
- Attend and participate in a focus group meeting – 60 minutes

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me.

A consent document will be emailed to participants one week prior to their interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and email it back to me prior to the interview.

Sincerely,

Paula R. Dietz

APPENDIX H:

Recruitment Social Media Post

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation. Additionally, the research aims to uncover the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation and ways to eliminate these barriers. To participate, you must be ages 25 to 55 and have attended an online doctoral program with a dissertation component. You cannot have attended Liberty University for your doctoral program. As a potential participant, you could have either graduated successfully from your program or remained in the all-but-dissertation (ABD) phase of your program. Participants will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-on-one interview – 60 minutes
- Complete a 1-2-page paper with a writing prompt – 30 minutes
- Attend and participate in a focus group meeting – 60 minutes

If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria or know someone who would like to participate, please contact me for more information. A consent document will be emailed to participants one week prior to their interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and email it back to me prior to the interview.

APPENDIX I:**Recruitment Verbal**

Hello Potential Participant,

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of online doctoral students who attended a program requiring a dissertation.

Additionally, the research aims to uncover the perceived barriers to completing the dissertation and ways to eliminate these barriers, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be ages 25 to 55 and have attended an online doctoral program with a dissertation component. They cannot have attended Liberty University for their doctoral program. These participants could have either graduated successfully from their program or remained in the all-but-dissertation (ABD) phase of their program. Participants, if willing, will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-on-one interview – 60 minutes
- Complete a 1-2-page paper with a writing prompt – 30 minutes
- Attend and participate in a focus group meeting – 60 minutes

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate?

YES - Great, could I get your email address so I can send you the link to a demographic questionnaire? Would you mind completing the questionnaire as soon as possible so that I can ensure that you are eligible to take place in the research? Once I have received and reviewed your questionnaire, I would like to schedule a time for our one-on-one interview. I understand that your time is valuable, but I am sure we can come up with a time that works for the both of us.

NO - I understand. Thank you for your time.

A consent document will be emailed to participants one week prior to their interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and email it back to me prior to the interview.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?