

A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF NON-COMPLETERS IN
ONLINE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

by
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A Dissertation Presented In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the EDUC 980 Course

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ABSTRACT

The chance of an individual completing a traditional doctorate program is 50% (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008; Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Student attrition in online programs is 10% to 20% greater than that of traditional, residential programs (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2000; DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Parker, 1999; Rovai, 2002). While doctoral attrition rates have been examined for decades, little research focuses on the phenomenon of attrition with doctoral candidates who enrolled in online graduate programs (Perry, Boman, Care, Edwards & Park, 2008). The phenomenon of attrition is multifaceted and dependent on countless academic, social, and personal factors (Picciano, 2002). As online education continues to gain popularity and acceptance within institutions of higher education, institutions will feel the pressure to address the issue of retaining their online learners. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to research students and faculty of online learning within a college setting to determine the best practices for the online environment. This qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study describes the experiences online doctoral students enrolled in United States educational doctoral programs. Data collection occurs through surveys, participant timelines, and interviews and is analyzed using van Manen's (1997) recommendations for conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study. The findings show that institutions should augment good educational and administrative practices along with engaging in academic and social integration to help students in online doctoral programs. The study also shows that students entering into an online doctoral program should be proactive in determining if an online program is the right educational choice for them versus a blended or traditional type program.

Key terms: asynchronous, attrition rates, barriers to degree completion, distance education, non-completer, non-traditional student, online education, social and academic integration, student-advisor relationship, and synchronous.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to all students who complete an online Doctor in Education program. It is ultimately the online doctoral student, who, despite life's challenges and the sacrifices made along the way, has risen above to program completion.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the dawn of the 21st century, enrollment at online universities is expanding. Rapid changes in higher education are occurring with advancements in technology. Though there remains some bias against online degrees, an online degree from an accredited university is becoming increasingly accepted into society, and, thus, more readily available. According to a 2010 Sloan survey of online learning, 5.6 million students enroll in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Student enrollment increased by almost one million students between 2008 and 2009. The increase in online learning in higher education is apparent by the fact that over 80% of educational institutions in the United States offer some form of online education (Terrell, 2005).

The U.S. Department of Education (2011) lists and ranks all the available online, accredited universities. Universities that offer online-accredited degree programs must meet the same rigor as universities that offer traditional degree programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In 2003, 57% of academic leaders rated online education as the same or superior to a traditional type education. In 2010, the number rose to 67% (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Thirty-one percent of higher education's students now take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Despite the requirements for rigor and increased enrollment, concerns about online programs persist. Specifically, attrition is a concern.

In 2009, the total number of doctorates awarded by U.S. colleges and universities was 49,562 (National Science Foundation (NSF), 2010). Doctor of Education degrees accounted for 13% of all doctoral degrees trailing behind life sciences, physical sciences, social sciences, and engineering (NSF, 2010). This figure represents only 30-50% of the

students who started the terminal degree (NSF, 2010). High attrition rates exist for traditional students; however, attrition rates are even higher for students in the online learning environment (Rovai, 2002; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2011).

Attrition can have a negative effect on a student's life, both personally and professionally (Lovitts, 2001; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). The intent of this research is to learn more about the experiences of students while enrolled in a doctorate program and gain a deeper understanding of their reasons for non-completion.

Background

High student attrition is a crisis within the United States and among doctorate students around the world (Europe Unit: Bologna Process, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), attrition stems from a lack of support both inside and outside the university and a lack of knowledge to complete the process. Others may report that the completion rate depends heavily on the program requirements of the university and the expectations of each department (Brucker, Ehrenberg, Groen, & Zuckerman, 2010).

The doctoral program is one of the most academic challenges students will face during their lifetime. It is devastating to some students when they pronounce their inability to finish the program (Blum & Muirhead, 2005). Graduate schools that have high attrition rates have associated costs and implications taking away time, money, and talent from the universities, students, and society (Brunsden, Davies, Shelvin & Bracken, 2000; Smallwood, 2004).

Costs Associated with the University

Attrition results in the waste of a university's human and financial resources (Kerlin, 1995; National Research Council, 1996). The resources used on students who are

non-completers of a doctoral program are never recovered (Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999). Student attrition at universities is a major economic issue as well as a political one. Retention of students is vital to the success of universities as internal institutional needs and external governmental pressures relating to student retention are growing significantly. The U.S. Department of Education paid close attention to student attrition rates when it worked with Congress to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. Data indicate the attrition record of most colleges for first- and second-year students is not good. The Department of Education has examined policies and ways to use federal money to reward programs that work (DeBerard & Spelmans, 2004). Therefore, a reduction in attrition rates could mean additional funding for universities (Schneider & Lin, 2011; Nettles & Millett, 2006). In addition, advocacies analyze persistence rates and may use this information to praise or criticize a university (Schneider & Lin, 2011; Nettles & Millett, 2006). High attrition rates also change the way students perceive the institution (Lau, 2003). When students do not enroll, universities not only lose tuition income, they also fail to meet the mission and goals of the institute (Bean, 1990). “Institutions have come to view the retention of students to degree completion as the only reasonable cause of action left to ensure their survival” (Tinto, 1997, p. 2).

Costs Associated with the Student

“When students fail to complete their degree, there are not only direct costs to the student and the university, but also opportunity costs, since the student who left was filling a space that might have been occupied by a student who would have graduated” (Wendler, Bell, Bridgeman, Cline, McAllister, Millett, & Rock, 2010, p. 27). Those students who depart college before graduating, experience personal failure in achieving their educational goals along with an income below that of their peers who do graduate

from college. This results in opportunity costs that have little or no financial benefit (Bean, 1990). According to the U.S. Census (2002), students who have a doctorate degree earn an average of \$3.4 million over their lifetime. This is almost two thirds more than workers who did not finish college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

Students who do not complete the program may also suffer emotional costs. If doctoral students withdraw involuntarily due to academic failure or inability to complete the program, it may decrease their self-confidence and lower their self-esteem (Lovitts, 2001).

Costs Associated with Society

When a student completes their doctoral degree, society gains several benefits. These benefits include a decrease reliance on public assistance, increased social awareness, enhanced civic participation, improved parenting skills, higher tax revenues, lower crime related incidents, and higher entrepreneurial activity (Watts, 2001). In recognizing the problem of attrition, and specifically online attrition, and its consequences, universities are compelled to look into the reasons why students leave and why the time to complete the degree is increasing (Hoffer & Welch, 2006). Universities need to encourage students to remain in the program and receive their degrees (Lovitts & Nelson, 2001). In order for universities to improve student retention, they need an understanding of the doctoral process and how student experience's lead to attrition (Lawley, 1999). Understanding the common features that students experience in online education and responding to their issues effectively can potentially improve poor doctoral completion rates (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Unlike some recent studies, such as one done by Fletcher, Gies, and Hodge (2011) on the barriers of the traditional doctoral students, this study focuses on the barriers of online students.

Problem Statement

The problem is approximately 50% of students who start a doctoral program do not complete the requirements for degree confirmation (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). This number has remained constant for the last fifty years (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). In addition, research in online programs report higher student attrition rates than rates of traditional, residential programs (Rovai, 2002; Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009). Past research on doctoral attrition has excluded the non-traditional, online-learning programs of education (Chyung, 2001; Easton, 2003; Hannun, Irvin, Lei, & Farmer, 2008; Kirtman, 2009; Perry et al., 2008). Similarly, current statistics on doctoral degrees such as demographics, time to degree, attrition and retention rates, and many other characteristics involving the doctoral degree concentrate on the traditional student compared to the online student (National Science Foundation [NSF]; 2010 Perry et al., 2008). Therefore, reasons for online doctoral attrition have emerged and the need to investigate the online environment is evident. This research explores the experiences and perceptions of the online learners who do not complete an online Doctor of Education program.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic, phenomenological study is to explore strategies for reducing attrition by describing the lived experiences as perceived by doctoral students who have broken enrollment in an online Doctor of Education program. The time it takes to earn a Doctor of Education degree is one of the longest times to degree completion among the major fields (Hoffer & Welch; 2006, NSF, 2010). According to the National Science Foundation (2010), median years to a Doctor of Education since receiving a bachelor's degree have increased from 15.2% in 1985 to 16.2% in 2010.

Attrition rates in the education doctoral program have been consistent at 50%; however, the rates may be as high as 70% (Nettles & Millet, 2006).

The phenomenon investigated was the experience of online doctoral student attrition. The study involves surveys, interviews, and participant timelines of doctoral students who withdrew from an online Doctor of Education degree during the last three years beginning with 2009 and who were enrolled in the program for at least one year.

Significance of the Study

High attrition rates are prevalent in online graduate programs and little research is conducted from the student's perception (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Consistent, high attrition rates indicate a need for universities to implement changes to retain students. This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of students who decided to leave their online doctoral programs. The research contributes to the understanding of doctoral student attrition and may be used as an instrument to decrease attrition rates. According to Online Education Database (2009), the graduation rate is an indicator of a college's success in attaining their educational goals. Universities are crucial player in online learning and need to understand the problems as perceived and experienced by online students. It is important for any stakeholder in education to recognize the perceptions of students who do not succeed and understand their reasons for withdrawing. This research helps to assist universities, students, and society in understanding the experiences of the non-completer in an online doctoral program.

Research Plan

The study of doctoral student attrition is extremely difficult due to the lack of a systematic means of data collection within universities. Previous research has focused on student motivation as well as academic and demographic variables (Bowen &

Rudenstine, 1992; Sigafus, 1998; Tluczek, 1995). Additional research assists in understanding the reasons why some students do not complete the program (Stallone, 2004). In addition, with the increase enrollment in online doctoral programs, there is a need to understand the reasons online doctoral students do not complete the program. If faculty understands student attrition, they will encourage interactions that influence a continuance of student's enrollment. For students, understanding student attrition helps build strategies in meeting challenges and promotes program completion. For institutions, preventing attrition will help meet their missions and goals. The following questions guide the study:

1. What are the barriers to degree completion as perceived by individuals who broke enrollment from an online Doctor of Education program in the United States?
2. What is the essence of the lived experience of online Doctor of Education students who broke enrollment in online doctoral programs in the United States?
3. What can universities do to remove some of the obstacles experienced by doctoral students while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?
4. What can students do to prepare and overcome the obstacles experienced while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?

The research conducted used a hermeneutic, phenomenological design to seek a broader understanding of the human factors involved during the process that influence student attrition. The hermeneutic, phenomenological design conveyed the voice of the participants in an effort to let their experiences on the topic help answer the research questions. Data collection was comprised of a survey, an interview, and a timeline of events from each participant. The method of selecting participants for this hermeneutic, phenomenological study used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling in qualitative

research selects participants for a specific reason (Letts, Wilkins, Law, Stewart, Bosch & Westmorland, 2007). Data were collected by surveys, timelines, and interviews from 10 participants who withdrew from an online Doctor of Education program during the last three years and were enrolled in the program for at least one year. The chosen timeframe collects current data from participants of their experience in the doctoral program.

The review of the literature in Chapter Two presents key elements involved in the barriers to degree completion and reasons for attrition that have been identified in research conducted with traditional, residential doctoral students. Universities are researching ways to improve the process by looking at the structure and environment of their doctoral programs. The following research helps explain the dynamic process of the doctoral program and cultural setting students experience in attempting to complete their online doctoral degree. Chapter 3 explains the study and the research methods used in analyzing the process. Clarification on reviewing the data, coding, and categorizing are also laid out in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study along with the organization of patterns, trends, and themes as the study progresses. Chapter 5 summarizes the study with a discussion.

Key Terms

In order to convey their meanings as intended, the following is a list of words along with their definitions that may have vague meanings:

Asynchronous – learning facilitated by media such as email and discussion boards supporting learners with teachers, even if participants are not online at the same time (Hrastinski, 2008).

Attrition rates – a calculation done on student enrollment compared to those who enter a college or university with the intention of graduating, and, due to personal or

institutional shortcomings, leaves school and, for an extended period, does not return to the original school or any other school (College Student Retention, 2012).

Barriers to degree completion – hurdles that must be overcome in order to complete a doctoral degree such as procrastination, psychosocial factors, lack of research and writing skills, health problems, loss of interest, life pressures, time management, lack of cooperation with chairperson and/or committee, financial resources, frustration, and a lack of confidence (Dominguez, 2006; Grover, 2007; Lage-Otero, 2006).

Distance education (DE) – distance education involves six distinct learning characteristics: a) teacher-learner separation b) educational organization influence in planning and student support c) media usage d) two way communication e) participation in an industrialized form of education and f) learner as individual or privatization of learning (Keegan, 1980).

Non-completer – in this study, a non-completer is a participant who has broken enrollment in a Doctor of Education program during the last five years and completed a minimum of one year of study.

Non-traditional student – is a student at higher education institutions who generally falls into two categories (a) students who are older than the typical undergraduate college student and had interrupted their studies earlier in life (b) students of traditional age but attending colleges or programs that provide unconventional scheduling to allow for other responsibilities and pursuits concurrent with attaining a degree (Dictionary.com 2012).

Online education – the use of the internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from

the learning experience (Ally, 2004, p. 7).

Social and academic integration – integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems (Tinto, 1993).

Student-advisor relationship – an interactive process in which the adviser helps the student set and achieve academic goals, acquire relevant information and services, and make responsible decisions consistent with interests, goals, abilities, and degree requirements. Advising should be personalized to consider the special needs of each student, which may include appropriate referral services (NACADA, 2003).

Synchronous – learning is supported by videoconferencing and chat, and has the potential to support learners socially into learning communities. Students and teachers experience learning as social because it allows asking and answering questions in real time (Hrastinski, 2008).

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter presents theories of student attrition as they pertain to the foundation and context for examining doctoral attrition in the online environment. The literature review addresses the roles of the student, faculty, and university in completing the doctoral program. A review of the literature examining reasons for non-completion of the doctoral program, effects of high attrition, and the consequences of attrition as it relates to national policy are discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary articulating the need for this study given the gap in the literature. Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) relating to academic and social integration will be used in this study to analyze the experiences of doctoral students who have withdrawn from online programs. Review of the literature in online programs reveal that a lack of faculty integration and feelings of social support to be a significant factor in the student's sense of potential for completion of the doctoral program (Allan & Dory, 2001; O'Brien & Renner, 2002; Rovai, 2002). Therefore, Tinto's (1993) theory is also reviewed and used as a framework for this study.

Brief History

There are many reasons why individuals choose to enroll in graduate education programs (Martin, 2005; Mujtaba, & Mujtaba, 2007). There are also many reasons why individuals withdraw from the same program they once had intentions of completing. Although the consequences of non-completion have been studied (Brunsden et al., 2000), forty years of research demonstrates that doctoral students' attrition rates remain consistent at 50% (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008; Ivankova & Stick, 2007). In 1980, number of doctorate recipients in the field of education compared to all other major fields of study was 1 in 4

(National Science Foundation (NSF), 2010). Thirty years later, ratio of doctorate recipients in education compared to others is approximately 1 in 10 (NSF, 2010). In addition, Doctor of Education programs report the longest time-to-degree compared to that of other doctoral programs (Hoffer & Welch, 2006; NSF, 2010). From 1985 and 2010, time-to-degree in the Doctor of Education field of study increased from 15.2 years to 16.2 years (NSF, 2010). In 2010, the only other major field of study exceeding 10 years in time-to-degree period was humanities taking 11.4 years (NSF, 2010). The high failure rate and increasing time to degree is problematic in Doctor of Education programs compared to others (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; NSF, 2010).

Reasons for doctoral attrition in traditional programs have been researched (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000); however, the phenomenon of online doctoral attrition has received little attention (Perry et al., 2008; Tinto, 1998). As attrition rates in online doctoral programs remain high, and researchers claim higher attrition rates among online students than those of traditional programs (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2000; DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Rovai, 2002), it is pertinent for researchers, administrators, and educators to examine the motives of individuals who become non-completers in online doctoral programs. Understanding motives of individuals who become non-completers can update policies and programs to decrease attrition rates; thus, it is essential that “institutions need a deeper understanding of the student-institution interaction from which student persistence arises” (College Board, 2009, p.2). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the reasons of online doctoral attrition and identify the variables to implement appropriate, preventive measures.

Theoretical Framework

A number of theories exist for attrition and retention of students (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Tinto (1975) laid the theoretical foundation for studying student attrition with his Student Integration Model (SIM) and researched the causes for doctoral attrition. Tinto's models (1975, 1997, 1993) are tested and confirmed by researchers more extensively than any other model (Allen & Nora, 1995; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Ivankova & Stick, 2007). These models provided some understanding of student attrition (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1993); however, their research was limited in their scope of non-completers in online doctoral students as they based their research on traditional students (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1993). However, in discussing attrition, it is still important to review these theories, as many of them are pertinent to doctoral attrition and have been confirmed (Allen & Nora, 1995; Cabrera et al., 1993; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

Tinto's Original Student Integration Model (SIM)

Tinto (1975) laid the theoretical foundation for studying student attrition with his Student Integration Model (SIM). The intent of the model was to explain the decisions that influenced a student's decision to withdraw from a college or university. Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1975) conceptualized persistence as an outcome of students' interactions with their colleges and universities as organizations.

In the model, Tinto described the relationship between student background characteristics and educational expectations and the characteristics of academic institutions. Tinto's SIM Model (1975) also purported that five-factors influence a

student's decision to withdraw (1) background characteristics; (2) initial goal and institutional commitments; (3) academic and social integration; (4) subsequent goal and institutional commitments; and (5) withdrawal decisions.

Background characteristics. Students' background characteristics are important predictors of attrition because they helped determine how a student interacted with an institution's social and academic systems, and subsequently become integrated into the institution (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Swail, 2004).

Tinto's (1993) model specifies a longitudinal process in which a number of background characteristics (age, race, secondary academic performance, parental encouragement, etc.) interact to form students' commitment to the university and to their educational goals. These commitments change, over time, because of students' integration into the university. Tinto (1993) theorizes that integration increases students' commitments and influences students' persistence.

Initial goal and institutional commitments. Tinto (1993) theorized that commitment to educational goals and commitment to the institution influences persistence and performance. The stronger the goal and institutional commitment, the better chances the student has for program completion. Research shows that a relationship between student goals and institutional mission facilitates academic and social programs (Swail, 2004). Increased integration into academic and social campus communities causes greater institutional commitment and student persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Academic and social integration. Academic integration and social integration are the most common themes in the literature (Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1997). Tinto's (1975) early work identified academic and social integration as the critical factors in

attrition. In relation to student integration, Tinto (1975) based his model on Durkheim's theory of suicide (Draper, 2008; McCubbin, 2003). Durkheim's theory predicted the likelihood of a person committing suicide based on an individual's degree of integration with society. Tinto (1975) took Durkheim's theory and predicted the likelihood of students to withdraw from their studies based upon the amount of academic and social integration. Tinto (1975) defines academic integration as grade performance and the quality of interactions with faculty and social integration as the students' level of participation in campus academic and social activities. Tinto (1975) described social and academic integration as separate constructs; however, they interact to influence persistence. While a high degree of social integration may weaken academic performance, it positively influences the student's commitment to the institution. Tinto (1975) stated that social integration with faculty increases the level of academic integration while directly influencing students' goal commitment.

Tinto (1975) examined academic integration using several variables: grade, personal development, academic self-esteem, their enjoyment of the subject, if they identified with academic norms and values, and with their role as a student. To examine social integration, Tinto (1975) looked at how the person fits in socially. To determine this, he examined how many friends the student had, how many staff knew the student's name, how many staff the student interacted with, and the student's satisfaction with the university.

Academic and social integration is "shaped by the personal and intellectual interactions that occur within and between students and faculty and the various communities that make academic and social systems of the institution" (p. 231). Student's lack of becoming socially and academically integrated, as well as other

factors internal and external to an institution often leads to their lack of persistence (Kember, 1989). When students fail to become integrated into their university's academic and social communities, they are less likely to complete the program. Several researchers confirm Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory pertaining to doctoral attrition (Allen & Nora, 1995; Cabrera et al., 1993; Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

Institutional and goal commitments. Tinto (1975) proposed that two dimensions of commitment, namely institutional and goal commitments also directly influence persistence or departure behavior. Institutional commitment represents the degree to which an individual is motivated to graduate from a specific college or university. Goal commitment, or educational goal commitment, represents the degree to which the individual is committed, or motivated, to earn a college degree in general. In turn, institutional and goal external commitments or demands and the level of academic and social integration directly influence commitments (Tinto, 1975).

Critique of Tinto's (1975) Original Model

Although criticized, Tinto's (1975) model has been the dominant model for student attrition for many years (Draper, 2008; Graunke, 2005; McCubbin, 2003). Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model is criticized because the model is based on traditional students (McCubbin, 2003); students whose ethnicity is primarily Caucasian, class was middle class, and degree was pursued on residential campuses (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) also knew that his model had failed by not considering the psychological characteristics that caused students to withdraw. Tinto's (1993) future work included many alterations on what he was criticized for; however, his future work continued to focus on residential students.

Tinto's (1993) Updated Student Integration Model

Since the criticisms of Tinto's (1975) original model, he has made considerable modifications to his SIM's theory (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993), in his updated model, takes into account the student's views on their previous academic experiences, their family backgrounds, and academic features. Tinto's (1993) model also included the individual characteristics of the student such as ethnicity, gender, and age. Academic experiences include social activities along with grade point average. Family background includes social status, morals, values, and expectations.

Tinto's updated models (1993, 1997, 2002) also include examining learning communities. Tinto suggested that academic and social support, academic and social integration, and effective student learning should be present to contribute to the success or retention of the student. In order for this to occur, the institution must be committed across all levels of the institution in order for students to succeed (Tinto 1993, 1997, 2002).

Recent work by Tinto (1982, 1993, 1997, 2002) shifted from a focus on attrition to persistence. Tinto (2002) identified institutional responsibility as a key element in supporting student persistence. Tinto's (1975, 1982, 1993, 1997) revised models are explicit in the expectation that institutions must take responsibility for the learning environment they offer as it is the learning environment that makes it possible for students to succeed, or fail in their studies.

Furthermore, Tinto (1993) takes into account that the higher the socioeconomic class, the higher the persistence. Although the relationship is much more complex, Tinto (1993) asserts that the lower the social status, the lower aptitude, and lower levels of intellect are present. Tinto (1993) confirms that the student's social and academic

integration are the most important obstacles to overcome and maintain student persistence. Student's perception of their doctorate experience is important to their success; thus, Tinto (1993) looks at the learning experiences of students in terms of opportunity costs. If students believe they will receive greater benefits from discontinuing the program, their chances of withdrawal are greater. If they have a greater chance for success in completing their degree, then they will remain enrolled. Tinto's (1993) updated model included doctoral studies in his attrition research.

Tinto's SIM applied to Doctoral Education

Tinto (1993) extended his theory to the doctoral population. According to Tinto (1993), the doctoral student who completes the program views education differently than the student who does not. The student who completes the program views education as gaining knowledge while the non-completer student sees education as a process of steps to completion.

Tinto's (1993) measured doctoral graduate persistence by the amount of academic and social integration that occurred between faculty, students, and the communities that are involved. When students do not integrate within the communities, they are less likely to complete the program. Tinto (1993) stressed that when social integration with faculty increases, the likelihood of degree completion also increases.

Tinto (1993) identified a three-stage model to explain doctoral attrition. The first stage, the transition stage, which is the first year, students begin to integrate into the academic and social communities of the university. In this stage, the development of new habits and patterns are associated with the university. The second stage is the candidacy stage, which includes comprehensive exams and acquiring the knowledge and skills required for research. The student endures the stress as a result from program enrollment.

The completion stage, which includes the dissertation, involves increasing dependence on support from family and friends. This stage is where the student's capabilities are revealed and becomes a member of the institute. The student is no longer the person he or she once was and has evolved into a new individual. In each stage, the role of faculty, peers, and students change in the degree of importance. For example, in the first stage, the student seeks to associate themselves in the academic and social communities of the university. In the final stage, the student's social interaction is limited. The advisor plays a much more important role in the completion stage (Tinto, 1993). Understanding these stages and the factors, both institutional and individual, that are most concerning is essential to all stakeholders if the chances to degree completion are to increase.

Application to Study

Tinto's (1975, 1993, 1997) theories have been tested and confirmed through various studies examining doctoral attrition and the practice of learning communities (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Fletcher et al., 2011; McCubbin, 2003; McIntosh, Packskamp, & Ridzi, 2001). Although researchers confirm Tinto's (1993) work in doctoral education, its application is still limited to traditional programs.

A number of researchers have found shortcomings in Tinto's model because it has limited applicability since it is best suited to institutional analysis of the persistence of traditional undergraduate students (Maxwell, 1998; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000); thus, has minimal use for researching attrition of older students pursuing a doctoral degree (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Some of the factors and ideas may be applicable to online students, specifically online doctoral students; however, researchers have noted that a student's experience in online education is unique from that of a traditional student (Miller & Lu, 2002; Ravoii, 2002; Skopek & Schulumann, 2008). For example, individual

variables pertaining to the family and employment play a much greater role in the online doctoral student as they are generally older and married (Kember, 1989).

This study aims to build upon Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) as applied to doctor of education student and obtain an in-depth understanding of the commitments, integrations, and institutional experiences of doctoral students who have withdrawn from online programs. Before discussing reasons for attrition, the following paragraphs provide information on the phenomenon of attrition, including calculating attrition rates.

Attrition

The Guide to Online Schools (2009) released a national study of rankings for online colleges and universities that demonstrated that many doctoral programs have high attrition rates. In Canada and Australia, doctoral attrition rates are 50% or more (Golde & Walker, 2006, Halse, 2007). In the US, which is the focus of this study, rates are similar (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). In 2006, Gilliam and Kritsonis reported that publicized, national studies on doctoral attrition rates are almost nonexistent; the publications that do exist range in reported attrition rates (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). While discussing attrition, it is important to understand how it is calculated and why rates vary. In addition, it is important to know why a national attrition rate does not exist.

Calculating Attrition Rates

Significant gaps exist in the knowledge and data regarding calculating doctoral attrition rates (Allan & Dory, 2001; Stallone, 2004) because universities do not have one measure and way to measure attrition rates. The National Research Council (1996) scanned over 10 years of documented material and found that universities use three basic

ways to determine attrition rates. The first is through student enrollment records at the university. The second is done through various student surveys, and the third way is to prototype the students who demonstrated persistence.

Under the NRC, the Advisory Committee, after studying attrition, determined that a national measure of attrition was insurmountable (National Research Council, 1996). National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found otherwise (Russell, 2009). Anticipating the efforts of Congress to provide institutional data on retention and completion, the NCES performed their own study to determine the feasibility of mandating a national method of measuring graduation rates. The report findings demonstrate the possibility of implementing measures at a national level to determine graduation rates. The decision to create and monitor a national measuring system is up to Congress.

The idea of enacting such a national policy caused immediate resistance from private colleges. There was also considerable opposition from members of Congress. The opposition based their argument on invading the privacy of students and causing additional reporting burdens to the colleges. The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) passed in 2008 prohibiting the development of a federal database to track student information. However, the Act did not prohibit individual states from comprising their own databases (HEOA, 2008). Although there is no national averages, studies over the past 10 decades demonstrate doctoral attrition and online attrition is a problem (Perry et al., 2008).

Understanding reasons for retention rates empower university administrators to develop interventions. These interventions tailor to disciplines, departments, and programs to meet educational goals at their universities (Sowell, Zhang, Bell & Redd,

2008; Swail, 2004). If administrators do not take action and implement an intervention plan with students who may be struggling with their academic or social skills, the student's chances of completing the program are diminished (Sowell et al., 2008; Swail, 2004).

The Cost of Attrition Rates in Higher Education

High attrition rates in doctorate programs have significant implications to businesses, universities, students, and future economy.

When students fail to complete their degree, there are not only direct costs to the student and the university, but also opportunity costs, since the student who left was filling a space that might have been occupied by a student who would have graduated (Bell, et al., 2010, p. 27).

The inability of colleges of education to supply the demand for qualified teachers and professors can be a direct result of high attrition rates (D'Andrea, 2002). High attrition rates could affect the ability of the university to secure funds and draw exceptional faculty and students (Katz, 1997). The lack of ability to produce qualified teachers and professors has an adverse effect on the country to remain competitive in the global marketplace (Russell, 2009). In addition, high attrition rates have a negative effect on a university's reputation. If an institution high attrition rates, they may be at risk of losing accreditation (Kelly & Schneider, 2012). This would also have financial implications because many federal student loans base their loans on good accreditation ratings. Notre Dame reported if they were to lower their attrition rate by 10%, the savings cost to the university would be approximately \$1 million per year (Smallwood, 2004). It is also damaging to the reputation of the university and discouraging to faculty as they fail to meet the mission and goals of the institute (Bean, 1990; Green & Kluever, 1997).

Louisiana State University researchers are focusing their studies on attrition rates as the timing of attrition influences the loss to the university. The cost is less to universities if attrition occurs in the first two to three years because the longer students enroll, the more money, and time the university invests in them (LSU, 2006). In a study done at LSU (2006), Susan Gardner, Joe Lott, and Tam Le reported that one-third of their attrition in doctoral studies occurs in the dissertation phase, nearing the end of the program. Although the cost is less to universities if attrition occurs in the first two to three years, money and time is still invested (LSU, 2006).

Students have costs resulting from lost investment of their education (Schneider & Lin, 2011). In a report tracking a cohort of doctoral students, Schneider and Yin (2011) indicated \$3.8 in lost personal income from a result of not completing their degree. Attrition opportunity costs to students also include financial aid, faculty time, and deferred entry into other careers that are more suited for them (Finegan, Siegfried, & Stock, 2006).

Reasons for Attrition

After years of in-depth studies on student attrition, researchers have concluded that attrition is costly and that there is no one reason for student attrition (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Gardner, 2010; Kember, 1990; Lovitts, 2001; Smallwood, 2004). Consistent with Tinto's Model, researchers have found multiple factors commonly categorized as personal factors, institutional factors, and the interaction between the two attributes to attrition (Allen & Nora, 1995; Cabrera et al., 1993; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Tinto, 1993).

Personal Factors Leading to Attrition

Perseverance, commitment, and self-motivation. Perseverance and self-

motivation attribute to completing the dissertation (Grover, 2007; Kuther, 2009). How to articles and popular press books have suggested in order for students to maintain a consistent level of effort while executing the dissertation, they should establish a strategy that works for them (Grover, 2007).

Some motivating behaviors addressed by Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) are:

- making your mind up that you will finish the dissertation
- choose an advisor that you may know and one that you can work with
- develop a timeline
- keep a list of all regulations and requirements
- stick to a schedule
- get in the habit of working on your dissertation every day, even if it is just for fifteen minutes
- try to choose times that would be most productive for you
- arrange a dedicated area in your home to work at
- choose a spacious, well lit area
- invest in a comfortable, healthy chair
- always carry some reading material with you
- write down thoughts as soon as they come to mind
- don't be afraid of writing in the wrong order, everything will come together
- learn to say no
- you do not have to go everywhere you are invited, and you do not have to volunteer for everything
- if you are feeling disorganized, clean your work area and sort your papers

Motivation is a major factor in completing the dissertation (Green & Kluever, 1997), and the program (Allen, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Student motivation and commitment are somewhat molded by background characteristics. However, students are affected by what happens to them after entering the program (Lovitts, 2001). In any case, to succeed in graduate school students must have the sheer determination to overcome the alarming hurdles they will face (Landon, 2008). In the absence of motivation and commitment, students may exit the doctoral program.

Feelings of isolation. If doctoral students experience feelings of isolation and do not integrate into the academic environment and faculty their chances are increased that they may not complete the program (Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009). Because nontraditional students do not have college groups or regular meetings with their peers, students experience isolation and loneliness during the dissertation stage (Kluever, 1997). Feelings of isolation are a major reason for failure (Lovitts, 2001; Ali & Kohun, 2006). Isolation feels differently in each stage of the program. The International Journal of Doctoral Studies published an article written by Ali & Kohun (2006). The authors detail their experiences in relation to the feelings of isolation among their doctoral students in a western Pennsylvania university. Although their doctoral program of Information Systems and Communications graduates students higher than the national average, they confirm, “The feeling of isolation among doctoral students is a major factor that contributes to the high attrition” p. 1). According to Ali and Kohun, (2006), there are four stages of developmental isolation:

Stage I begins with the preadmission to enrollment. This stage involves reviewing the different doctoral programs available. Much of the information involving the admission process tailors to the individual. Students are unclear about what the admission

process involves (Hawley, 2003; Lovitts, 2001). The doctoral program is different from other programs and students experience a brief period of isolation.

Stage II is the first year of program. The beginning of the program is difficult and the hardest to adapt. The students find themselves isolated in the psychological adjustment and may drop out of the program. Hawley (2003) describes the difference in the doctoral studies compared to previous studies are in the intensity of psychological demands.

Stage III involves the second year and continues through candidacy. This stage usually consists of additional coursework, a comprehensive exam, and the submission of the dissertation for approval. The comprehensive exam is a key component in the doctoral program's success. However, students take the exam alone. The amount of time needed to complete the coursework takes away from the student's social integration and this separation can cause feelings of isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2006).

Beginning the dissertation involves choosing a topic with many students taking up to two years to make this simple yet most difficult decision (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Students must focus on an issue they can be objective about and one that will keep their interest over a long period (Green & Kluever, 1997). The topic becomes the result of months of vigorous intellectual efforts and considerable emotional investments (Hawley, 2003). Students experience isolated pressure as they may spend countless hours alone determining a topic for their doctoral study (Hawley, 2003).

Stage IV is the dissertation stage and completes the process to obtain the doctorate degree. Writing the dissertation involves independent work with intermittent advice from the student's advisor. For the nontraditional student, there is no daily contact, socialization, or communication with their peers to compare any progress. This stage

generally lacks a support system. Again, students feel isolated and tend to procrastinate. In most cases, students have not experienced the intensity of this type of research before. Lovitts (2001) explains this stage as being a complex process in which feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness occur.

Several studies demonstrated the link with isolation and attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hawley, 1993; Ryan, Magro, & Sharp, 2011). In a qualitative study done to examine how Facebook can help first-year doctoral students integrate into their new culture, Ryan et al. (2011) confirmed feelings of isolation as students prepare for their academic studies. Most of this work is done alone, and away from family and peers. This isolating feeling gives reason why so many doctoral students do not complete the program (Ryan et al., 2011). When feelings of isolation are present in an online doctoral program, it can cause low levels of academic integration; thus, leading to non-completion of the program (Rovai, 2002; Ryan et al., 2011; Terrell et al., 2009).

Lack of writing and research skills. The writing and research skills needed to complete the dissertation separates the doctoral degree from other degrees. Writing the dissertation does not imitate the writing skills acquired as an undergraduate (Grady & Hoffman, 2007). A study done by D'Andrea (2002) collected data from 215 professors from colleges in 42 states. Professors were asked to rate the barriers to degree completion. The study revealed the number one barrier was difficulty with planning and writing. Students in interviews and surveys specifically noted that they felt insufficiently trained in the scientific and methodology skills need for research (D'Andrea, 2002). Therefore, some students complain about the inability of universities to provide the necessary writing and research skills to complete a dissertation (Allan & Dory, 2011; Carter, 2004). Students complain about the lack of sufficient training in writing a

proposal, how to conduct research, and the overall dissertation process (Green & Kluever, 1997).

Writing can be daunting for those students who lack confidence in their skills (Muirhead, 2004), and, thus, writing a dissertation is an independent, self-directed study that can be very intimidating to some students (Newton & Rudestam, 1992). Students become uncomfortable with the new role that lies ahead and lack confidence to continue, or even start, the dissertation process (Sigafus, 1998). Some students fear the rejection of their proposal because of their lack of writing skills (Blum & Muirhead, 2005).

Smallwood (2004) described his uncertainty regarding dissertation-writing skills. He stated,

After several years of doctoral work, I have become familiar with this path to a doctoral degree, even if I'm not entirely sure where this road is taking me. I have completed my course requirements, finished a pilot study, filed a dissertation proposal, and struggled with the IRB requirements at two institutions of higher learning. Much less clear, however, is how to write a dissertation that will go beyond the requirements for degree completion. (p.1)

Students refer to writing the dissertation as the most isolating and challenging portion of the doctoral degree often leading to withdrawing (D'Andrea, 2002). Because of the lack of research and writing experience and the feelings of being overwhelmed, students may experience a lack of confidence in their skills (Muirhead, 2004). Students need to be competent to complete the doctoral program (Grover, 2007). This can weaken self-confidence and cause emotional and psychological barriers (Muirhead, 2004). The time and difficulty involved can give even the most positive students a lack of confidence along with the temptation to withdraw (Sigafus, 1998).

Procrastination. Procrastination is a trait or social disposition to postpone a task or decision (Haycock, McCarthy, & Skay, 1988). Researchers report that most college students procrastinate while trying to complete academic tasks (Collins & Onwuegbuzie, 2001; Peled & Sarid, 2010). The biggest problem graduate students face in writing the dissertation is procrastination (Kuther, 2009). In a Delphi study on the perceived barriers to completion, 33 advisors who taught in traditional Doctor of Education programs identified procrastination as one of the top 4 reasons contributing to non-completion (Kittell-Limerick, 2005).

Procrastination is one of the top reasons doctoral students fail to complete their dissertation (Green, 1997). Procrastination is a consequence that stem from various factors. If students fear failure due to ability, procrastination is a tactic to prove one's self-worth (Novotney, 2010). Research shows that fear of failure and shifting tasks are associated with academic procrastination (Collins & Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Using factor analysis, Solomon and Rothblum (1984) found that fear of failure and task averseness are the primary reasons for procrastinating. Procrastinators can blame their fear of failure instead of lack of ability (Green, 1997).

Popular press books on the doctoral process suggest that fear of the unknown results in students second-guessing their commitment to the doctoral process (Newton & Rudestam, 1992). If students possess feelings of fear, their feelings may influence procrastination. The transition to candidacy status creates an abrupt change in the learning environment (Sigafus, 1998). Students become uncomfortable with the new role that lies ahead and procrastination is present due to their fear of failure, and lack of confidence to continue (Sigafus, 1998; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984).

Inability to cope with stress. Many studies on doctoral attrition indicate that

stress-related factors are a barrier to degree completion (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Myers, 1999; Fletcher et al., 2011). Stress often becomes a major problem while enrolled in the doctorate program. Causes of stress include academic demands, fear of failure, financial issues, the time spent away from family, examinations, and time constraints (Bowman & Bowman, 1990; Esping, 2010). Stress accumulates resulting in students feeling the task of completing the program is insurmountable and that they will never finish (Dominguez, 2006).

Previous research confirms that periods of stress relates to degree completion in Doctor of Education programs (McDermott, 2002, Nagi, 1974; Tierce, 1984). Non-completers enrolled in a cooperative doctoral program in educational leadership program reported more critical periods of stress from doctoral study compared to students who have completed a traditional doctoral program (McDermott, 2002). Therefore, the consequences of stress may contribute to non-completion of the program.

Roles and responsibilities. Balancing doctoral studies with family and work relationships is a challenge for doctoral students (Myers, 1999) more so for online doctoral students (Kember, 1989). When students enter the doctoral program, they are usually older, work full time, and have family obligations (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Lovitts, 2001). Research demonstrates that students who pursue their doctorate and work full time are at more risk of dropping out of the program (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). Washburn-Moses (2008) surveyed 619 students from eight doctoral programs in a satisfaction survey of doctoral students in a special education program. Although the programs were not identified as traditional or non-traditional programs, the researcher stated that most of the participants were full time students. Therefore, an assumption is made that the programs were of traditional nature. The research stated that, “doctoral

students felt least satisfied with their ability to juggle work and family with their overall workload” (p. 265).

Completing the doctoral program requires an enormous amount of time and conflicts with time spent with the family (Myers, 1999). These responsibilities to the family create a strain on the household and family cannot understand why there is no time for them (Ali & Kohun, 2006). In a survey of withdrawn students, Lovitts (2001) found that 70% cited personal reasons such as family, health, personal obligations and employment as reasons that doctoral students’ decide to leave their programs.

Financial. The lack of financial resources is one of the top six reasons why students do not complete their degree (Carter, 2004; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Poole, 2010). Students who receive no financial support are the most at risk of withdrawing from the program (Ivankova, 2004; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). In an ethnographic study done by Myers (1999), over 70% responded that financial difficulties were a barrier to degree completion. Tinto (1993) stated that the continuous flow of enrollment involves enough financial hardship to quit the program. Research also indicates that students who received funding such as scholarships, assistantships, fellowships or graduate assistantship, experience less stress and had a greater chance to complete their degree than students who relied on other sources of funding or received no funding (Ivankova, 2004; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

Frustration. In past research studies, doctoral students have repeatedly stated how frustrating the dissertation can be (Piantanida & Garman, 1999; Church, 2009). A grounded theory study examined the connectivity and persistence in a limited residency doctoral program (Terrell et al., 2012). The students in that study reported they had little or no communication while carrying out their dissertation work. Researchers

reported that students became frustrated “by slow response times, lack of mentorship and inability to help the students identify and begin work on a research topic suitable for a dissertation” (Terrell et al., 2012, p. 3).

Frustration can occur when students fail to gain approval of their proposal after several attempts. Frustration creates an obstacle for students that are extremely difficult to overcome (Fletcher, 2009). The repeated occurrence of frustration can result in low levels of persistence, therefore resulting in the student withdrawing from the doctoral program (Terrell et al., 2012).

Institutional Factors Leading to Attrition

Lack of Program Structure

The definition of program structure is “the overall form of a program, with particular emphasis on the individual components of the program and the interrelationships between these components” (Daintith, 2004). Program structure is extremely important because without structure, one cannot complete the doctoral program (Kuther, 2009). Students must learn the flow of program structure to ensure that they fulfill all the requirements to complete the doctorate (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, & Abel, 2006).

Program structure links with student completion rates and time to degree studies (D’Andrea, 2002). The NCES (2009) estimated that 90% of graduate students enrolled are suffering in the ABD stage because they lack the knowledge to complete the process (Educational Research Institute, 2009). Appropriate program structure provides and assures individuals they will have the resources required to succeed (Sigafus, 1998).

Fletcher (2009) conducted a phenomenological study that explored the lived experiences of traditional doctoral students involving persistence to degree completion.

The study demonstrated that when faculty supported students, persistence to degree completion increased. Therefore, the lack of faculty support decreases persistence, and may lead to non-completion of the program (Fletcher, 2009; Tinto, 1993).

Lack of Support and Guidance from Advisor and Committee

Past research has acknowledged that if students experience a lack of support from their advisor or committee during the dissertation stage, it can result in non-completion of the program (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Fletcher, 2009; Green & Kluever, 1997; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). The absence of structure during the dissertation leaves students with feelings of confusion and uncertainty (Allan & Dory, 2001). Doctoral students depend upon their advisors to be their support system (Katz, 1997; Sigafus, 1998) and perceive human factors to be the most significant asset for their program completion (Stallone, 2004). Through survey research, Allan and Dory (2001) found that 20% of the student responses included the inadequacy of faculty guiding them through the beginning stages of their dissertation. Another 18% responded with the fact that faculty were not supportive, were unavailable, or seemed uninterested in their guidance needs.

In the last decade, researchers have concluded the biggest factor in non-completion of the doctoral program is the lack of support and knowledge to complete the dissertation process (Green & Kluever, 1977; Stallone, 2004). Golde and Dore (2001) found that many doctoral students do not clearly understand what the doctoral study entails, how the process works, and how to navigate it effectively. The dissertation stage is where many doctoral students fall behind and do not complete the program (Grady & Hoffman, 2007). It is the advisor's responsibility is to provide support to prevent this from happening (Grady & Hoffman, 2007).

When students do not have an effective advisor, four main problematic categories arise that can affect student persistence, (a) lack of advising, (b) lack of feedback, (c) lack of mentorship, and (d) disconnect between advisor and student research interests. Most students who did not have an effective advisor believed their advisors were too busy to interact, give advice, and provide proper feedback. Students who were engaged in negative student-advisor relationships had setbacks in their academic progress. All of the students in the study felt that if the advisor had similar research interests, their connections would have resulted in a positive relationship (Fletcher, 2009). Results from Golde and Dore's (2001) doctoral education survey also affirmed the importance of a student-advisor relationship and that the connection could have ramifications for the rest of one's life (Golde & Dore, 2001).

One of Fletcher's (2009) concluding statements on his study was, "Thus, the importance of the advisor-advisee relationship is confirmed in this study as participants described a lack of a close relationship with their advisors as being a barrier to progress" (p. 9). Mutual interests usually result in positive actions (Fletcher, 2009). Dissertation advisors should symbolize and assist academic, professional, and personal roles engaging students in scholastic studies (Katz, 1997). An ideal relationship between the dissertation advisor and the doctoral candidate occurs when a student receives constant and timely feedback on progress made. Interactions and feedback should be frequent enough to maintain periodic dialogue on the issues and research questions raised by the student (Lage-Otero, 2006).

Organizational Culture

Another main cause of attrition deeply embeds in the organizational culture of graduate school and the structure and process of graduate education (Lovitts 2001). New

faculty and students do not immediately acquire the organizational culture formed by the traditional patterns, norms, values, beliefs and behaviors. The graduate student handbook supplies the graduate students with the written rules of a university's organizational culture. Students learn the unwritten rules of the university's culture by trial and error. If students do not adjust to the organizational culture and learn these unspoken rules, it could have a negative effect upon student persistence (Carter, 2004; Swail, 2004). These negative factors may attribute to not completing the program.

Academic and social integration. An individual's departure decision depends on the extent to which the individual becomes academically and socially integrated into the institution determines (Tinto, 1993). According to Lovitts (2001), more students leave their programs for "integration-related reasons than for any other reason" (p. 176). Graduate student attrition is a function of the distribution of structures and opportunities for integration. The degree to which universities integrate students into the graduate program varies among universities (Lovitts, 2001). Student persistence has a direct impact on the degree of integration a university cultures. Therefore, the retention of students is the university's responsibility to commence initiatives that motivate integration among students (Fletcher, 2009).

Lovitts (2001) surveyed 175 students and questioned them as to what could have prevented their attrition. Almost half of the students responded with improving social integration. The student's social self-image and the amount of student-advisor interaction define social integration (Bitzer & Bruin, 2004). In particular, the students felt that their experiences would have been better if the faculty or their advisor provided them with appropriate professional socialization experiences (Lovitts, 2001, p. 184). In all, the students surveyed wished they had more integration with the faculty and/or their advisor

(Lovitts, 2001).

Online Attrition Research

Although some research has been done on the online student, little has been done focusing on the online learning environment and the unique characteristics of the participants, especially those pursuing a doctoral degree (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Swail, 2004). The research relating to online attrition has primarily been in community college and undergraduate programs. Factors related to non-completion in online programs are similar to those identified for traditional doctoral programs. However, research has revealed how these factors transpire differently to online students and how they may have led to non-completion of the program (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Miller & Lu, 2002). Previous research also examined some initiatives that may help increase degree completion. The following paragraphs examine the individual and institutional factors associated with non-completion of a doctoral program, and how these factors differ from a traditional doctoral program to an online doctoral program.

Individual Factors

Past research completed on traditional doctoral programs found factors that are similar to current findings examined in online doctoral programs. For example, past research on traditional doctoral programs confirm similar factors such as a lack of integration and feelings of isolation for non-completion of an online program (Angelino et al., 2007; Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006). When students find it difficult to get the help and support they need (Nash, 2005), they may experience anxiety and frustration due to the lack of clear feedback from the instructor (Hara & Kling, 2001; Nash, 2005). Personal or family issues such as finances, lack of skills, frustration, children, and job needs have also been determined to cause non-completion of both traditional and online programs

(Martinez, 2003).

Institutional Factors

Students need program structure and support in the online environment. Because students are performing independent research, faculty should train, advise, and encourage opportunities for academic and social integration to avoid non-completion of the program (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). Young (2006) contends that “online learning should not be an isolated, independent activity but rather one in which students and instructors are partners in learning” (p. 73). High online attrition rates may be caused by a lack of interaction between students in the online course environment (Carr, 2000). In most instances, learners should not be engaged with course content in isolation. Rather, they should be engaged in creating meaning by interacting with peers and the instructor and collaborating with classmates (Bolliger & Inan, 2012). This is consistent with previous research that suggests institutes should provide a culture of support academically and socially in online courses (Swail, 2004).

Difference between Online and Residential

Factors involved in the non-completion of a doctoral program are identified in this study. The purpose of this research was to identify and confirm factors specifically to the online learner in the Doctor of Education program. The following paragraphs outline how these factors are unique to the online doctoral student.

Balancing doctoral studies with family and work relationships is a challenge for doctoral students, but even more so for online doctoral students (Kember, 1989). Online doctoral students are part-time in comparison to traditional, full-time students. The online student generally has family circumstances such as housing, and additional financial issues such as supporting his or her family (Kember, 1989). Research

demonstrates that students who pursue their doctorate and work full time are at more risk of dropping out of the program (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). Therefore, the online doctoral student has an increased chance of not completing the program.

There are several advantages of enrolling in online courses such as convenience, flexibility, and accessibility. The online doctoral student can access programs and institutions from anywhere in the world that has internet access. The traditional doctoral student, usually older with a family, may need to relocate for program enrollment. Therefore, the online student can structure their study time around their job and family-related responsibilities without relocating. Although convenient for the online doctoral student, when students are away from the institution's environment, their individual and family situations tend to become a priority (Kember, 1989). If pressures arise from work or family related issues, this increases the chances of the online doctoral student to become a non-completer.

Another factor considered to be of more importance to online students is their technology skills. Students have found online courses to be much harder than anticipated and they lacked the technology background to complete the course online (Moody, 2004; Nash, 2005). Students in the online doctoral program are often older and may not be proficient in the technology skills needed for the online doctoral program. Younger students also referred to as the net generation, have spent their lives using computers, cell phone, videogames, and digital music players (Prensky, 2001). The older, online, doctoral student may have increased levels of anxiety about engaging with the online environment and be overwhelmed by the unfamiliar methods of online learning (Tyler-Smith, 2006).

The online doctoral student that has a strong locus of control will show increased

motivation and persistence in an online program (Martinez, 2003). The locus of control affects online students more than traditional, undergraduate students because they are influenced by external forces such as computer problems, work issues, family needs, and competition of time from other activities (Martinez, 2003). These factors are usually not applicable to traditional students.

Social integration and integration with the institute is found to be an essential component for the online student (Garrison, 2000; Rovai, 2002a) and with the traditional, undergraduate student (Tinto, 1993). If social integration does not exist among students, research has determined that it may cause feelings of isolation and decrease chances of completing the program (Motteram & Forrester, 2005). Although online students may still experience a feeling of disconnectedness due to limited social contact with the institution, integration with the institute is less relevant to online students (Kember, 1989). In addition, online doctoral students require support of their employer and peers where they work (Tyler-Smith, 2006).

Summary

Eighty-three percent of higher education universities offer online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2011), and graduate degree programs offered through online learning has steadily increased (NCES, 2003). Doctoral attrition rates at universities range from 50% to 70%. In addition, online attrition is a concern, as researchers claim a higher attrition rate among online students (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2000; DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Parker, 1999). Despite significant attempts to improve attrition through years of research, attrition rates reported in US universities have remained consistently high (Wylie, 2004). To this extent, higher education must be committed to the success of doctoral students. Students of higher education represent a stronghold on

the nation's progress and superiority (Gilliam & Kritsonis, 2006).

The review of the literature demonstrated past theoretical frameworks on attrition to be the result of failed interaction between the student and the institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1997). Previous literature also stated that if interaction between the student and the institution is non-existent, students are likely to withdraw resulting in non-completion of the doctoral program. This previous research has focused on doctoral attrition in traditional, residential programs (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Fletcher et al., 2011; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000); very few studies have examined online doctoral attrition (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Any attempt to lower attrition rates necessitates further understanding of the negative doctoral experiences that are presently available (Lawley, 1999; Perry et al., 2008); therefore, universities need to acquire the knowledge that allows expanding policies that support doctoral students and prevent their attrition (Tinto, 1994). Thus, understanding the factors that relate to online doctoral attrition can help universities find solutions to prevent their students from not completing the program.

This dissertation will add to research on attrition of online learners by identifying factors contributing to and/or impeding students' persistence in online learning by using a qualitative method. Whereas the amount of qualitative research pertaining to doctoral persistence and attrition is limited in this area (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011), this qualitative data and its analysis presents the results by exploring the views of participants (Creswell, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Therefore, it is the intent of this study to understand the perceptions of students who have lived through the phenomenon of non-completion in an online Doctor of Education

program and provide the knowledge and understanding that can help reduce attrition and improve the rates for non-completers for this specific population. Whereas previous studies do not focus on the unique background characteristics of the online doctoral student, this research listens to married participants, possess parental and family responsibilities, employed, own homes, and possess additional characteristics than those of the traditional student (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Kember, 1989). The proposed study focuses to partially fill this gap in understanding the issues of doctoral attrition and contribute to research on students' persistence in the online learning environment and unique characteristics of the participants.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of students who broke enrollment in online Doctor of Education programs in universities across the United States. Guided by Tinto's Model (1975, 1993, 1997, 2002), this study focused on the experiences of doctoral students who broke enrollment during their pursuit of an online doctoral degree in education program. The following questions framed this study:

1. What are the barriers to degree completion as perceived by individuals who broke enrollment from an online Doctor of Education program in the United States?
2. What is the essence of the lived experience of online Doctor of Education students who broke enrollment in online doctoral programs in the United States?
3. What can universities do to remove some of the obstacles experienced by doctoral students while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?
4. What can students do to prepare and overcome the obstacles experienced while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?

Design

I chose a qualitative research methodology to understand the holistic experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of doctoral students who broke enrollment in their online Doctor of Education program. Assumptions in qualitative research include that nothing is trivial as it may provide a clue to an understanding of what is being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Unlike quantitative research where statistics provide evidence of findings, qualitative research is descriptive in nature to present findings on the phenomenon being

investigated (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Studies conducted using the qualitative method concentrate on the perceptions of individuals and the understanding of the situation at hand taking place in their natural settings (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2006). In qualitative research, topics emerge as the study progresses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This emergent design allowed me to focus on issues that the participants perceived to be pertinent.

This study used the hermeneutic phenomenological (van Manen, 1997) research design. I chose this approach to gain an understanding of an individual's experience and provide a universal description of all participant experience as a whole (van Manen, 1997). Specifically, this design permits the collection of data from each participant while simultaneously capturing the core experience for all participants. The phenomenon investigated is the experience of a non-completer in an online Doctor of Education program.

Phenomenology has historical philosophical writings from a German mathematician named Edmund Husserl (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). Husserl's meaning of hermeneutic phenomenological research is a descriptive study of consciousness for the purpose in discovering the structure of experience (Ricoeur, 1996). As Husserl (2001) explained, the researcher looks for the basic structure that exists to give meaning to some experience. The experience involves an outward appearance and an inward consciousness. Researchers such as Moustakas (1994), Stewart and Mickunas (1990), and van Manen (1990) use Husserl's foundational work but take a different approach to phenomenology (van Manen, 1997). The hermeneutic approach of phenomenology assumes that participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied, that they view these experiences as conscious ones (Van Manen, 1997), and the evolution of descriptions are the core of these experiences, not

explanations or analyses (Moustakas, 1994). Stewart and Mickunas (1990) elaborated further and emphasized four philosophical perspectives in phenomenology: (a) the search for wisdom (b) to suspend all judgments until a more certain basis is attained (c) consciousness is always directed toward an object (d) and the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of the individual. It is with the above philosophies that I chose this type of methodology in studying and analyzing the lived experiences of broken enrollment in an online Doctor of Education program. This qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study relied on the collection of data centered on actual experiences and courses of actions taken by doctoral candidates to complete their degree rather than experiences under experimental conditions created by me. Data collection involved survey questions, participant timelines, and interviews. Each was descriptive in nature; therefore, statistical analysis played no role in this study.

Procedures

In choosing the hermeneutic approach to phenomenology, it was important to understand the lived experiences of the participants in order to interpret the meanings of these life experiences (van Manen, 1997). Van Manen (1997) suggested the following fundamental structure for hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenological inquiry:

1. The researcher chooses a topic to which they can commit.
2. The phenomenon being investigated is an experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it.
3. The researcher develops themes by sorting through descriptive words of the lived experience. These themes reflect the characteristics of the phenomenon.
4. The researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived

experiences in addition, writes a description of the phenomenon using diverse meanings describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.

5. The researcher understands the philosophical perspective and the concept of studying how the participants experience a phenomenon by maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon.

6. The research on the experience is broken down into parts, creating a whole context. Hermeneutic phenomenological research design comprises all the data parts into producing a whole context of the study (van Manen, 1997).

The above procedures provide a supporting foundation to use throughout this research.

Participants

In order to understand the phenomenon of broken enrollment and all that is associated with it, only participants who lived the experience were selected. The method for selecting participants was purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling seeks information-rich cases to acquire relevant knowledge depth in the study (Patton, 2002). In addition, to acquire participants for the study, snowball sampling is used. Snowballing is a method of expanding the sample by asking participants to recommend others to complete the survey and be interviewed (Babbie, 1995).

Because I was not acquainted with anyone who met the criteria for this study, I relied solely on referrals and requests from individuals sought through informal networks. These informal networks are relationships or sources of information that I used to exchange resources and services. After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University to conduct the study (Appendix I), I sent emails to contacts in search of qualified participants (Appendix A). Contacts included previous

and current coworkers, student acquaintances, business associates, and friends. I used a list serve of 350 superintendents from every school district in the state of Massachusetts to solicit potential participants. In addition, I used a list serve of all employees of the school district where I work and a list serve from school based student information software. The last contact group was an informal network of fellow classmates from my attending university.

While there are no specifics upon the number of participants in a hermeneutic phenomenological study, sample sizes range from two to 25 (Klenke, 2008). Boyd (2001) looks at two to 10 participants as an adequate saturation point, and Creswell (2007) recommends in-depth interviews with up to 10 people. The sample size of this study involved in-depth interviews of 10 individuals. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of this sample.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 10)

Name	Age Range	Race	Gender	Enrolled FT/PT	Courses Complete	Year Enrolled	Year Withdrawn	Time in Program	Dissertation Begun?	University Attended	Marital Status	Children under 15	Ed. Program Enrolled
Joey	30-40	White	M	FT	4 to 5	Fall 2008	Fall 2009	1 yr.	No	A	M	2	Ed.D.
Raymond	30-40	White	M	FT	3 to 4	Summer 2008	Fall 2010	2 yrs.	No	A	M	3	Ed.D.
Cindy	40-50	White	F	FT	11 to 12	Spring 2009	Summer 2011	3 yrs.	Summer 2011	A	M	2	Ed.D.
Dean	50-60	White	M	PT	2	Spring 2008	Spring 2009	1 yr.	No	B	M	0	Ed.D.
Millie	40-50	White	F	PT	13 +	Fall 2006	Fall 2010	4 yrs.	Summer 2009	A	M	1 deceased	Ed.D.
Ellen	50-60	White	F	FT	7 to 8	Spring 2007	Fall 2010	3 yrs.	Fall 2010	B	M	0	Ed.D.
Louise	50-60	White	F	FT	7 to 8	Spring 2007	Spring 2009	2 yrs.	No	A	M	0	Ed.D.
Glenna	40-50	White	F	PT	13+	Spring 2009	Spring 2011	2 yrs.	No	C	S	0	Ed.D.
Sutter	30-40	White	M	PT	2	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	1 yr.	No	D	M	3	Ed.D.
Kimberly	30-40	White	F	FT	2	Spring 2008	Summer 2009	1 yr.	No	A	M	3	Ed.D.

Setting

The data collected was from participants residing primarily in the central and eastern regions of the United States. Because I acquired participants through informal networking (i.e., snowball sampling), there were no specified sites; however, the survey requested the name of the university that the participant attended. Through online research, I verified that each university reported on the returned survey was an accredited university for an online Doctor of Education program. All of the universities are located in the United States. Table 2 lists generalized information from the four universities reported:

Table 2

University Sites Attended by Participants

Name	Type of Program	Type of Residences	Participant Enrolled	Public or Private	Region of the US	Cost Per Credit Hr.
A	Asynchronous	1-three day	Cindy Kimberly Millie Raymond Louise Joey	Private	North Central	\$770
B	Asynchronous	1-five day	Ellen Dean	Private	Southeastern	\$910
C	Asynchronous	2-four day	Glenna	Private	Central Region	\$560
D	Asynchronous	1-five day 1-three day 1-eight day	Sutter	Private	Northeastern	\$535

All universities were private sites located in the central or eastern region of the United States. Six participants attended the same university while two attended university B, one attended C, and one attended D. All 10 participants enrolled in an Doctor of Education program.

The Researcher's Role

In accordance with van Manen's (1997) guidelines for conducting a hermeneutic phenomenology, I chose to research this topic given my personal interest in the phenomenon. Although passionate about the topic, I was certain to pay close attention to the perspectives of the participants while I was conducting the interviews.

In this qualitative study, I conducted the data collection along with the analysis of the data. Because of this dual role, my credibility was important (Patton, 2002). Patton

(2002) advised the researcher to disclose any funding of the project. This research is self-funded. I am a 52-year-old female enrolled in an online Doctor of Education program at Liberty University, Virginia. After obtaining my Associates Degree in Secretarial Science in 1980, I became a lifelong learner in the pursuit of higher education. While working full-time in the private sector for 20 years, I had an opportunity to work in the field of public education. The superintendent of schools hired me as the district's first data administrator. After serving the public school system for thirteen years, I accepted a job offer in a vocational school as their Coordinator of Data and Research. I hold an administrative position that involves working at the local and state level of public education. Students, teachers, and administrators surround my life. Education has not only been the root of my success, but my career. The desire to learn and achieve has always been a life-long commitment. These characteristics have led the path for me to obtain the highest honor in education, the doctoral degree.

When I attended the final course requirement for my doctoral program, the professor announced the possibility that 60% of the students in the room may not complete the doctorate program. That meant approximately 12 of the 20 students sitting in the classroom had the potential to remain in ABD status or not complete the course requirements. I was puzzled and thought, how could this be? After completing all the course requirements, why would some students fail to complete their doctorate? In an effort to understand the experiences of those students who become non-completers, I was compelled to learn more. This profound interest, along with my own pursuit to complete the program, was the reason for choosing this topic for my dissertation.

The researcher is the human instrument in qualitative studies (Patton, 2002). Because this study involved human experiences, I needed to acquire the complexity of

the human experience while at the same time adjusting and reacting to the environment (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). It was important to detach previous perceptions I gained while experiencing the doctoral process. In an effort to separate these perceptions, I have exempted any participants in my university of study. In addition, while interviewing participants, I listened carefully to participants as if no prior experience existed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I am aware of my feelings about non-completers and was careful not to let previous judgments influence interactions with the participants. During the interviews, two column memos separated participant commentary from my thoughts as the interviewer. In adhering to van Manen's (1997) procedures, the phenomenon investigated views the experience of the participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collected from participants progressed through surveys, timelines, and interviews. Participant emails describe the purpose of the research, the participant selection criteria, and request the recipient to complete a survey using the link provided and/or forward the email to another possible participant. The email requested participants to complete the revised Rutgers's survey (Appendix B).

When the participant clicked on the survey link sent in the email, an informed consent page appeared (Appendix C). The participants read the information and then click a box indicating their consent to participate prior to beginning the survey. The consent form also requested the participant's name, email address, and telephone number to provide contact information to schedule an interview and contained a clause to allow me to contact participants for an interview.

Surveys were arranged in the order they were received on SurveyMonkey. Participants were contacted from the contact information listed on the survey. Upon

calling the participant by telephone for the interview, I introduced myself and verbally asked the participant's permission to record the interview. I then began to ask the interview questions (Appendix G). I completed transcriptions within 24 hours from the recorded interview (Appendix M).

Methods of Data Collection

When conducting qualitative research, it is essential to use multiple sources of data in order to allow for data triangulation and thereby increases the trustworthiness of the study (Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, multiple sources of data are collected from participants through surveys, timelines, and interviews.

Survey

The first method of data collection was an online survey. The electronic survey included a letter of confidentiality and informed consent. The survey utilized and adapted for this study originated from The Office of Institutional Research at Rutgers's University; however, modifications made to the survey resulted in questions that were relevant for this research. Permission to use Rutgers' survey was requested (Appendix C) and granted (Appendix D).

As a graduation requirement, Rutgers uses a process to collect almost 100% feedback from their doctoral program evaluation survey. When students receive a graduation packet, they receive written directions on how to complete the web-based survey. The directions include a user name and password. Students log in using their password, complete the survey, and print a copy. Students must bring the printed copy of the survey with them for an exit interview. If the student does not bring in the printed copy, the person in charge of the exit interview will try to access the survey online using the student's password. If access is denied, the computer confirms completion of

the survey. If access is not denied, the student must complete the survey before the exit interview continues. The chances of a student leaving the university without taking the survey are almost impossible. Approximately every two to three years, detailed reports are used at the program level. This allows the dean and the department to look at the survey results and make any appropriate changes deemed necessary.

Although the intention of the survey designed by Rutgers University is to have their graduates evaluate their doctoral program after graduating, the survey contained relevant questions to this study. The goal of the survey was to collect demographic data and to see how students rated the university's services and the doctoral process. The survey questions were intended for the participants to reflect upon and rate their lived experiences of the doctoral process at the attending university. The original Rutgers's survey was modified to collect data pertinent to this research. Unlike Rutgers's use of face-to-face administration, the survey was administered via an online survey tool, SurveyMonkey. The experience of the participant was the focus in designing the questions pertaining to enrollment in the online doctoral program. Questions were not meant to intimidate, embarrass or incriminate. Questions also focused on some of the concerns students may be experiencing.

Section I of the survey asked general and demographic data. Section II of the survey pertained to program satisfaction and program support. Participants were asked to fill in an answer in relation to their level of satisfaction. The four choices of satisfaction are (1) very satisfied, (2) satisfied, (3) dissatisfied, and (4) very dissatisfied. Section III, V and VII focused on the climate of program, quality of interactions, the qualifying exam, dissertation, and the advisor's behavior. These questions were intended to aid in determining the perception of the participants by agreeing or

disagreeing with the statements. The choices are, (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) disagree, and (4) strongly disagree.

Section IV and Section VIII request students to rate the course work and the overall evaluation of the university and program as (1) excellent, (2) very good, (3) fair, and (4) poor. Section VIII question 3, asks the participant if they were to start the graduate program over again, would they—with answers of (1) definitely would, (2) probably would, (3) probably would not, and (4) definitely would not.

Section IX, the comment section, is crucial to this study. This section asked three questions to help in defining the answers to all of the research questions. The first open-ended question asked the participants to describe their experience thus far and include details of their successes and struggles. This question also asked them to reflect upon things that could have been done differently to make their journey easier. The second question asked, “Based on your experience, what changes would you recommend in your doctoral program in the future?” The last open-ended question asked participants to supply any additional information about their doctoral experience. The purpose of these questions was to gather information about the participants’ experiences in their doctoral programs.

There are two types of surveys, open-ended and closed-ended. The survey chosen involves both types of questions. The open-ended qualitative questions allow respondents to answer in their own words. The closed-ended questions are in the form of the Likert scale. Likert scale questions provide more insight to determine respondents’ attitudes and perceptions than a multiple choice or categorical question survey because it forces the person to agree or disagree with the subject. A four-point scale is used to rate most of the questions in the research survey giving an even number of responses as opposed to an

odd number. Item responses were added to create an overall score and numbers were interpreted in a summative scale.

The identifying sections of the revised Rutgers's Doctoral Program Evaluation Survey that correlate to each research question are clarified below:

1. What are the barriers to degree completion as perceived by individuals who broke enrollment from an online Doctor of Education program in the United States?

- 1) Section II – Satisfaction with Program.
- 2) Section III – Climate of Program and Quality of Interactions.
- 3) Section IV – Program Course Work.
- 4) Section V – Qualifying Examination and Dissertation.
- 5) Section VI –Program Support.
- 6) Section VII – Dissertation Chair/Main Advisor (committee support).
- 7) Section VIII – Overall Evaluation of the University and Your Program.
- 8) Section IX – Comments.

2. What is the essence of the lived experience of online Doctor of Education students who broke enrollment in online doctoral programs in the United States?
(Section IX, Comments)

3. What can universities do to remove some of the obstacles experienced by doctoral students while attempting to complete their online doctorate degree? (Section IX, Comments)

4. What can students do to prepare and overcome the obstacles experienced while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree? (Section IX, Comments)

Survey validity. As an added security to validity, I requested a group of students from Liberty University to review the survey questions for validity. Two peers agreed to

review the interview questions for clarity. We discussed the survey using instant messaging. After reading the survey questions, we deleted two sections: Quality of Life at University (as online students are unable to experience residential culture); and Employment Status and Expectations (as the participants were non-completers). We modified the section that did not apply to this research—Climate of the Program and the Quality of Interactions—as we determined some questions concentrated on resident students rather than online students. (An example deleted question referred to the rapport between faculty and tensions among faculty that affect students. The consensus was to omit these questions from the survey, as they did not pertain to online students.)

We also discussed the section on Qualifying Examination and Dissertation and although an important subject, we decided to omit the majority of this section as it was unknown how many participants would be in the dissertation stage. (We removed questions regarding workshops, publications, presentation, recitation leader, teaching assistant teaching preparation, departmental funding, and regional or national meetings due to their irrelevancy in this research. Any questions pertaining to serving as a recitation leader, teaching assistant, teaching preparation, departmental funding, regional or national meetings we also omitted.)

The feedback received from my peers' helped solidify accuracy, truthfulness, and concentrated on providing adequate topic coverage. The revised survey helped in acquiring knowledge to understand the perception of the participants by allowing them to reflect upon their experience in the program.

I also asked the members of my dissertation committee, considered a panel of content experts, to review the survey questions. Expert opinions, literature reviews, and open-ended questions helped validate the survey. The original survey consisted of 21

pages. After the committee review, they suggested further shortening the survey by omitting some irrelevant sections. After receiving feedback from my peers and after a second review from my committee, it was suggested that I delete the section on evaluating the program. I felt this section was important because if participants evaluate the graduate program, the answers would enrich the analysis process by providing a more complete, comprehensive picture of the participant's experiences and perceptions during enrollment in an online Doctor of Education program. To gain an insight of the perceptions of a non-completer, I felt it was imperative to understand how the participant perceived the university. In allowing the participants to rate their perception of the university, the survey permitted a better understanding of the phenomenon. The focus on collecting the survey answers was not to evaluate the services and programs offered by the university, but to understand how participants perceived the university as meeting their needs and goals. In collecting these perceptions through the survey, the emerging themes generated from textual analysis strengthened and supported the interview transcriptions. Ultimately, I convinced my committee to include this section. The revised survey consisted of eight pages of questions relevant to this research.

SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey is a web-based survey tool used to host participant surveys. I chose this electronic survey method out of convenience and ease of use. The web-based survey eliminates paper and the need for participants to return the survey by mail. SurveyMonkey uses a software tool to aid in combining the different styles of research. Computerized results help to automate and speed up some analysis tasks, allow instant access to data once coded, facilitate more complex questioning of the data, and provide creative aids to stimulate theoretical development (Barry, 1998). Computerized results can lead to greater awareness of the need to integrate the different

methods of methodology into qualitative work (Barry, 1998).

Through convenience and snowball sampling procedures, surveys collected the participant contact information. Contact information was stored in a participant file alphanumerically, by name. Participants' email addresses and telephone numbers were used as contact information. Each email was sent with the intention of soliciting participants. A link was copied and pasted into the outgoing message delivered through an email client tool within SurveyMonkey. The beginning pages of the survey included a letter of confidentiality and informed consent. This allowed me to track responses. I sent follow-up reminders by electronic mail to those who did not respond, and to one participant who needed to complete the survey. After collecting 10 completed surveys, which is considered sufficient for phenomenological studies (Boyd, 2001; Creswell, 2007), I no longer attempted to acquire additional participants. I proceeded to the second phase of data collection, participant interviews.

Participant Interviews

Interviews are the primary form of data collection for qualitative inquiries (Creswell, 2007; Klenke, 2008). Participants were asked to participate in a 20-minute to 40-minute interview to examine their experience in an online Doctor of Education program. The purpose of interviewing participants is to gain their perspective of their experiences as a non-completer in an online Doctor of Education program. Qualitative, semi-structured interviewing assumes that the participant will provide meaningful, knowable, and explicit knowledge of the doctoral process (Patton, 1990). While interviewing participants, I looked to acquire the thoughts of knowledgeable participants about their experiences in the operations, processes, expectations, and program outcomes. The quality of the information obtained during an interview is dependent on the

interviewer (Patton, 1990). I was careful not to deviate from the sequence and set-up of interview questions.

Interviews consisted of standardized, open-ended questions (Patton, 1990). I chose this method of questioning because the exact instrument used in the evaluation is available for inspection by those who will use the findings in this study. In addition, open-ended questioning allows the interview to focus on efficiency. Analysis is also facilitated by making responses easy to find and compare (Patton, 1990).

The interview process was semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews allow informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Cohen, 2006). Questions are arranged with the intention of taking the respondent through the same sequence and asking the same questions with the same words. This form of questioning minimizes variation in the questions and allows for limited flexibility (Patton, 1990). Asking the same questions reduces the need for interviewer judgment during the interview. Being a novice researcher, choosing this type of interview was an important consideration.

Interview questions are in the form of opinion and value questions aimed at understanding the cognitive and interpretive processes of the participants while focusing on their opinions, judgments, and values as opposed to actions and behaviors. Answers to these questions reveal what people think about some experience or issue (Patton, 1990). They tell about people's goals, intentions, desires, and expectations. Examples of opinion questions begin with, what do you believe? What do you think about? What would you like to see happen? What is your opinion of? (van Manen, 1997).

Feeling questions elicit emotions, feeling responses of people to their experiences and thoughts. How do you feel about that? These questions are set up for

adjective responses such as anxious, happy, afraid, intimidated, and confident and so on. Participant interviews were conducted using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach with open-ended research questions according to van Manen (1990).

Some of the interview questions were derived from a review of the literature and others were based on the procedures used by Patton (1990) and van Manen (1990) to help answer the research questions. Additional interview questions were referenced from a dissertation completed on the lived experience of eight participants from any program in the late-stage doctoral student attrition in counselor education (Willis & Carmichael, 2011). The research question for Willis and Carmichael's (2011) study was what is the nature of the participants' experience of doctoral attrition in counselor education?

All of the interview questions collect data to answer the research questions (Appendix G). Questions were aligned and coordinated with the literature review to gather information about how participants perceived and experienced the doctorate program. The collection of data aimed at the experiences of the phenomenon and to probe deeper into the influences that affected the online doctoral experience. Questions were also designed to investigate the perceived meaning of how participants experience setbacks, or obstacles while enrolled. The design of the interview questions intend to pull out the perceived ways participants felt they could overcome these barriers.

If participants became too vague in their answers, I asked them to elaborate. For example, one participant described the degree of social integration as, "None." When asked, "None at all?" He said, "None." When another described having an "eye opening" experience of "isolation," I asked, "Can you give me an example?" Whenever participants described their feelings, such as their perception of the program, I would

add, “Why did you feel this way?” These prompts were asked to solicit additional information and in line with qualitative research recommendations (Patton, 1990).

To interview participants, my preferred method was face-to-face interviews. Because of the distance involved with the participants, only two face-to-face interviews occurred. Eight participant interviews transpired via the telephone as per their preference. As the process of enlisting qualified participants was not an easy task, I interviewed participants at their discretion. After receiving permission from the participant, each interview was recorded for credibility purposes. Telephone interviews revealed emotional reactions that surveys could not. For example, one participant broke down several times while being interviewed on the telephone. I could tell by the crackling in her voice that she was reliving the memories of losing her son while enrolled. When another participant described the incident that made her decide to withdraw from the program, emotions ran high as her voice volume elevated. After each interview, I transcribed the interview into text by typing the exact words from the participant’s recorded words.

In qualitative research, it was important that I addressed validity. Validity refers to the accuracy of a measure and the trustworthiness of the data (Maxwell, 2005). Although validity is not statistically measured, it is my job as a researcher to interpret and assess the data collected. I took several measures to address the face and content validity of this study. Face validity is the likelihood that a question may be misinterpreted. It is the obvious or common truth (Krippendorff, 2004). Content validity determines whether the research provides adequate data to cover the research topic. During the interview, it is important to ask questions related to the research. If any of the questions were out of context, participants may feel they were irrelevant to the study and become uncooperative. Staying focused during the interviews was also important to

establish face validity. If the questions were misinterpreted, additional components of validity would have been harder to establish (Krippendorff, 2004). All the questions were reviewed by me to reiterate their relevance to the study by referencing them to one of the research questions (Appendix G). In addition, to establish content and face validity, I asked the members of my committee of which I consider content experts, to review the questions. Expert opinions, literature reviews, and open-ended questions helped support to establish content validity in this research (Kumar, 2005).

Participant Timelines

The final phase of data collection involved participant timelines of their lived experience with the phenomenon. A timeline is a participatory data collection method for gathering time-related information (Weiss & Bolton, 2000). The timeline used in this study documented the sequence of key events in the history of the participant's experience through their Doctor of Education program journey (Appendix L). Dates move in progression with major events that have occurred in their lives. A major event may include the date of earning an undergraduate degree, entry date into a doctoral program, the withdrawal date of the doctoral program, or any other significant events. This timeline provides important background to the participant's individual situation and supports data triangulation.

Data Analysis

The analysis of phenomenological data begins with the methodology of reductions, the analysis of topics, categories, and a search for all possible meanings. I relied on instinct, imagination, and ideas to portray the experience (Miller & Salkind, 2002). In hermeneutic analysis, the researcher reviews the written text and looks for the meaning of text for people in their situation, using their words, telling their stories (van

Manen, 1997).

To analyze the written text in interview and survey responses, themes are isolated to describe the lived-experience of the non-completer. I used three approaches to analyze the participant responses: (a) the wholistic or sententious approach (b) the selective or highlighting approach, and (c) the detailed or line-by-line approach (van Manen, 1997).

The wholistic reading approach involves reading the responses and asking, what sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole (van Manen, 1997)? The answer to this question formulates a phrase. For example, when asked to describe the perception of the doctoral program compared to that of their experience, the answers revealed that in general, most participants found the program to be “more difficult than that they thought.”

In the selective reading approach, I read the interview transcript several times, each time looking for a statement or phrase that revealed the phenomenon being described (van Manen, 1997). These highlighted words throughout the text helped determine a common theme for the experience (Appendix J).

In the detailed or line-by-line approach, each sentence is reviewed and the researcher attempts to determine what is being revealed about the experience or phenomenon. Themes integrate meaningful sections/units to a process known as free imaginative variation. After collecting sufficient elements to categorize a phenomenon, I asked if I could omit anything without losing the phenomenon. In other words, what change made to a circle no longer make it a circle (van Manen, 1997)? To address credibility, I am convincing if the defined categories are valid, and that they attribute to the core of the phenomenon (van Manen). The completed analysis should demonstrate: (a) detailed descriptions from the participants (b) the phenomenological reduction have

been consistent (c) the discovery of new topic areas (d) a structure has been articulated (e) results can be verified.

The repetitive process of reading, coding, and analyzing participant answers form emerging patterns to determine central themes of the research. When similar comments, incidents, and events (i.e., phenomena) begin to group together, they form categories. For example, these phrases fell under the category of family: “I started a family,” “a house full of kids,” “family life,” “two kids and one on the way,” and “I have a family.” Further examination determined whether phrases were attributes of the main category, or if they resulted in subcategories. I then examined and identified the meaning of the data by asking questions, making comparisons, and looking for similarities and differences between the comments. This ensured consistency in coding to categorize subject areas and specific events. Themes emerged and began to describe the phenomenon for this research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The ability to analyze what respondents say helps gain insight into their attitudes, behaviors, concerns, motivations and culture (SurveyMonkey, 2011).

The analysis of open-ended survey questions consisted of using open coding, text analysis, and category analysis. The content of open-ended survey responses and interview responses creates categories. Responses that pertain to a specific category are filtered and only those comments are viewed for category accuracy. After categorizing all responses, they are listed by the most often used count of all tagged categories, to the least used. This method adheres to van Manen’s (1997) procedures in developing themes to reflect the characteristics of the phenomenon. For example, a theme emerges after categorizing the descriptive words of the lived experience. The amount of words and phrases that are used under the category, the greater merit the theme holds. In addition,

after analyzing responses, themes are cross-referenced with the frequency rating reported on survey answers. For example, if participants state they did not have support while attempting their dissertation, the survey question pertaining to the training received in research methods should have a high frequency rating.

The use of computer-aided software for analysis was minimal given that there are disadvantages of using computer-based methods in qualitative research, including (a) practical benefits of computer-based methods may be exaggerated, (b) computer use online researchers from their data, and (c) computer-based analysis may encourage users to emulate some of the more problematic aspects of survey research (Fielding, & Lee, 1996a). However, computer aided analysis can be helpful at times, and the main purpose of using computerized coding in this research was to aid in the development of emerging themes. The Microsoft Word search function was used to see how often participants used certain words or phrases. For example, searching for the word “motivation,” resulted in four matches. After combining all participant answers into one document, Microsoft Word determines the number of times a word is used. The results materialized into categories and themes as shown in Appendix J.

Analysis of Surveys

There are no national statistics of gender attrition in the Doctor of Education programs but studies indicate that women drop out at higher rates than men do (Smallwood, 2004). Most of the survey results present a response average, rating average, respondent totals, and a weighted value calculation. However, this research concentrated on the rating average calculated from the question.

After collecting the surveys, a rating average was calculated. Each answer correlates to an assigned weight. A default value is assigned to each column header from

left to right starting at value 1. For example, if a survey question has four answers, the following displays the assigned weights:

- The first rating scale choice is valued at 1 (Strongly Disagree)
- The second at 2 (Disagree)
- The third at 3 (Agree)
- The fourth at 4 (Strongly Agree)

The rating average is then determined by calculating the respondent number with the column weight. The numbers in the parentheses in the formula are the weighted values assigned to the column. The other number is the respondent count or the “frequency” of those that picked that rating: $[1*(1) + 0*(2) + 3*(3) + 2*(4)]$

In this example, the “1” respondent answered strongly disagree. Since the number of respondents that chose that rating is “1” and the weighted value is assigned a (1), the $1*(1)$ as the first part of the equation. Next, for the disagree column, “0” respondents chose that response and the column weighting is (2). For this second part of the equation, you see $0*(2)$. This process continues through to the end of the equation for each frequency and for each weighted value. After multiplying the weighted values with the actual number of respondents who picked that rating, the following is the sum of the totals: $[1*(1) + 0*(2) + 3*(3) + 2*(4)] = 18$. After all parts have been calculated, the following formula is for the rating averages: $RA = [1*(1) + 0*(2) + 3*(3) + 2*(4)] / (1 + 0 + 3 + 2)$ with $RA = 18/6$ and $RA = 3$. A response rating of 3 means that this falls to the right and close to the agree rating.

Rating averages were used in data triangulation to compare with the answers in the participant surveys. For example, when participants were asked to rate their experience in the Doctor of Education program, the rating average calculated out at 2.40. The

interpretation of this result means that the participants experience was unfavorable. Only 10% rated the experience favorable. This rating would verify the finding that participants did not have a favorable experience, as they were non-completers of the program.

Analysis of Timeline

Before interviewing each participant, I completed a timeline for each participant from the data collected on the survey. The timeline provided demographic data along with dates providing the necessary information to verify participant eligibility. Timeline information also cross-referenced the length of time enrolled in the program with the amount of courses completed. For example, Cindy's timeline states she entered the program in spring 2009 and completed her coursework in fall 2011. The information contained in Cindy's timeline cross-references the feasibility of Cindy to complete her coursework during the nine semesters of enrollment. However, if Cindy's response indicated she enrolled in the program in spring 2009 and completed her coursework in fall 2010, this would indicate erroneous information as it would be a highly unlikely scenario. I completed the timelines from the survey data and verified with the participant at the end of the interview. This information was used to determine the participant's stage of enrollment and as a method of data triangulation.

Analysis of Interviews

The procedures used by van Manen's (1997) include a vital step in the research process, verifying the research results. Participant answers to survey questions help support the themes established from the interviews. For example, if a participant stated during the interview that they felt they were not prepared for the level of writing required for the program, their survey answer should mirror their perception when asked if they were satisfied with the training received from the university. Analyzing the survey was

done in the same manner as the interviews. I used the wholistic reading approach to read the entire transcript and ask the question, “What phrase or sentence may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole (van Manen, 1997, p.162)?”

After careful review of the results, I corroborated that the defined categories are valid, and that they attributed to the core of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). The completed analysis demonstrated detailed descriptions from the participants and the results are verifiable through paper trails provided in the appendices. The survey answers aided in answering the research questions and contributed to the true meaning of the phenomenon.

Synthesis of Collected Data

Triangulation of data gives the reader more confidence in the conclusions of a study (Bowen, 2005). When multiple data collection sources and multiple data analysis procedures are used, triangulation occurs (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Triangulation in this study consisted of surveys, timelines, and interviews. When multiple sources of data collection exist, a deeper knowledge of the phenomena of the study occurs (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The data collected from multiple sources in this study provided for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the non-completer in an online Doctor of Education program. Multiple data analysis procedures such as open coding, memoing, rich data, and participant feedback were used for data analysis.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, a researcher must “demonstrate that the methods used are reproducible and consistent, that the approach and procedures used were appropriate for the context and can be documented, and that external evidence can be used to test

conclusions” (Ary et al., 2006, p. 509). In understanding the meaning of trustworthiness, qualitative research should consider credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A study is credible when there is confidence in the research findings. Credibility establishes the analytical abilities of the researcher by various methods (Bowen, 2005). The written material provided in the appendices delivers the ability to validate my research work. These essential components reduce the bias of my research. Data triangulation, negative case analysis, and member checking all served to establish credibility in this study. The collection of data through interviews, surveys, and timelines addresses the issue of data triangulation. Triangulation supports the conclusions of the study allowing the researcher to be more confident of the study (Bowen, 2005). Member checking, which involves contacting participants to check the accuracy of their surveys and interviews, took place during and after data analysis. For example, after contacting Joey to discuss my findings, which were that he “struggled with the lack of human interaction,” I found that he had since enrolled in a traditional Doctor of Education program. This process helped provide validity of the research findings (Bowen, 2005). I used consistent formatting when collecting participant feedback to increase the dependability of data collected. Because I was the sole researcher, this helped in creating data consistency. Interview questions were structured and asked in the same sequence.

To enhance the dependability and conformability of the study, I established an audit trail in the findings of the document analysis, observations, and survey results. The creation of folders for each participant helped organize with data collection. Each file contained the participant’s survey, timeline, and transcribed interview. To gain a more thorough understanding of the participant’s experience, I read each file multiple times.

While observing participant's responses, I noted similarities and underlined repeated words and phrases. For example, Ellen's survey described a loss of momentum. In her interview, she reiterated by stating she was "in a discouraged place" and felt like she was "not getting anywhere." After reviewing Ellen's file, her timeline confirms her enrollment in the program for 3 years. These findings demonstrate the existence of data triangulation to augment the conformability of the study. In addition, the study incorporates van Manen's (1997) method of isolating thematic statements to increase dependability.

Transferability is another aspect of qualitative research to consider.

Transferability refers to what is found in one context is applicable in another context. In other words, other readers can apply the findings of the study to his or her own setting (Bowen, 2005). To provide for transferability, I made great efforts to provide detailed descriptions of the collection process used and to present the findings with detailed, rich descriptions of the phenomena.

Ethical Considerations

There were a number of ethical considerations to account for in this study because the research involved human beings. However, the purpose of this research was not to evaluate individuals and programs. The purpose was to gain an understanding of the doctoral program experience so that students are informed of the process and programs can be more responsive to student needs. I made every attempt to make the research goals clear to the participants as stated in the informed consent. I also made a point to the participants that their input would remain anonymous throughout the research and the use of pseudonyms would protect anonymity.

Typed data was stored under password protection on my home personal computer.

A separate USB drive was stored in a locked desk drawer. Any written material and the recording device used were in a locked file cabinet. As an ethical consideration, I offered the participants access to the results of the research.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the methods used to design, choose participants, collect and analyze data for answering the research questions that frame this study. In the following chapter, I present the findings of this study, including a brief synopsis of each participant that includes a demographic table, participants' reasons for withdrawing, and the possibility of re-enrollment in an online Doctor of Education program. Barriers to degree completion collected from the survey in Section IX list the participant reasons for withdrawal (Appendix K).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to examine and explore the phenomenon of the non-completer in an online Doctor of Education program. Only by understanding the experience of the participant not completing an online Doctor of Education program can the researcher grow, learn, and begin to understand the phenomenon itself. The process of data collection included interviews, surveys, and timelines of ten participants. The analysis of data utilized van Manen's (1997) method of phenomenology. Through this approach, the exploration of significant statements resulted in the generation of themes. This chapter presents the findings of the study in accordance with the research questions.

This chapter looks at the proposed research questions by using the words of the participant. Participants were asked to reflect on what influenced their decisions to withdraw from their online doctoral program. They were also asked to reflect on their own experience in the program as well as their perceptions of the program. Additionally, because some students may choose to re-enter the program, participations were asked what would make them re-enroll in the program.

The scope of the interviews encompassed their doctoral studies and was limited to their online doctoral experiences. Analysis of the interviews in relationship to the research questions revealed important information regarding the perceived experience of the online doctorate program in relationship to their process in attempting to complete the program. Van Manen (1997) suggested the use of descriptive coding to isolate and determine themes to describe the lived-experience of the participant. Specific suggestions

for improvements and descriptive coding lead to a series of emergent themes regarding the perceptions that were inherent. The primary emergent themes include the traits of the non-completers and the perceptions of their experience in the online program.

Research Questions

This hermeneutic phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of non-completers in a doctoral program. A search to understand the shared lived experience of the participants was framed by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the barriers to degree completion as perceived by individuals who broke enrollment from an online Doctor of Education program in the United States?

RQ2: What is the essence of the lived experience of online Doctor of Education students who broke enrollment in online doctoral programs in the United States?

RQ3: What can universities do to remove some of the obstacles experienced by doctoral students while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?

RQ4: What can students do to prepare and overcome the obstacles experienced while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?

Participants

The data collection originated with 13 participants. After careful review, three participants were omitted from the results. One participant opted out due to attending Liberty University, one gave false contact information, and another participant was ineligible due to enrollment in a traditional program, rather than an online. All 10 participants meeting the study criteria consented to participate in the study and agreed to have their voice audio-recorded during the interview. Participants provided their name, email address and telephone number. None of the participants attended Liberty

University. All participants enrolled in an online doctoral degree in education during the last three years, and all enrolled for at least one year. The following participant portraits provide a deeper understanding of their individualized experiences; I have included each participant's reason or reasons for withdrawing, and their possibility of future enrollment.

Joey

Joey is a white male between the ages of 30-40. He is married with children. He is a superintendent at a public school district. Joey completed 4-5 online courses before he withdrew in 2009 as he began to question the perception of earning his doctorate from an online institution.

Joey explained his reason for not re-enrolling in the program: "I wish just to have that . . . that social interaction. I also needed to collaborate with others and uh . . . have uh . . . that face to face experience rather than online." When asked about re-enrolling he stated, "Uh, no. Not at this point. Maybe with another program. A program with cohorts."

Cindy

Cindy is a white female between the ages of 40-50. She works at a public high school. Cindy completed 11-12 courses before withdrawing in the fall of 2011 due to the health of her husband. Cindy's explanation for not re-enrolling in the program was, "My husband being sick." When asked about re-enrolling Cindy stated, "I just got the desire that I am going to complete it. That is my goal and I will go back if they will let me back in to complete it. As a matter of fact I have already started my letter to go back."

Dean

Dean, a white male, has been a vice principal in a vocational high school for the last 12 years. He enrolled in an online Doctor of Education program for a little more than a year. He withdrew from his third course in the spring of 2009. Dean's explanation for

not re-enrolling in the program was, “Lack of support from superior, financial reasons.” When asked what reason or reasons would cause him to re-enroll in the program, Dean replied, “I cannot think of any reason.”

Ellen

Ellen is a white female between the ages of 50–60. She is married. Before withdrawing in 2009, Ellen completed 7–8 courses and then withdrew from the program. Ellen’s explanation for not re-enrolling in the program was, “Frustration.” She will re-enroll in the program because “Well, I still have it hanging over my head. I’m somebody who finished the job. It’s very difficult for me to put so much time and effort into trying to finish and then not finish. If I go for superintendent, I definitely need the degree.”

Glenna

Glenna is a white female between the ages of 40 and 50. She holds a secondary teaching position at a suburban high school. Glenna enrolled in an online Doctor of Education program for three years. She completed more than 13 courses before withdrawing in the spring of 2009. Glenna’s explanation for not re-enrolling in the program, “I needed a break. I don’t need the degree. I needed to regroup.” When asked what reason or reasons would cause her to re-enroll in the program, Glenna replied, “My own reasons. Self-determination. To finish something I started.”

Kimberly

Kimberly is a white female between the ages of 30–40. She is married with three children. She enrolled in the Doctor of Education program “for money purposes and pretty much that was the only reason was to make more money.” She completed two courses online. Kimberly’s explanation for not re-enrolling in the program was, “Family.” When asked about re-enrolling, Kimberly stated, “I will pursue my degree in

the future but it's gonna be when my kids are older and ya know they are not gonna need so much of my time anymore.”

Louise

Louise is a white female between the ages of 50–60. Louise is a classroom teacher in a public school. She enrolled in an online Doctor of Education program for two years and withdrew in December 2010. Louise completed 7–8 courses before learning that her out-of-state degree would not be eligible for her salary increase.

Louise's explanation for not re-enrolling in the program was, “They would not transfer credits. Even basic things like research in a qualitative and quantitative research that's going to be the same no matter what they would not transfer it between programs.”

When asked what would cause her to re-enroll, Louise replied, “If the program I wanted accepted credits so I didn't have to start all over again.”

Millie

Millie is a single, white female between the ages of 40–50. She enrolled in an online Doctor of Education program for 4 years. The tragic death of her only child caused her to withdraw. She had completed 13 or more courses and had written the first three chapters of her dissertation. I spoke with Millie at length about what would cause her to re-enroll in the program. She said, “That's a good question. Um . . . hopefully in the next year. I need to get it done. Um . . . ya know just that need that . . . to get it done. I got to get motivated again though . . . because I lost that motivation.”

Raymond

Raymond is a white male between the ages of 30–40. He is married with three children ages eight, five, and three. Raymond pursued a doctorate to make more money as much as anything. Raymond completed 3 to 4 online courses. Raymond's

explanation for not re-enrolling in the program,

I think it just . . . it was just . . . it demanded more uh . . . commitment that I was able to . . . to do at the time. We had two young kids. Um . . . and while we enrolled we kind of had a third one on the way and there was just no way we were gonna um . . . continue ya know take care of family and . . . in addition, meet the demands of the . . . the program. We just thought it was the wrong point in our lives to . . . rather I thought it was the wrong point in my life to continue to um . . . continue on with it. Ya know at this . . . at that time.

When asked about the possibility of re-enrollment, Raymond replied, “Ah I’ll probably do it again. I mean I’ll probably re-enroll . . . when our kids are all grown up . . . It was just too much. It just demanded a lot more than I ever thought.”

Sutter

Sutter is a white male between the ages of 30 and 40. He is married with three children. After teaching English for eleven years at one public school, he has now acquired a new English teaching position at a vocational school. Sutter’s explanation for not re-enrolling in the program was, “Family issues, financial.” Sutter enrolled in an online Doctor of Education program and when asked about the possibility of re-enrolling he replied, “If the university had a slightly different program through satellite campuses.”

Participant Summary

The age of participants ranged from 30–60. Three participants were in the dissertation stage of the program when they withdrew. Courses completed ranged from 2 to more than 13. The sample consisted of 6 full-time students and 4 part-time students. The pool of participants consisted of 4 males and 6 females. All participants were

employed at an educational institute while enrolled in the doctorate program. Fifty percent of the participants did not complete the program due to family or personal situations. Additional reasons for non-completion are itemized in Table 3.

Themes

In this study, hearing the voice of the participants allowed me to examine connections, patterns, and prevalent themes that describe the experiences of the participants as a whole. According to van Manen (1997), “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (p. 107).

While analyzing the data collected through participant surveys, timelines, interviews, themes were divided into two sections, (a) individual themes and (b) institutional themes. This list is not inclusive of all themes from all non-completers, but rather the major themes emerged from the 10 participants. Individual themes include family or personal situations, frustration, financial, and personal academic and social integration. Institutional themes include institutional procedures, student-adviser/committee relationships, and opportunities for academic and social integration. The itemization and compilation of themes is documented in the appendix (see Appendix J).

To help determine central themes of the research, the open coding method was used. Open coding is a process of reducing the data to a small set of themes that appear to describe the phenomenon that are under investigation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In open coding, data were divided into segments. Each segment was examined for common words that established categories or themes. Further examination was made to

determine whether phrases may be attributes of the main category, or may result in subcategories. I examined and identified the meaning of the data by asking questions, making comparisons within and across data sources, and looking for similarities and differences between the comments. Similar comments were grouped together to form categories. These categories and themes are used in answering the following four research questions.

Research Question One

What are the barriers to degree completion as perceived by individuals who broke enrollment from an online Doctor of Education program in the United States?

After years of in-depth studies on student attrition, researchers conclude there are multiple reasons exist for student attrition depending upon the focus of studies, the universities, and the students (Fletcher, 2009; Green & Kluever, 1997; Lovitts, 2001). Participants were quick to respond with an answer when asked why they withdrew from the program. However, after analyzing each response, several participants listed multiple barriers to degree completion. Table 3 presents the primary and secondary barriers participants discussed:

Table 3

Barriers to Degree Completion

Barriers to Degree Completion Categorized by Percentage of Participants	Primary	Secondary	TOTAL
Family or personal situations	50%	10%	60%
Frustration	10%	20%	30%
Financial		30%	30%
Academic and social integration	10%	10%	20%
Commitment	10%		10%
Adviser relations	10%		10%
Depression		10%	10%
Perseverance		10%	10%
Institutional procedures	10%		10%
Perception of an online degree		10%	10%
Total	100%	100%	

The main reasons participants did not complete the program were family or personal situations, frustration, financial, and academic and social integration.

Additional reasons were commitment, adviser relations, depression, perseverance, institutional procedures, and perception of an online degree. Although many of the additional reasons listed are significant barriers to degree completion, they were not the main reasons why participants became non-completers in this study.

Family or personal situations. Three participants, Cindy, Millie, and Kimberly, listed family issues as their main reason for withdrawing from the program. Cindy felt she was spending too much time on the program and not enough time with her husband

and family as she reflected back on the program, “It took lots of hours away from your family to do a good job.” When asked to list the reason or reasons for withdrawing, Cindy’s response on the survey was, “The health of my husband. When my husband got sick, I could not devote those hours. I had to take care of my husband and my family.”

The second participant to withdraw due to family issues was Millie. After the death of her only son, Millie struggles every day wondering if she can find the strength to re-enroll in the program. When asked to describe how she felt after withdrawing from the program, she said, “I kind of just quit going because ya know my whole life got turned upside down. I haven’t done anything since . . . I haven’t done anything at all. What will that be? Kyle’s been gone almost 3 years.”

Kimberly, the third participant, realized her responsibilities were with her family and not the program after the birth of her third child. When asked what circumstances affected her experience in the program, she said, “Family life. My children.” Kimberly defined her main reason for not re-enrolling, “Family. My kids are still young, and I feel like I need to spend the time with them.”

There is no doubt enrollment in the program requires a balance of time management between program studies and family. In analyzing the data, three participants, all female, referred to family issues as the main reason for withdrawal. Three out of the four males in the study referred to the program as taking time away from the family, but none found it problematic enough to withdraw. Dean, the fourth male, was in the 50-60 year old bracket and never mentioned family as being problematic. Ellen, the fourth female, “waited until my children were school age and then I would have the time to devote to coursework.” Glenna was single, and Louise was over 50 years of old. Whereas 50% of the females listed family as their primary

reason for withdrawing, these results can deliberate the fact that family issues can be a greater barrier to degree completion to females rather than to males.

Frustration. When students are uncertain as to how to complete the process, they become extremely frustrated (Dyckman, 2005). Glenna cited the repeated occurrence of frustration resulting in her withdrawing from the program. Glenna was frustrated because there were no clear defined steps on how to organize and develop it her dissertation. She expressed her concerns, “I had a minimum of four different kinds of writings, and within the four times I had to do three comments and on top of that I needed observation with administration with 100 hours. I could not get administration to go 100 hours. I dropped the class. I needed a break. I don’t need the degree. I needed to regroup.” As she stated, it was “frustrating – changing adviser.” Glenna had a hard time continuing the program, as she was “exhausted and overwhelmed with working full time and trying to keep up with the course work.”

The repeated occurrence of frustration can result in withdrawing from the program (Fletcher, 2009). The longer students stay with the program, the more frustrated and negative they may become. When asked why she chose not to en-enroll in the program, Ellen replied with one word “frustration.” Kimberly also expressed frustration by saying, “It wasn’t really good for my health because I felt like I wasn’t getting anywhere.”

Participants experienced a point in time where they just could not continue with the program. They felt the only solution was to withdraw. Glenna, Ellen, and Joey expected the program to be similar to that of their master’s program. However, they referred to the doctorate program as much more time consuming. They also referenced the amount of frustration they experienced while enrolled. Ellen described her

experience:

I just was in a very discouraged place. I felt like I was just marking time. I wasn't getting anywhere. I just can't do this anymore. It was affecting my health . . . it was affecting relationships. I just came to a place where I knew this was no longer a good fit for me and made the decision to leave.

Student attitudes are extremely important (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Smith et al., 2006).

Bean and Eaton's (2001) revised model of student retention confirms that in order for students to be successful, they need to believe they are in charge of their own destiny.

In Section VI, question 1 (f) of the survey participants were asked if they received financial aid of any kind (including loan, scholarship, fellowship, and teaching or research assistant ship) during their graduate studies. Six participants received some sort of financial aid during their graduate studies while four did not. When asked to evaluate the university in the adequacy of financial support they received in Section VIII, question 1 (d), seven participants answered excellent, very good, or fair for this question.

Dean, however, had problems financing his tuition. He rated the adequacy of financial support received as "poor" and did not receive any financial aid. He was not happy with his employer as Dean described his "struggles were with a superintendent who did not support either financially or professionally the goal of the doctorate." Dean interpreted this as not only a financial barrier, but also a lack of support by his employer to continue the program. In his interview Dean stated, "I decided that the benefit I would get was not worth it." This aligns with Tinto's (1993) learning experiences of students in relation to opportunity costs. When students believe they will receive greater benefits from discontinuing the program, their chances of withdrawal are greater.

Sutter's secondary reason for non-completion was due to "financial constraints." When asked about his reason for not re-enrolling, Sutter said, "Mostly my withdrawal was a matter of prior personal financial obligations." He found it difficult to pay for college and raise a family at the same time. Sutter did not receive any financial aid and evaluated the adequacy of financial support received from the university as poor.

Millie also mentioned finances. When talking to her about re-enrolling, She said, "I also owe a lot of money and it will cost me some to get it finished. I have a lot of student loans now." Louise also discusses finances as she talked about "a pay raise if she completed the program." However, she also knew that "in the end, there is also a mountain of student debt."

Academic and social integration. Tinto (1993, 1997, 2002) suggested that academic and social integration and effective student learning should be present to contribute to the success of the student. In order for this to occur, the institution must examine their learning communities closely and be committed across all levels of the institution and in order for students to succeed. Tinto (1993) also postulated that the student's social and academic integration are the most important obstacles to overcome and maintain student persistence. The lack of social integration is likely to result in withdrawal (Tinto 1993). Out of the 10 participants in this study, Joey withdrew for lack of social interaction. He felt a need to collaborate with others as he said, "I wish just to have that . . . that social interaction. I also needed to collaborate with others and uh . . . have uh . . . that face to face experience rather than online. I had difficulty with the limited human interfacing."

To measure social integration, Tinto (1975) looked at how many friends the student had, how many staff knew the student's name, how many staff did the student

actually interact with, and if the student was satisfied with the University. I asked the same question during the interview to collect data on social integration: Please describe the extent of social integration you encountered while enrolled in the program. For example, how many friends did you have? How many staff knew your name? How many staff did you interact with?

Consistent with Tinto's (1993) model of doctoral persistence, all of the participants replied with having minimal social integration or none at all. The words "very limited," "lonely," "none," "not too much," and "very little" were echoes across participant responses.

Research Question Two

What is the essence of the lived experience of online Doctor of Education students who broke enrollment in online doctoral programs in the United States?

Participants shared their experiences while enrolled in the program. Common experiences and emotions expressed by the participants were the lack of face-face-contact, feelings of isolation, the program was much harder than anticipated, academic difficulty, negative student-advisor relationship, frustration, and choosing between family and degree completion.

Three participants who had small children expressed their difficulties while trying to study at home. This suggests that the chances of completing the program diminishes while trying to raise a young family. Even as a single person, Glenna did not participate in social activities. She never went out of her house. Glenna's social life was almost non-existent. Participants recognized the degree of self-discipline, commitment, perseverance, frustration, and lack of support while enrolled in the program.

Although three participants withdrew for the same reason (family obligations),

each participant's experience was unique. Participants recalled the lack of face-to-face contact along with social disconnect. Each also expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation. A few participants articulated moods of depression during enrollment and after withdrawing. Sutter described how he felt after making the decision to withdraw: "Depressed. I have been at the high school level 11 years and it's ok . . . but inhibiting personal growth . . . I am not allowed to grow. It's frustrating. I have the ability but not allowed to grow."

Isolation. Feelings of isolation are a significant reason for failure (Lovitts, 2001; Ali & Kohun, 2006). As each interview evolved, I began to gain a clearer picture of how each participant experienced the program. Participants were willing to share their stories and discussed their experiences of program withdrawal. All participants referenced, in some form, the lack of social integration resulting in feelings of isolation. While analyzing participant interviews using the detailed line-by-line approach (van Manen, 1997), several transcripts reiterated the words "face-to-face." Kimberly had trouble in the whole aspect of online learning. She could not get past the barrier of online learning and the lack of social integration that went along with it. She confessed to needing classes that met face-to-face with other students on a regular basis to help her with her struggles.

The greatest connection came after I interviewed Joey and reread his transcript multiple times. His statements made an enormous impact on the nature of this study. When asked about his perceptions of the doctoral program compared to his experience, Joey replied,

To be honest with you I found the program to be more difficult than I thought an online learning model would be. Uh . . . so, that was kind of uh . . . kind of eye

opener... and then also for me was just that isolation. That feeling that you were just doing it on your own. Um . . . I didn't expect it to be so quite isolating as part of that process . . . so there was two kinds of learning that I experienced there. I just wish it...to have that... that social interaction. I also needed to collaborate with others and uh...have uh...that face to face experience rather than online. It helped to uh . . . to better appreciate a blended learning, an online learning and understanding that my perception was of, I thought it was going to be much more easier . . . which it wasn't. It was much more writing intensive.

Although unsuccessful at the program, Joey said he learned a lot and met people at residence. He was not sorry about enrolling and actually enjoyed the opportunity to learn about an online education. Joey's response highlights why some students become non-completers: isolation, academic difficulty, lack of social integration, and writing intensity. After years of in-depth studies on student attrition, researchers have concluded there is no one reason for student attrition (Green & Kluever, 1997; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1975), as illustrated by Joey's multi-faceted response.

Difficulty of the program. The time and difficulty involved in a doctoral program can give students the temptation to withdraw (Sigafus, 1998). After this realization sets in, participants feel isolated in the psychological adjustment and this is where some think about discontinuing the program (Hawley, 2003). Eight participants expressed the degree of academic intensity involved in the program by noting that the program was much harder than anticipated. Four of the participants compared the program to that of their master's program. They found the doctoral program to be more challenging and involving more research work. Cindy said, "I thought it would have been more like my masters. I enjoyed my masters. That's why I chose the same

university to get my doctorate.”

Participants discovered that the doctoral program is different from other programs. Raymond found the experience to be much more in depth than he originally thought. He thought it was going to be a “relatively easy process But uh . . . you know you get in uh . . . you get in and you find out more details about each step and each checkpoint that’s going to require you know . . . significant amounts of work and time.

Kimberly also found the program to be harder than expected and convinced herself to withdraw. She said, “It was a lot harder than I thought. Like I stated earlier, I was able to acquire my masters all-online. That program was really easy because there was not that much in-depth scholarly writing and things you had to do and so getting my doctorate it was a lot harder. I just I couldn’t do it. Just you know taking my classes on line. It was just way too hard for me.” Glenna also had different ideas about the program as she said, “Before I thought the doctoral program was more about talking about theory learning a lot more to it. A lot of research work...challenging . . . and challenging yourself.”

Joey expressed the difficulty in online learning as he said, “Uh . . . you know what . . . to be honest with you, I found the program to be more difficult than I thought an online learning model would be. Um . . . so that was kind of ah . . . kind of eye opening.” Dean was the only participant to find the program not challenging as he said, “I felt that the classwork was not challenging to the extent I expected doctoral work to be so... I had a higher expectation. I found it easy. Then again, maybe it was the program. I had a friend of mine in a doctorate program and her studies were pretty extensive.”

Student-advisor/committee relationship. Lack of support from advisors and the committee may also contribute to student failure (Fletcher, 2009; Green & Kluever, 1997; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Ellen's main reason for withdrawing was difficulty with feeling connected to her adviser and lack of sufficient training and support through the research process. Her doctoral advisor left the country for long periods and she stated that he "has a low opinion of the program being an adviser for the program . . . and that's what happened in my case. He definitely had a low opinion of the program and so he didn't . . . he didn't take the work seriously." She felt his commitment to the program affected her ability to focus and maintain momentum. Ellen lost momentum each time and eventually gave up.

The doctoral advisor's role is essential to the success of the doctoral student (Carter, 2004; Grover, 2007). Two of the three participants in the dissertation stage of the program experienced disconnect with their adviser and committee. After Ellen spoke with her advisor for the last time, she withdrew from the program. Her reason for withdrawing was that her advisor's commitment to the program affected her ability to focus and maintain momentum to finish. Ellen's experience supports a previous study done by Lovitts' (2001) where students reported the lack of support, encouragement, and guidance through the dissertation process.

Millie also engaged in a negative student-advisor relationship. She did fine with the coursework but felt the dissertation process was more difficult. Millie believed she would have benefited from "more face time with the committee chair." Millie also experienced dissatisfaction when she had her committee intact. Her relationship with her chairperson was not a good fit as she discussed a disagreement she had, "I upset my chairperson. I didn't know how to do something . . . I didn't mean to. She was actually

not happy with me after that. Kind of crazy to come this far and quit.” The third participant, Glenna, withdrew after completing her coursework. Therefore, she did not have any feedback regarding her student-advisor relationship.

The lack of support and cooperation from advisors and the committee may contribute to student failure and prevent them from completing their program (Dominguez, 2006; Fletcher, 2009; Green & Kluever, 1997; Grover, 2007; Lage-Otero, 2006; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Sigafus, 1998). Ellen was frustrated with the lack of guidance she received: “Advisement was completely virtual. The dissertation work was virtual and that made it difficult. There wasn’t a lot of guidance around what the expectation was. You sent it in and it came back completely marked up. You learned by submitting. So that went back and forth back and forth. So that’s what the expectation was.”

Students engaged in negative student-advisor relationships have setbacks in their academic progress (Fletcher, 2009). When participants were asked if they would select the same dissertation adviser/committee, only 22.2% of the participants stated they would. The answers of “probably would not” and “definitely would not” amounted to 77.8%. This indicates participants experienced negative relationships.

Table 4 lists participant satisfaction rating of the adviser and selection of the dissertation committee generated from the survey. The process involved in selecting the committee viewed negatively at 44.4%. The overall rating of the adviser was satisfactory. Results also confirm that participants were not happy about working with the adviser of their choice as 44.4% selected “somewhat satisfied” while 33.33 said “not very satisfied.” The reason for not being satisfied could be that 66.7% stated that the doctoral committee was only somewhat helpful in supporting and encouraging their research ideas.

Table 4

Student's Satisfaction Rating of Advisor and Dissertation Committee

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
The process of selecting the dissertation committee was satisfactory.	11.1%	44.4%	44.4%	0.0%	2.33	10
Was knowledgeable about formal degree requirements.	33.3%	44.4%	22.2%	0.0%	1.89	9
Gave me constructive feedback on my work.	33.3%	55.6%	0.0%	11.1%	1.89	9
Returned my work promptly.	33.3%	55.6%	0.0%	11.1%	1.89	9
Guided and assisted me in the completion of my research.	22.2%	55.6%	11.1%	11.1%	2.11	9
Overall performed the role well.	22.2%	55.6%	11.1%	11.1%	2.11	9

	Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Not Very Helpful	Not at All Helpful	Rating Average	Response Count
My doctoral committee supported and encouraged my research idea.	11.1%	66.7%	11.1%	11.1%	2.22	9
Doctoral committee members were accessible.	11.1%	44.4%	33.3%	11.1%	2.44	9

Note. A response *rating* of less than 2.50 means that this falls to the left of neutral and closer to agree. Response count less than 10 indicates participant(s) skipped the question as they felt it did not pertain to them.

An ideal relationship between the dissertation advisor and the doctoral candidate is when a student receives consistent and timely feedback on progress made. When asked about the frequency of meetings with their adviser/committee, 33.3% noted “than once a month,” and 44.4% stated, “as needed.” According to past research, feedback is

accomplished in a variety of ways but should be frequent enough to maintain periodic dialogue on the issues and research questions raised by the student (Lage-Otero, 2006).

Millie was discouraged as she said, “I didn’t get a lot of feedback from them.” When asked about a situation that had a significant impact while enrolled, Ellen said,

The issues with my adviser in an online relationship. The first time I was working on my lit review I had a deadline and my adviser informed me he was leaving for the Orient for six months. Just keep working and when I come back you can send me the material and I will review it then. You lose momentum. I only met him twice.

Glenna also brought up the subject of feedback, “There was no real feedback or anyone to talk too.” When asked to make any recommendations to improve the program, Cindy recommended, “more contact with advisors.”

Emotions of non-completers. When students come to terms with themselves in addition, pronounce their inability to finish the program, a multitude of emotions can occur (Blum & Muirhead, 2005). In an effort to go into further detail of the participants’ experiences, participants were asked to describe how they felt after making their decision not to re-enroll. For some, it brought relief and released a great deal of stress. Participants used words and phrases such as, “I felt very free,” “I felt like I had more time,” “I felt incredibly relieved,” “exhausted,” “uncomfortable,” “a heavy weight taken off,” “I felt much better,” “back to myself”, “more time to do the things I wanted”, “I can go home and relax, go out with friends, be back to myself.” Other participants experienced a low point, as they felt “depressed,” “discouraged,” “frustrated,” and “uncomfortable.” Louise said, “I had put over a year in this process and basically had to start all over again.” Cindy, like many students who withdrew, experienced continued feelings of regret

(Lovitts, 2001). She stated, “it is never off my mind. I’m always thinking about getting finished and my topic.”

Research Question Three

What can universities do to remove some of the obstacles experienced by doctoral students while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?

Promote integration. Tinto (1993) mentions the importance of social integration with faculty members. Faculty integration increases not only social integration, but also academic integration. During the interview, participants were asked what they thought universities could do to remove some of the barriers they experienced while attempting to complete the program. All of the participants except for Dean wanted more communication as far as the expectations and detailed requirements of the program. Raymond wanted to know “more about the difficulty and what it entails in each step. I know that I didn’t find out until the first course.”

The university must take specific actions toward integration among students (Fletcher, 2009). Almost all of the participants discussed a need for increased communication. When asked what the university could do to remove some of the barriers, Cindy replied, “more face-to-face time with my adviser or professors . . . so I am not waiting so long to make a change.” Cindy also just wanted to communicate with someone about the program as she states,

There is no communication there to say, is everything going okay? Do you need to sit a class out? If I had been asked for help . . . if I could tell someone what was going on and the kind of road we were going down and had an option there, I could have prevented myself from calling and saying, Can I talk to somebody? Because I need to get out of this class. More communication between courses . . .

not assuming everything is okay.

Glenna also talked about communicating in much the same way as Cindy. Glenna wanted additional feedback from her assignments. She expressed her experience regarding the lack of communication and the frustration she dealt with:

Each course lasted seven weeks. In that time it was required to log on a minimum of 15 hours a week, complete two mini papers, read three peers work and critique, and one major paper a week. At the end of seven weeks was a major project—at least 10 pages of work. A lot of the course work and courses was not connected to your dissertation. Each course was taught by a different professor. I never had the same professor twice so no substantial connection was there. It became very frustrating and confusing being told to think about your dissertation but not clear defined steps on how to organize and develop. There was no real feedback or anyone to talk too.

Two participants, Millie and Ellen, expressed their concerns while enrolled in the dissertation stage of the program. Millie added, “I enjoyed the online experience. The dissertation process was a little more difficult, and I probably would have benefited from some face time with my committee chair.” She also suggested, “When you get to the dissertation part exactly what’s involved and how to pick your committees. Making sure, you’re with the right person. Do you know what I mean?” In order to communicate effectively the requirements of the dissertation, Ellen said, “students should have advisers who are graduates of the program, because it is a unique program and unless somebody understands . . . I mean you know you can’t have somebody who thinks.”

Provide program flexibility and support. In an examination of institutional

practices and dissertation obstacles (Katz, 1997), students believed that the university should have supported and encouraged them more. Completion rate depends heavily on the program requirements of the university and the expectations of each department regarding the dissertation (Brucker et al., 2010).

Sutter thought the university should “organize differently.” He also suggested that universities should “encourage people that have lives on the outside.” Sutter believed the university he attended was “geared more towards single people without a family. That’s just the way it is.” Kimberly also thought universities could foster a caring attitude by being a little more flexible for families as she replies, “they should be a little more flexible for families. Just, I don’t really know . . . be more understanding maybe?”

The differences in the doctoral studies compared to previous studies are in the nature and intensity of psychological demands ((Hawley, 2003). Glenna felt that while enrolled in the program, “you need some sort of work ethic that helps you through it. Need a support system to help you through it more than you think . . . need back up.” Glenna also suggested that the university put additional effort into educating prospective students. She added,

I would say before you enroll you want to . . . maybe before you get accepted . . . go to a program . . . and the people there are going to require to learn all the parts of the websites, the library and how to navigate around the website . . . or you . . . trying to take . . . also have that faith. How to get help make connections . . . the expectations they want from you.

A lack of support from both inside and outside the university can result in non-completion of the program (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Upon acceptance, Glenna suggested continued support throughout the program. She

recommends additional support upon acceptance by saying,

There needs to be a set course of teachers and a professor assigned at the beginning of the program to assist and discuss the whole process with you. Every class should have a small component of the dissertation included so that you're not overwhelmed at the end of coursework. So start the program with . . . the program working with the professors more than once. Also working with some more than once . . . and also starting your dissertation . . . use, the methodology and also someone right there at the beginning of methodology. My classes had nothing to do with my dissertation. No recourse . . . no one to talk to.

When asked if participants were adequately prepared for their candidacy exam/dissertation work, the survey results revealed that 44.4% disagreed. This could be an indication that the program needs additional academic support.

Table 5

Coursework, Seminars, Labs, Reading Courses, etc. Adequately Prepared Me for Candidacy Exam/Dissertation Work (n = 9)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
11.1%	44.4%	44.4%	0.0%	2.33	9

Note. A response *rating* of less than 2.50 means that this falls to the left of neutral and closer to the agree *rating*. Response count less than 10 indicates participant(s) skipped the question as they felt it did not pertain to them.

Louise, unhappy that her credits could not be transferred to another program, felt the process should become more flexible. She stated, “The biggest barrier right there was that they would not transfer credits.” If her credits were allowed to be transferred into another program, she believed she would have never withdrawn. The following words expressed her concerns:

I’m not sure the process needs to change as much as the administration of the process. I would still be in the program if they had allowed me to change from teacher leadership to teaching and learning or something like that. But, number one they didn’t offer it and if I had changed to any other, if I had went with a Ph.D. in special education; I would have to start all over again after being there over a year. Nothing. The credits wouldn’t change from program to program. So that was my difficulty. I liked the program. I liked the way it was set up. I liked how organized it was. I liked how everything worked. I liked that part of it. Like I said, what I did not like was that once you started something you were locked in and you couldn’t transfer credits from program to program. You had to start all over again.

Louise made a suggestion for improving procedures was “to have advisors who were graduates of the program.” If advisors were successful and completed their doctorate at the attending university, their experience with the program and structure of the process can help students succeed in the program. Louise had a negative experience with her adviser. She thought it would be a good idea, Louise believed she could have avoided her situation, if she had an advisor who was understanding and familiar with the program. She said her “advisor had a low opinion of the program and did not take the work seriously.”

Modify program procedures. Lovitts and Nelson (2000) pose the challenge that, “Departments with high rates of attrition among graduate students need to look to their own practices for answers and solutions” (p. 4). To gather knowledge on student perceptions, participants were asked if they were to do it all over again, would they choose the same university.

Table 6

If You Were to Start Your Graduate Career Again, Would You Choose the Same University?

Definitely Would	Probably Would	Probably Would Not	Definitely Would Not	Rating Average	Response Count
0%	20%	50%	30%	3.10	10

Note. A response *rating* of more than 2.50 means that this falls to the right of neutral and closer to the probably would not *rating*.

A rating average of 3.10 indicates the majority of participants would not choose the same university. Only two participants felt they would choose the same university if they were to start their graduate career all over again. These results suggest that participants were generally dissatisfied with the university. Ellen provided additional comments after the interview was and expressed her dissatisfaction with the university. She said, “I think that ya know, when I was enrolling . . . it was not . . . it was early in the development of various programs. And so, I think that probably they were still learning too.” She expressed her concerns with the university not meeting her needs, “So it’s about . . . ya know having . . . having programs that can meet individual learning needs.”

Table 7

Participants Were Asked If They Would Select the Same Field of Study (N = 10)

Definitely Would	Probably Wood	Probably Would Not	Definitely Would Not	Rating Average	Response Count
40%	20%	30%	10%	2.10	10

Note. A response *rating* of less than 2.50 means that this falls to the left of neutral and closer to a probable *rating*.

In Table 6, the results suggest that participants were unlikely to choose the same university if they were to start their graduate career again. Table 7 suggests that they would probably choose the same field of study. In analyzing these two tables, the results endorse the likelihood that participants were unhappy with the university and not their degree path.

Participants were also asked about their satisfaction level of various aspects of their program. These questions helped view how participants perceived the program. Table 8 displays the results.

Table 8

Program Satisfaction: Summary of Survey Results

Question	Response Average	Rating Average	Response Count
My program's reputation	Very Satisfied 0 Satisfied 9 Dissatisfied 1 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.10	10
Program's ability to keep pace with recent developments in my field	Very Satisfied 1 Satisfied 9 Dissatisfied 0 Very Dissatisfied 0	1.90	10
Adequacy of facilities	Very Satisfied 0 Satisfied 8 Dissatisfied 2 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.20	10
Training in research methods	Very Satisfied 0 Satisfied 8 Dissatisfied 2 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.20	10
Professional relationship with my dissertation supervisor	Very Satisfied 1 Satisfied 5 Dissatisfied 3 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.22	9
Quality of academic advising and guidance	Very Satisfied 2 Satisfied 5 Dissatisfied 3 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.10	10
Helpfulness of staff members in my department	Very Satisfied 2 Satisfied 5 Dissatisfied 3 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.10	10
Overall satisfaction with your program	Very Satisfied 2 Satisfied 5 Dissatisfied 3 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.10	10

Obtain clarity on degree completion requirements	Very Satisfied 3 Satisfied 3 Dissatisfied 3 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.00	9
Receive help on developing a plan for degree completion	Very Satisfied 3 Satisfied 3 Dissatisfied 3 Very Dissatisfied 0	2.00	9
Receive advice on funding opportunities	Very Satisfied 2 Satisfied 3 Dissatisfied 1 Very Dissatisfied 2	2.38	8

Note. A response *rating* of less than 2.50 means that this falls to the left of neutral and closer to the satisfied *rating*. A response *rating* of more than 2.50 means that this falls to the right of neutral and closer to the dissatisfied *rating*. All responses fell towards the satisfied rating. This is an indication that overall, the participants were satisfied with the program. A response count less than 10 indicates participant(s) skipped the question as they felt it did not pertain to them.

Although all of the results fell within a satisfied rating, the results show, consistently, that almost a third of the participants were *dissatisfied* with their dissertation supervisor, the quality of guidance, helpfulness of staff members, overall program satisfaction, clarity of degree requirements, and receiving help on degree requirements. These results could be an indication of problems with policies and procedures.

Research Question Four

What can students do to prepare and overcome the obstacles experienced while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?

Self-reflect. Online learning requires a multitude of traits and characteristics from the university and the student (Thomas & Owen, 2007). As Glenna stated, “I think online allows people flexibility but the down side is no personal connection with a core group of professors and peers. I don’t know one professor from my doctorate program.”

Ellen expressed her experience with the program:

I knew people who were able to go through the program and be very successful with it. So, I think that there is some value to offering that kind of program but I think that it is not a good fit for everyone. For me,, being the kind of person that I am the social person that I am, I work better knowing my adviser. And knowing that I could arrange for a meeting and go over and have a face-to-face conversation about what I was doing well, what I wasn't doing well, what needed to be improved, what revisions needed to be accomplished that works better for me. I think that, ya know, when I was enrolling it was not it was early in the development of various programs. And so I think that probably they were still learning too. I certainly learned from them. Ya know what I'm able to take from online learning is maybe not as much as maybe somebody else. Maybe somebody else that learning environment is perfect for them. But for me it wasn't. So it's about, ya know, having programs that can meet individual learning needs.

Commitment. Students must understand the need for commitment because without commitment, they may exit the doctoral program (Lovitts, 2001). Participants described their view of commitment required in the program (Table 9).

Table 9

Commitment

Participant	Response
Joey	Oh, I was fully committed in fact I . . . I attended a couple of the residencies as required as part of the program . . . and . . . Uh . . . I think just self-determination and good time management skills.
Raymond	I think it just . . . it was just . . . it demanded more uh . . . commitment that I was able to . . . to do at the time.
Cindy	It took lots of hours away from your family to do a good job and make it great. Spend an hour or two every day on the computer, reading. When I did statistics, I hired someone local so I had someone to talk to. Online did not help me at all. So, I spent lots of hours. When my husband got sick, I could not devote those hours. I had to take care of my husband and my family.
Dean	The commitment was significant. I decided that the benefit I would get was not worth it . . . the amount of time. I didn't want to just throw things together at the last minute and hand it in.
Millie	Um . . . well I had to be very structured and it did take a lot of time out of my day and I guess I lost that motivation at the end but . . . (she broke down and I started the next question).
Ellen	My commitment to the program was complete. I think it was unnecessarily demanding.
Louise	I was very committed and in fact was ahead in two classes with the people that started with me had a 4.0. University A requires that a couple of times a year they meet in different paces all over the country. I had already been to one in Atlanta and one in Florida. I was looking at possible chairs, research design, questions. I was very committed.
Glenna	A very strong commitment level. You need some sort of work ethic that helps you through it. Need a support system to help you through it more than you think. You need back up.
Sutter	I wanted to do it because eventually get out of the high school level and into the collegiate level. Fairly committed. I think you need a huge commitment. I have two kids and one on the way.
Kimberly	I guess I wasn't too committed. The prior degree was all on line and I was pretty committed for my master but as far as my doctorate as I continue I complete two classes I realized that I would have to be somebody that went and sat in the classroom in order to finish it so I guess I wasn't too committed if I just made it through two classes. I am a very committed person. I am very motivated and sometimes I put a lot of pressure on myself and it is almost like I feel like I put way too much pressure on myself that it wasn't really good for my health because I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere and I was not able to perform to my set of standards.

Only four participants reiterated the fact that they were committed. Joey was “fully committed,” Ellen stated that her commitment level was “complete,” Louse stated that she was “very committed,” and Glenna said she was “very strong commitment.” Interestingly, three of the four participants were in the dissertation stage while the fourth participant, after the interview, re-enrolled into a traditional program. These results indicate that commitment level may extend the time spent in the doctoral program. Consequently, a low level of commitment can shorten enrollment leading to withdrawal.

Kimberly referred to herself as “a very committed person.” However, after she thought for a moment she corrected her statement and said, “I guess I wasn’t too committed if I just made it through two classes”. Ellen started with a high level of commitment, but when she realized she did not have the support of her adviser, her commitment level went to zero. Although each participant had good intentions and high commitment levels when first enrolled in the program, degrees of commitment varied depending upon the circumstances that arose while in the program. All of the participants experienced one or more life situations that affected their commitment level in the program. These findings fall within Tinto’s (1993) framework indicating that commitment to academic goals is associated with persistence.

Increase Skills and Knowledge of the Process

Lacking the necessary skills to progress in the program can lead to non-completion of the program (Grady & Hoffman, 2007). Additional shortcomings include lack of focus and a lack of skills required for research work (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Katz, 1997). The following paragraphs elaborate on writing skills, time management skills, and knowledge of the process.

Writing skills. A major barrier for degree completion is difficulty with planning

and writing (D'Andrea, 2002). Writing the dissertation does not imitate the writing skills acquired as an undergraduate (Grady & Hoffman, 2007). Six participants felt they had the necessary skills for the online Doctor of Education program. The remaining four participants felt differently. Joey stated, "Ya, the level of writing and expectations was very high and there were a lot of tutorials. There were a lot of uh . . . high expectations in terms of writing qualities and I felt like I could not fulfill that requirement." Kimberly also referred to the writing skills, "I was not prepared at all scholarly. It was very difficult for me." Ellen said she knew how to write, but "I was not prepared for the writing as far as the re-visioning process." Besides writing and grammar, Glenna recalled, "my math skills were not up to par." Sutter's response was to his competencies were that the program was "just difficult and complicated."

Nine out of ten participants described the level of writing to be high or extensive. Kimberly elaborated on the subject:

The level of writing was very high. They required APA to the letter ya know the two space after the period kind of thing. Whenever there was a question, you could always go back to APA . . . and then they also most of the time . . . the feedback on your writing was they did a lot of discussion and talk and things about the syntheses. Ya, no, it wasn't that you were reporting on something. You were synthesizing what you have read and using it in your paper. It's not a dry report of this is what I read, this is how they agree but it's not only this viewpoint but the counterpoint and the nuance of it and it was writing was a very critical skill. Not in the beginning. No. I know that I was lucky. In the beginning of the program that I would turn something in early and get feedback, make corrections and turn it in for a final grade . . . and those first few classes

really did strengthen my early writings. Especially professional writings.

Although Sutter felt prepared for the level of writing “because I had my masters in literature so I did that kind of writing literacy analysis,” he also conferred that, “The level of writing was extensive.” Dean’s perception of the program was, “I thought the writing was easy.” Dean was the only participant who used the word “easy.” Dean completed two courses and did not begin his writing of the dissertation. Because Dean’s answer does not align with the consensus of this research or with the literature review, he is considered a deviant case. A deviant case is one in which appears to be an exception to the rule of patterns that are emerging from the data analysis (Patton, 2002).

Table 10

Development of Skills

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements:

	Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Not Very Helpful	Not at All Helpful	Rating Average	Response Count
I developed the skills to write journal articles.	33.3%	44.4%	22.2%	0.0%	1.89	9
I developed the skills to present papers effectively.	22.2%	55.6%	22.2%	0.0%	2.00	9

Note. A response *rating* of less than 2.50 means that this falls to the left of neutral and closer to probably somewhat helpful. Response count less than 10 indicates participant(s) skipped the question as they felt it did not pertain to them.

Although these results are not negative, they do indicate that participants need more help in the development of their skills.

Time management skills. One of the key issues in degree completion is identified as time management (Myers, 1999). Effective time management alleviates some of the stress students experience (Kuther, 2009). Joey acknowledged the importance of time management while discussing his commitment to the program, “I think just self-determination and good time management skills.”

Louise found time management to be challenging as she said, “the other part was time management . . . you have those last weeks when everything is due and you are trying to juggle and make sure you complete everything and that was a little difficult.” Sutter found it “difficult to keep up the pace . . . especially the level of time that was spent.” Raymond also found it problematic as he stated, “the amount of time I spent reading and what it required for me to be able to sit down and write that way

required a lot more focus . . . and that's hard to get in a house full of kids.”

Knowledge of the process. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), attrition can stem from a lack of knowledge to complete the process. Most students withdraw because they do not fully understand the final stages of earning their doctorate degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Louise was unclear about how to improve and advance in the program as she shares her comments, “Well, like I said, one of the things I really would have appreciated was some critical feedback.”

The NCES (2009) estimated that 90% of graduate students enrolled are suffering in the ABD stage because they cannot proceed through the individualized, autonomous portion of the program. The ability to navigate through an unstructured portion of graduate school is not based on students' intellect, but his or her lack of knowledge of the process (Educational Research Institute, 2009). Ellen reiterated the lack of structure by noting the lack of guidance received as she said, “The dissertation work was virtual, and that made it difficult. There wasn't a lot of guidance around what the expectation was. You sent it in and it came back completely marked up. You learned by submitting. So that went back and forth back and forth. So that's what the expectation was.”

When students are uncertain as to how to complete the process, they become extremely frustrated (Golde & Dore, 2001). Ellen continued with, “I did okay until I got to the dissertation part and that was kind of frustrating as far as choosing a committee and that kind of stuff. I would say there was not enough direct instruction on the expectation including the dissertation proposal. But there was very little institution on the expectation . . . really made it very challenging.”

Stacey's struggles included the lack of knowledge to complete the process as she admits, “Nothing was ever really explained.” Louise felt that there were problems

within the university as she said, “I’m not sure the process needs to change as much as some of the administration of the process.” Raymond felt misled as he remembered thinking, “This could be doable . . . especially doable within the time frame they were suggesting. That was not my experience once I got into it. Why I kind of wish things were just more up front from the get go.”

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of data collected from 10 participants who withdrew from an online Doctor of Education program. The participants in this study voluntarily shared their experiences. Data collection was comprised of interviews, surveys, and participant timelines. Open coding was used to determine central themes. After completing the data analysis, seven themes emerged. These themes are not inclusive of all themes from all non-completers, but rather the major themes emerged from the 10 participants in this study.

Themes were classified as individualized themes or institutional themes. Individual themes include family or personal situations, frustration, financial, and personal academic and social integration. Institutional themes include institutional procedures, student-adviser/committee relationships, and opportunities for academic and social integration. The itemization and compilation of themes is documented in the appendix. These themes were used in framing the answers to the four research questions in this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Chapter Five presents a summary of the findings of this study, followed by a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory. The chapter continues with an outline of the study limitations along with a discussion of implications (methodological and practical). The chapter closes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore strategies for reducing current attrition rates of 50% to 60% of online Doctor of Education students (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Rovai, 2002) by investigating the lived experiences of individuals who have broken enrollment in an online Doctor of Education degree. A phenomenological design was used to understand the holistic experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of online doctoral students (van Manen, 1997), to understand the participants' experiences, and to provide a universal description of the experience of a non-completer as a whole (van Manen, 1997). Although the majority of the participants listed family or personal reasons for not completing the program, participants consistently referred to a lack of academic integration and social integration and expressed feelings of loneliness, frustration, and isolation. Overall, participants expressed their lack of face-to-face contact and feelings of disconnect with the university due to the lack of academic and social integrations that led them to non-completion of the program. Additional, primary factors that influenced student's reason for non-completion included family or personal situations, financial, and frustration.

Survey data, participant timelines, and participant interviews were collected from

10 participants who withdrew from an online Doctor in Education program between 2008-2011 and enrolled in the program for at least one year. This study was guided by Tinto's (1975, 1988, 1993) models for explaining student departure concerning persistence and academic and social integration. The results were used to answer the following four questions:

Research Question One: What are the barriers to degree completion as perceived by individuals who broke enrollment from an online Doctor of Education program in the United States?

Family or personal situations. In a survey of past students, Lovitts (2001) found that 70% cited personal reasons such as family, health, personal obligations, and employment as reasons for non-completion in their program. Fifty percent of the participants enrolled in an online doctor of education in this study listed family reasons as their primary reason for non-completion of the program. Despite repeated efforts of participants to juggle family and everyday occurrences, participants felt they were spending too much time on the program and not enough with their family. Feelings of guilt by neglecting their role in the family attributed to their decision of withdrawing from the program. The results of this study confirmed previous studies indicating that family or personal situations were one of the top reasons why students became non-completers of doctoral programs (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lovitts; 2001; Myers, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

Lack of academic and social integration. In listening to the participants, all expressed an increased need for academic and social integration between their peers, the faculty, and the institution. Participants in this study lacked academic support and believed the lack of support prevented them from advancing in the program. References

to a lack of social interaction and no face-to-face collaboration supports Tinto's models (1975, 1988, 1993) of integration in that the participant's lack of academic and social integration can lead to non-completion of the program. However, in online programs the participants referenced lack of integration as not having the capability of interacting with others in a face-to-face social setting.

Financial. The lack of financial resources is another significant reason doctoral students do not complete their degree (Carter, 2004; Dominguez, 2006; Grover, 2007; Lage-Otero, 2006; Sigafus, 1998). Over half of the participants in this study referenced finances while earning their degree and three out of 10 listed financial reasons as one of the major reasons for withdrawal. Six out of 10 participants received some form of financial aid. Participant references to financial difficulties in this study support research that financial burdens can escalate and the graduate study is abandoned altogether (Lage-Otero, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Poole, 2010)

Research Question Two: What is the essence of the lived experience of online Doctor of Education students who broke enrollment in online doctoral programs in the United States?

Feelings of isolation. If doctoral students experience feelings of isolation and do not integrate into the academic environment and faculty their chances are increased that they may not complete the program (Terrell et al., 2009). All but one of the participants expressed feelings of isolation. The social disconnect that participants felt while enrolled confirms previous research on isolation contributing to non-completion of the program (Ali & Kohun, 2006, Kluever, 1997; Lovitts, 2001; Ryan et al., 2011). Feelings of isolation are specifically identified in online studies as most of the work is done alone and away from family and peers (Rovai, 2002; Terrell et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2011).

Although online students are at home while enrolled, they sacrifice time spent with family and friends. Social events, children's school activities, and simple actions such as watching a movie with the family are forgone so that the online doctoral student can complete the program requirements.

Difficulty of the program. The difficulty and time required to maintain enrollment in the doctoral program might cause students to withdraw from the program (Nash, 2005; Sigafus, 1998). Eight participants discussed the degree of academic intensity involved in the program by noting that the program was much harder than anticipated. The participants noted the uniqueness of online learning made the program much more challenging than they expected. These findings relate to previous studies where participants experienced periods of psychological adjustment because of program difficulties and deliberated about whether to withdraw from the program (Hawley, 2003; Terrell et al., 2009).

Student-advisor/committee relationship. Two of the three participants in the dissertation stage of the program experienced disconnect with their adviser and committee, which resulted in non-completion of the program. These findings confirm past research acknowledging that if students experience a lack of support from their advisor or committee during the dissertation stage, it can result in non-completion of the program (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Fletcher, 2009; Green & Kluever, 1997; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Willis & Carmichael, 2011).

Research Question Three: What can universities do to remove some of the obstacles experienced by doctoral students while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?

Promote academic and social integration. If universities take specific actions

toward increasing integration among students, it can increase the chances of degree completion to the student (Fletcher, 2009). Almost all of the participants in this study discussed a need for increased communication.

Provide program flexibility and support. Participants in this study thought universities should be more understanding in the doctoral program as students are usually working full time, married, and have young families. The study demonstrated the importance of faculty and program support directly relating to persistence in degree completion. This confirms studies done that determined the lack of support decreases student persistence, and may lead to non-completion of the program (Fletcher, 2009; Tinto, 1993).

Modify program procedures. When participants were asked if they would select the same university if they were to re-enroll, the majority of the participants would not choose the same university. However, they would still choose the same field of study. These results indicate that participants were unhappy with the university and not their degree path. Thus, this research endorses a previous study by Lovitts and Nelson (2000) challenging that, “Departments with high rates of attrition among graduate students need to look to their own practices for answers and solutions” (p. 4).

Research Question Four: What can students do to prepare and overcome the obstacles experienced while attempting to complete their online doctoral degree?

Commitment. Students must understand the need for commitment because without commitment, they may withdraw from the doctoral program (Lovitts, 2001). Only four participants reiterated the fact that they were committed to the program. This confirms Tinto’s (1993) framework indicating that commitment to academic goals is associated with persistence, and the lack of persistence decreases the chances for program

completion.

Increase skills. Students must increase skills that may contribute to non-completion of the program. Kimberly was not ready for the program rigor as she stated, “I was not prepared at all scholarly. It was very difficult for me.” Some of the major skills referred to in the literature review were writing skills, time management skills, and knowledge of the process (Golde & Dore, 2001; Grady & Hoffman, 2007).

Writing skills. Participants referred to their lack of writing skills required for the program. These findings confirm previous studies indicating that lacking the necessary skills to progress in the program can result in participant weakness; therefore lead to non-completion of the program (D’Andrea, 2002; Grady & Hoffman, 2007; Muirhead, 2004).

Time management skills. One of the key issues in degree completion is identified as time management (Myers, 1999). Two participants in this study referenced time management skills as a necessity for degree completion. This confirms previous work as time management being one of the key issues in degree completion (Myers, 1999).

Knowledge of the process. Many students do not complete the program because they do not fully understand the final stages of earning their doctorate degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde & Dore, 2001). Participants in the current study identified with previous research and were unsure of the knowledge to complete the process. They became extremely frustrated at the expectations and the lack of guidance in the process.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings presented in this hermeneutic phenomenological (van Manen, 1997) study add to the foundation of current knowledge on doctoral persistence and therefore may help universities, students, faculty, and any other person of interest gain an

understanding of how the participants in this study experienced the non-completion of an online doctoral program. Themes established in Tinto's (1993) student integration model based on traditional students are very similar to those found in online students. However, the dynamics of establishing those themes are different. For example, a high level of commitment is required to complete academic degrees. In addition, the amount of commitment in an online Doctor of Education program comes with alternative sacrifices for the student. As previously stated, the online doctoral student is generally older, works full time, and is married with children. The commitment level of an online doctoral student places financial and social sacrifices, which is generally not experienced by the traditional, undergraduate, unmarried student in Tinto's (1993) model. A majority of studies have focused on the students who have withdrawn from traditional doctoral programs. This study focused on the online Doctor of Education student, where minimal studies have been completed (Chyung, 2001; Easton, 2003; Hannun et al, 2008; Kirtman, 2009).

Previous research on doctoral student attrition examined a range of reasons for student attrition (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Gardner, 2010; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Individuals seek their doctorate degree for multiple reasons, and each student that becomes a non-completer in the program is unique in their journey. This research examined the various institutional and personal reasons for non-completion of the doctoral program, and then focused on each participant's reason for non-completion to fill the gap in the literature. The participant's data collected did not appear to be bias in relation to any one university.

As van Manen (1997) stated,

It would be inappropriate to ask for the results or for a conclusion of this

phenomenological study. However, as this research identifies with human experiences of non-completers, we gain a better understanding of the reasons why students withdraw from an online doctorate program (van Manen, 1997, p. 13).

The majority of the participants in this study had trouble with family or personal situations, a lack of academic and social integration, finances, and frustration while enrolled in the Doctor in Education. These barriers led to non-completion of the program.

In analyzing the data, three participants, all female, referred to family issues as the major reason for not completing the program. Family and personal issues were the main reason in this study for program non-completion. After giving birth to her third child during enrollment, Kimberly, age 34, gave her reason for withdrawing from the program. She stated, "Family. My kids are still young, and I feel like I need to spend the time with them." Cindy's husband became ill and she made the decision to choose her family needs over her own educational goals. Cindy explained her withdrawal was because she "needed to take care of family needs." The third participant, Millie, had an unexpected loss of her child. She stated, "I didn't officially withdraw . . . I just never went back." These findings can deliberate the fact that family issues can be a greater barrier to degree completion to females rather than to males.

Three out of the four males in the study referred to the program as taking time away from the family, but none found it problematic enough to withdraw. Dean, the fourth male, was in the 50-60 year old bracket and never mentioned family as being problematic. However, as previously noted, Dean is a deviant case. These findings confirm research done by Lovitts (2001) that determined students are affected by what happens to them after entering the program.

All of the participants in this study referred to the lack of academic and social

integration while enrolled. As Millie stated, “I really thought I would have more interaction with people during the program”. Ellen replied that she had “difficulty with feeling connected to the adviser” in the online doctoral program. The lack of face-to-face contact resulted in feelings of isolation for the participants, thus contributing to non-completion of the program.

The lack of financial resources is one of the major reasons why students do not complete their degree (Carter, 2004; Dominguez, 2006; Grover, 2007; Ivankova, 2004; Lage-Otero, 2006; Poole, 2010; Sigafus, 1998). Thirty percent of the participants in this study found finances to be problematic and 60% of the participants in this study required financial aid. The participant’s responses to financial concerns in this study support research that financial burdens can escalate and the graduate study is abandoned altogether (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

Obtaining a doctoral degree online is often perceived as inferior to residential, but in actuality, the literature suggests that it is often more rigorous and more work (Ward & Shelley, 2010). The participants in this study underestimated the time and effort needed for the program. Nine out of ten participants acknowledged that the program was much harder than expected. Dean, the only participant that did not acknowledge difficulty in the program, was considered a deviant case. Glenna recalled being frustrated with the program as she said, “It challenges to where it is too hard to where you shut down.” Ellen stated, “I just was in a very discouraged place.” These findings reinforce previous studies indicating that student attrition occurs because they are asked to do something they have never done before and lack the knowledge of the process (Carter, 2004; Grabois, 2007; Grover, 2007).

The lack of institutional support includes such factors as the lack of advising, lack

of feedback, lack of mentorship, lack of program structure, and lack of resources needed for students to succeed. The lack of institutional support noted by the participants is consistent with the findings discovered in the literature review (Grady & Hoffman, 2007, Katz, 1997; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1993). Tinto's models (1975, 1988, 1993) demonstrated the importance of the institute and the role it plays in promoting an environment of academic and social integration is applicable to this study. Tinto (1993) also argued that if students lack integration with faculty and peers, their chances are increased for program withdrawal. However, educators who desire to study the persistence of online students may find that the Tinto's models (1975, 1988, 1993) have limited applicability since it is best suited to for the analysis of the persistence of traditional undergraduate students (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Rendon et al., 2000).

Implications

Practical Implications

Individuals. Students entering the online Doctor in Education program can expect the program to be much harder than anticipated. Although many of the participants felt they had the necessary skills needed to complete the program, they did not expect the program rigor and time needed for their studies. Potential students can also expect feelings of isolation during the online doctoral program. While most referenced the lack of academic and social integration, they also expressed a lack of communication relating to program processes and procedures, thus, creating feelings that they were doing it alone.

The majority of the participants in this study had trouble with family or personal situations, a lack of academic and social integration, finances, and frustration while enrolled in the Doctor in Education. These barriers led to non-completion of the program.

Online doctoral students need to be aware of the sacrifices they must make towards program completion. These sacrifices include time spent with family and friends. They must stay focused on their studies and this may result in the loss of friends and ability to attend to family and social gatherings.

Individuals with young children should carefully consider and weigh the costs and benefits of beginning a doctorate when their children are young. The average age of completing a doctor of education is 40.5 years (National Science Foundation, 2010); therefore, if individuals enroll in an online doctoral program after their children have grown, they have an increased chance of program completion. The participants in this study made an intentional decision to place their family's needs over their own desire to earn a degree. However, they were not individuals who just gave up. Their decision was an honorable one as they have forgone their educational goal and made their family a priority.

Because three out of 10 of the participants had problems with finances, it would be beneficial to doctoral students to consider doctoral programs that provide adequate financial support. If no support is available, it could lead the online doctoral student into non-completion of the degree.

Institutions. If institutions, faculty, administrators, and students fail to address the issues of online learning, attrition rates of 50% to 60% will be difficult to decrease. Several participants stated the lack of social and academic integration received while enrolled in their online Doctor in Education program. Whereas the lack of support from the faculty and institute can lead to non-completion of the program, the following suggestions provide ideas to improve institutional support. A program dedicated to meeting the requirements and needs of the student can have greater potential for

increased student persistence therefore increasing the chances for program completion. Professors of online teaching should be trained to provide constant and timely feedback, and accommodate the needs of the online learner. Students benefit from online instruction when faculty are involved and provide encouragement and assistance. When faculty is involved with their students in online learning, it provides the students with a sense of belonging. Students need their online professors to provide sufficient feedback to feel connected with the program (Kember, 1989; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Additional student needs regarding intutional resources may include technology support, providing course materials, library resources, counseling services, academic and peer support groups, and any student support, if provided, that would support the online student to degree completion.

Universities are losing almost one-third of their doctoral students during the dissertation stage (Louisiana State University, 2006). Two of the three participants in the dissertation stage in this study experienced disconnect with their adviser and committee leading to non-completion of the online Doctor in Education program. In light of the findings related to a problematic dissertation chair relationship in doctoral attrition, current or prospective doctoral students are encouraged to consider possible dissertation chairs early in the doctoral program. A veteran advisor who is familiar with program procedures can help maintain enrollment (Myers, 1999); thus, potential students may benefit from an adviser who is familiar with the process. Students can look at the quality of published dissertations from their program's graduates to ascertain an advisor's experience of completed dissertation. The choice of a dissertation chair might be the most important decision in doctoral study (Bair & Haworth, 1999).

Institutions should monitor advising relationships assuring that each adviser is

experienced in supervising research and is committed to graduate students (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). If students are not progressing in their dissertation, an intervention meeting should be scheduled to help move the process along. Advisors should also be aware of their role and the impact they possess in the students completing their degree. Assistance with academic problems and personal encouragement should be part of an advisor's responsibility.

Theoretical Implications

In analyzing the external and internal factors to students' persistence in an online Doctor of Education program, universities and students can develop strategies to enhance doctoral persistence, thus, increase the chances of degree completion. The implications derived from this study examine the experiences of online doctoral students and are revealed using Tinto's (1993) Model of Institutional Departure. This model has had the greatest influence on understanding of student withdrawal. Tinto (1993) theorized that students enter college with predefined family and individual characteristics (family, skills, abilities, prior education). These predefined characteristics influence the student's goal and commitments toward their degree. Tinto's (1997) model also identified student commitment to the institution as a factor, and the institution's commitment in terms of services and expectations of student success (Tinto, 2002).

The participants in this study entered the program with intentions of completing. They entered into an academic institute characterized by grade performance and scholarly growth, which together lead to academic integration. They also enrolled in an institute where peer and faculty interactions should lead to social integration. However, the majority of the participants in this study found that the lack of social integration played a significant role in their persistence and their decision to withdraw from the program.

Their limited interactions, referred to as face-to-face, prevented academic and social integration that resulted in decreased persistence. Ultimately, it was the degree of integration, both academically and socially, that led them into feelings of isolation and frustration. Combining all these factors, in varying degrees and stages of the program, the participants were led to non-completion of the program. These findings are consistent with Tinto's (1975, 1988, 1993) models of student integration (1975, 1988, 1993).

Student related factors and institutional factors interact and contribute to the level the student becomes integrated into the university, which is essential to persistence (Tinto, 1993). Relationship with peers and a sense of belonging with the community is a large element of social integration (Tinto, 1997). As Tinto (1997) wrote, "It is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to drop out" (p. 96).

While this single study cannot provide a framework for institutional practices, the research does suggest that institutions should promote a culture of a caring and be committed to their students. This is consistent with previous research that suggests institutes should provide support academically and socially (Swail, 2004). Universities need to be flexible so they can mold to meet the diverse needs of individual students. Students often leave their programs without any further contact from the university. When participants were asked if they were contacted after withdrawing from the program, Louise replied, "Oh no. It is an online institution. It is a big institution and my slot will be filled by the next person. They did not seem concerned at all."

Institutional student support should include all possible services needed for the online student to succeed. This support, although not inclusive, involves technology

support, course materials, library resource support, counseling services, academic and peer support groups, and any student support, if provided, that would help the student to degree completion. Universities need to develop additional links, between student services and academic services, where Tinto's (1993) model of academic and social integration is most relevant. The significance in providing an understanding of the various roles that will be expected and required of administrators, faculty members, and staff members on campus is essential if a program is to be successful. Integration must be supported throughout the entire program to bring online learners together.

Study Limitations

This study focuses on individuals who withdrew from an online Doctor of Education program during the last three years and enrolled in the program for at least one year. Further, data collection was limited to self-report measures and interviews where participants were asked to reflect on experiences. Although steps were taken to increase the trustworthiness of the findings, there are several limitations to this study as a result of these methodological decisions.

Participant Enrollment Period

A limitation to this research is the enrollment period of the participants. Whereas the criteria to participate involved only one year of enrollment, participant experiences and responses may have been different if the participant enrollment exceeded one year; thus, experiencing multiple stages of the program. Half of the participants in this study met the minimum enrollment requirement of one year; therefore, they were in the initial stage of the program. Three participants, Cindy, Ellen, and Millie, experienced the final stage and began their dissertation. The remaining two students, enrolled for two years, were in the middle stages of the program. In addition, while half the participants met the

one-year requirement; many of them did not represent Tinto's (1993) Longitudinal Model; whereas, over time, institutional experiences influence the level of academic and social integration experienced by the individual.

Isolated Program Chosen for Study

In an effort to maintain consistency in data collection, the targeted universities were chosen if they offered an online Doctor of Education program. Therefore, survey results are limited to an online Doctor of Education program and should not represent all doctorate programs (Creswell, 2007). Enlarging the pool of participants to include multiple online doctorate programs instead of isolating the study to an online Doctor of Education program may provide a more diverse collection of data and add validity to the study.

Geographic Location of the Institute and Participants

Data collection included four different online universities. All of the universities, along with the participants, were located in the eastern region of the United States. This study may have provided different results if the data collection involved a separate location of the country. In addition, the outcomes could have been different if the data collection involved only one university, or several more universities.

Each university is unique in their policies and procedures. The structure and process of graduate education evolves in the culture of graduate school and is a main cause of attrition (Lovitts, 2001). The organizational culture is the traditional patterns, norms, values, beliefs and behaviors passed down to new faculty and students. The unwritten rule of the university's culture is up to students to find out by trial and error. Graduate students receive the written rules of a university's organizational culture through the graduate student handbook. The faster these unspoken rules are learned; the

sooner students can adjust to the organizational culture and complete their degree (Carter, 2004). The number of online course completed in this study is supported in multiple studies, which found first time students often lacked the necessary independence and time management skills needed for persistence in online learning (Eisenberg & Dowsett, 1990; Ehrman, 1990). It is important to understand the negative experiences of the students who do not complete the program (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The participants of the study are from online programs rather than traditional programs. Therefore, conclusions drawn from the research might result in alternate outcomes if the programs were traditional or mixed. Online learning students have minimal face-to-face interactions and do not experience the school culture to the degree that traditional students do. In addition, research of online learning programs does not have supporting evidence of historical studies because the programs are new in existence.

Number and Ethnicity of Participants

Although a sufficient number of participants were included in this study given the qualitative research design employed (Creswell, 2007), a much larger pool of participants may reveal additional, varied responses. Further research collecting additional data on students who have withdrawn from an online doctoral program may result in additional experiences of the non-completer not revealed in this study. In addition, all 10 of the participants were of Caucasian race; thus, the findings from this study may not be transferrable to studies presenting additional ethnic groups.

Researcher Bias

In qualitative studies, researchers may misinterpret data or responses from the participants, which may cause researcher bias (van Manen, 1997). In this study, I was the only individual to code the data and thus bias may be present. However, detailed steps in

the auditing and analysis process of this study provided in the appendices help support that the findings are true and representative of the data collected (van Manen, 1997). In addition, it is possible that I have brought some of my own experiences into analyzing the data. As a doctoral student, I have experienced some of the same frustrations as the participants. However, preventative steps such as choosing a sample of non-completers who were not enrolled in the same university, peer reviews, and member checks were done to reduce bias.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study provide insight and information regarding the perceptions of the non-completer; however, there is still an abundance of data to be uncovered. Below I discuss recommendations for future research.

Compare Reasons for Enrollment to Determine Program Completion Rate

Although all of the participants in this study were non-completers, each held aspirations of completing their doctoral degree. The present study is limited by methodology and sample demographics. Future research can expand on the characteristics and demographics of the participants. The research should include completers and non-completers of online doctoral students using a quantitative method to compare the two groups. Such information would include the reasons for enrolling, how their education is financed, marital status, number of dependents, ethnicity, etc. The purpose of the study would be to see if the reasons for enrollment in an online doctoral program give added commitment to degree completion. One could go further to see if individuals, when given additional money from their employer after degree completion, have an increased chance of degree completion as to those who do not have any monetary increase.

Characteristics of the 2018 Doctor of Education Non-Completer

It may also be pertinent to look at a similar study in approximately five years. Millions of Americans raised in the era of texting and web-based learning at an earlier age have been labeled as the net generation (Bonamici, Hutto, Smith, & Ward, 2005). Future students in doctorate programs will have a different perception of an online doctoral program as they have acquired distinctive ways of thinking, communicating, and learning (Prensky, 2006). Thirty percent of the participants in this study were over the age of 40, and an additional 30% were over 50 years old. The recommended study would be age specific, with the criteria being under the age of 40. The purpose of the study would be to see if students, having been born into an influx of technology driven programs, have adapted to the ways of online learning (Prensky, 2006). As society continually absorbs and accepts technology driven programs, will students adapt to online learning while lacking the social integration Tinto's model represents? Do we experience the loneliness and isolated feelings in the same way as the participants in this study?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a Framework to Predict Program Completion

Another recommendation for future research is to look at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model as a framework to predict program completion. In relation to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, students must be striving for self-actualization (Maslow, 1962). Self-actualization is being the best you can be, driven by a desire to know things. Individuals at this level possess a cognitive need to have more knowledge. However, this need can only be met when other, lower level of needs are met (Maslow, 1962).

If students do not have their lower level needs met, such as socialization,

interaction with peers, and being a part of a group, they cannot accelerate into the self-actualization stage of completing a doctoral degree. Maslow's (1962) second level of needs, involves the security of employment and family. Because the online study is usually married and working fully time, these needs to the online doctoral study are vital for their success. The third level, love and belonging, requires the online student to have the support of their family and friends. Without their support, it will be difficult for them to excel. Maslow's fourth level would involve the student to possess the self-esteem and confidence necessary to continue with the completion of the online doctoral program. Unless a student is confident enough, their success rate diminishes. If the first four levels of Maslow's (1962) needs are met, it is only then that they will be successful to degree completion. This study could involve the development of survey questions to help determine and identify their level of need according to Maslow (1962).

Summary

The importance of individuals and institutions to understand the unique factors involved in non-completion in an online doctoral degree cannot be underestimated. It is also important for students to recognize that institutions are not uniform or methodical in reporting attrition, and the odds of completing an online doctoral degree are historically against them. One of the most significant factors in non-completion in an online doctoral degree is the ability for students to integrate their academics with work, family, and social commitments. If one or more factors become a priority, the chances of not completing an online doctoral degree increase. Individuals must possess the desire and perseverance in the program to remain consistent and resilient to weaken the barriers to degree completion while at the same time recognizing that each stage of completing the online degree brings new challenges.

Prospective doctoral students need to understand that they cannot compare the online doctoral degree to previous courses or degrees they have taken online. The online doctoral program may be more rigorous than anticipated, dissertation requirements generally take longer, and the emotional isolation due to the lack of social and academic integration that transpires is surprising. Before enrolling in an online doctoral program, students need to ask themselves the reason for acquiring the degree, if they are ready and willing to sacrifice the opportunity costs that occur towards degree completion, and recognize that a psychological impact may occur from feelings of guilt and selfishness towards completing their own educational goal. These opportunity costs include time spent with family, lost income, social activities, career opportunities, and much more. Although unexpected events may occur that demand withdrawal from the program, ultimately the student decides whether to overcome the forces they encounter. Individuals considering enrolling in a doctoral program should perform a self-assessment of the factors involved and converse with others who have enrollment experience in an online doctoral program.

Additionally, institutions should examine their program procedures and policies to ensure they are providing the resources necessary to foster online doctoral student persistence. As the literature shows, high attrition rates for institutions have negative consequences (Gardner, 2010). In order for institutions to decrease attrition, they must listen to their students who were non-completers of their online doctoral programs. Multiple academic and administrative policies should be reinforced throughout the three stages (transition stage, candidacy stage, and completion stage) of degree completion investigated in this research. Findings from this study suggest that while students withdraw for a myriad of reasons, universities should be wise to increase opportunities

for students to become academically and socially integrated into the university in order to increase their sense of belonging and acceptance within the institution. The increased integration will therefore help promote program persistence and commitment and decrease the chances of their online doctoral students becoming a non-completer.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LETTER OF CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONSENT FORM

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Non-Completers in
the Doctoral Program

by

Bernadette Marie Wyman

Liberty University

School of Education

December 2011

You are invited to be in a research study of the experiences and perceptions of non-completers in a doctoral program. You were selected as a possible participant because you have withdrawn from an online Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education program during the last three years and have been enrolled in the program for at least one year. You were referred by the sender of this email to aid in the completion of this doctoral dissertation. Your efforts involve completing the following survey and participating in a brief interview. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Bernadette Wyman, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. My advisor, Dr. Judy Shoemaker, and committee members Dr. Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw and Dr. Lucinda Spaulding are supervising the research. All committee members are affiliated with Liberty University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences as perceived by doctoral students who have broken enrollment in an online Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education program. The data collected will aid in understanding how participants perceive the barriers to degree completion, how students and universities can contribute to overcome these barriers, and the essence of the lived experience of online doctoral students with broken enrollment.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we ask that you take approximately 10 minutes to complete an online survey and agree to a 25-minute to 40 minute interview. Contact information is requested on the survey and you will be contacted within the next two to four weeks to arrange for an interview. With your verbal consent at the time of the interview, you will be recorded while responding to questions via the telephone or Skype (a software application that allows users to make voice and video calls over the Internet).

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. The benefits to participation are in helping current and future doctoral students complete the doctoral program. The information collected from doing this study will help better understand the experiences of students who do not complete a doctorate program. You may also receive personal satisfaction from helping others.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not

include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records in the form of paper or external hardware memory devices will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet and only researchers will have access to the records. Any data stored on a computer hard drive will be right protected with a security password known only to the principal investigator. Once the data is collected, analyzed, and the dissertation has been accepted as complete, any coding key that could link the survey with the participant is destroyed. These actions will maintain the anonymity of the results. Three years after the completion of this study, all records will be destroyed by burning. Data stored on external devices and hard drives will be deleted by the Principal Investigator. Data collected from participants will be used for this research only and will not be available for future research unless permission is granted.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

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

How to Withdraw From the Study:

Please email Bernadette Wyman at bwyman@liberty.edu with the words “please withdraw” in the subject line. Any recorded interview will be erased and any data included in this research will be deleted.

Contacts and Questions:

The researchers conducting this study are Bernadette Wyman and Dr. Judy Shoemaker. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Bernadette Wyman at 508-821-5644 or email bmwyman@liberty.edu. You may also contact Dr. Judy Shoemaker at 863-326-6208 or email jshoemaker@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502, or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. If initiated, I have asked questions and have received answers. By placing an X in the space below, I consent to participate in this study.

_____ I consent to participate in this study

I also consent to be interviewed by Bernadette Wyman and may be reached at the contact information provided below:

Name _____

Email address _____

Telephone Number _____

Signature of Investigator: **Bernadette M. Wyman**

Date: December 2011

APPENDIX B

Revised Rutgers's Doctoral Program Evaluation Survey

Did you attend Liberty University's Ed.D. program? **If yes, please do not proceed.**

Please provide your email address _____

What was the name of the university you were enrolled in?

In which degree program were you enrolled?

- Ed.D. in Education
- Ph.D. in Education

Subfield:

When did you first enroll as a graduate student in this program?

Semester Year

How many courses did you complete in the program?

1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10	11-12	13+
-----	-----	-----	-----	------	-------	-----

When did you withdraw from the program?

Semester Year

Please list the reason or reasons for withdrawing.

Please indicate your status during the enrollment.

- Full time
- Part time

Have your career goals and plans changed since entering the doctoral program?

- Yes
- No

Section I – Personal Information

1. What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
2. What is your present citizenship status?
 - U.S. Citizen
 - Permanent resident of the U.S.
 - Citizen of (Please specify country):

3. To which racial or ethnic group do you belong? Please check all that apply.

- Asian/Asian American
- African American
- Filipino
- Chicano
- Native American
- Latino
- Puerto Rican
- White

Other (please specify):

4. Age category:

- 20-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50-60
- 60-70

Other

5. Number of degrees held prior to doctorate

6. Certifications held

7. Year received bachelor's degree:

Section II – Satisfaction with Program

Please indicate your level of satisfaction with each of the following items.

- a. My program's reputation
 - Very Satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very Dissatisfied
- b. Program's ability to keep pace with recent developments in my field
 - Very Satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very Dissatisfied
- c. Adequacy of facilities
 - Very Satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very Dissatisfied
- d. Training in research methods
 - Very Satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very Dissatisfied
- e. Professional relationship with my dissertation supervisor
 - Very Satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very Dissatisfied
- f. Quality of academic advising and guidance
 - Very Satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very Dissatisfied
- g. Helpfulness of staff members in my department or program
 - Very Satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very Dissatisfied

- h. Overall, satisfaction with your program
 Very Satisfied Satisfied Dissatisfied Very Dissatisfied

Section III – Climate of Program and Quality of Interactions

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

- a. Faculty members are willing to work with me
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- b. My own relationships and interaction with faculty are good
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- c. My relationships and interaction with other students in my program are collegial
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- d. Overall, the climate of my program is positive
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Section IV – Program Course Work

Please rate each of the following.

- a. Availability of area courses I needed to complete my program
 Excellent Very Good Fair Poor
- b. Overall quality of course instruction by faculty
 Excellent Very Good Fair Poor
- c. Overall, the quality of course work in my program
 Excellent Very Good Fair Poor

Section V – Qualifying Examination and Dissertation

1. How much do you agree with each of the following statements?
- a. Coursework, seminars, labs, reading courses, etc. adequately prepared me for candidacy exams/dissertation work
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- b. The process of selecting my dissertation committee was satisfactory
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
2. Dissertation workshop(s):
- a. Did the university and/or your program provide coaching and workshops for students writing doctoral dissertations?
 Yes No Don't Know
- b. Should the university provide dissertation coaching and workshops?
 Yes No Don't Know
- c. Did you attend workshops for students writing doctoral dissertations?
 Yes No Don't Know

3. How often did you meet with an advisor and/or your committee for each of the following activities?
- a. Doing research for the dissertation
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| At Least
Weekly | One or Two
Times/Month | Less than
Once/Month | As
Needed |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- b. Writing the dissertation
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| At Least
Weekly | One or Two
Times/Month | Less than
Once/Month | As
Needed |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- c. Meeting with my dissertation committee
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| At Least
Weekly | One or Two
Times/Month | Less than
Once/Month | As
Needed |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
4. How helpful was/were your advisor(s) for each of the following activities?
- a. Writing the dissertation
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very
Helpful | Somewhat
Helpful | Not Very
Helpful | Not at All
Helpful |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- b. Doing research for the dissertation
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very
Helpful | Somewhat
Helpful | Not Very
Helpful | Not at All
Helpful |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- c. Meeting with my dissertation committee
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very
Helpful | Somewhat
Helpful | Not Very
Helpful | Not at All
Helpful |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
- a. I have been able to work with the dissertation advisor of my choice
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very
Helpful | Somewhat
Helpful | Not Very
Helpful | Not at All
Helpful |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- b. My doctoral committee supported and encouraged my research idea
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very
Helpful | Somewhat
Helpful | Not Very
Helpful | Not at All
Helpful |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- c. Doctoral committee members were accessible
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very
Helpful | Somewhat
Helpful | Not Very
Helpful | Not at All
Helpful |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

- d. I developed the skills to write journal articles
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Helpful | Helpful | Helpful | Helpful |
| Very | Somewhat | Not Very | Not at All |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- e. I developed the skills to present papers effectively
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very | Somewhat | Not Very | Not at All |
| Helpful | Helpful | Helpful | Helpful |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Section VI – Program Support

1. Please indicate your level of satisfaction if you engaged in the listed activity.

Did you:

- a. Obtain clarity on degree completion requirements?
- | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| If Yes | Very Satisfied | Satisfied | Dissatisfied | Very Dissatisfied |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- b. Receive help in developing a plan for degree completion?
- | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| If Yes | Very Satisfied | Satisfied | Dissatisfied | Very Dissatisfied |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- c. Receive advice on funding opportunities?
- | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| If Yes | Very Satisfied | Satisfied | Dissatisfied | Very Dissatisfied |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
- d. Hold a job during your graduate studies?
- Yes No
- f. Receive financial aid of any kind (including loan, scholarship, fellowship, and teaching or research assistantship) during your graduate studies?
- Yes No

Section VII – Dissertation Chair/Main Advisor

For each of these statements, indicate the extent that it describes the behavior of your dissertation advisor or chair.

My dissertation advisor:

- a. Was knowledgeable about formal degree requirements
- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
- b. Gave me constructive feedback on my work
- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
- c. Returned my work promptly
- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
- d. Guided and assisted me in the completion of my research
- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
- e. Overall, performed the role well
- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree | <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|

Section VIII – Overall Evaluation of the University and Your Program

Please rate each of the following items as they apply to the University (the overall institution). Leave blank if not applicable.

1. The University as an institution
 - a. The graduate or professional school admissions process
 - Excellent
 - Very Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
 - b. The University computing facilities and resources
 - Excellent
 - Very Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
 - c. The University library support services
 - Excellent
 - Very Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
 - d. Adequacy of financial support I have received
 - Excellent
 - Very Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
2. Overall, how would you rate...
 - a. Your experience at the University?
 - Excellent
 - Very Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
 - b. Your experience in the doctoral program?
 - Excellent
 - Very Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
 - c. The quality of the doctoral program?
 - Excellent
 - Very Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
3. The University and Your Program

If you were to start your graduate career again,...

 - a. Would you select the University?

Definitely Would	Probably Would	Probably Would Not	Definitely Would Not
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
 - b. Would you select the same field of study?

Definitely Would	Probably Would	Probably Would Not	Definitely Would Not
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
 - c. Would you select the same dissertation advisor/committee?

Definitely Would	Probably Would	Probably Would Not	Definitely Would Not
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section IX – Comments

Describe your experience while enrolled in the program. Include details of your successes and struggles. Reflect upon things that could have been done differently to make your journey easier.

What was the reason(s) for enrolling in the doctoral program?

Based on your experience, what changes would you recommend in your doctoral program in the future?

Please tell me any additional information you would like me to know about your doctoral experience.

Please provide the following contact information so that I may contact you to arrange a brief interview regarding your experience. The interview is crucial to complete this research. Your time is greatly appreciated. Thank you so much.

Preferred Name: _____

Telephone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

If you would like a copy of the survey results sent to you, please provide a forwarding email address: _____

Appendix C

Requesting Permission to Use Survey

From: Midge Wyman [mailto:midge_wyman@yahoo.com]

Sent: Thursday, April 15, 2010 3:30 PM

To: Gayle Coryell

Subject: Survey

Ms. Gayle Coryell, Research Project Manager

Gayle,

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me on the telephone today about Rutgers Doctoral Program Evaluation Survey. As I mentioned, Rutgers survey is the best all-around survey that I have found. I am requesting permission to use this survey in my dissertation for my Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education degree at Liberty University.

If possible, I would also like to request access to the Association of American Universities Data Exchange. I believe this information will be very helpful.

Again, thanks for your time. You have provided me with some useful information.

Sincerely,

Bernadette Wyman

Appendix D

Permission Granted to Use Survey

RE: Survey

Thursday, April 15, 2010

4:34 PM

From: "Gayle Coryell" <coryell@instlres.rutgers.edu>

To: "Midge Wyman" midge_wyman@yahoo.com

You're quite welcome Midge. I am happy to grant permission. We do not copyright our surveys and are happy to share them. Attached you will find the common questions we will be adding to our doctoral exit survey over the summer.

Gayle

Gayle Coryell
Senior Institutional Research Associate
Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning
Geology Hall Room 107
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
85 Somerset Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Voice: 732-932-7305
Fax: 732-932-1268
coryell@instlres.rutgers.edu

Appendix E

Email to Solicit Participants

I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University and need your help in completing my dissertation. The title of my paper is *A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Non-Completers in the Doctoral Program*.

If you have withdrawn from an online Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education program during the last three years and have been enrolled in the program for at least one year, please complete a survey by clicking on the link provided below within the next 3 days.

If you agree to be in this study, please take approximately 20 minutes to complete this online survey and agree to a 40-minute interview. Your email address and telephone number is requested on the survey and you will be contacted within the next two to four weeks to arrange for an interview. With your verbal consent at the time of the interview, you will be recorded while responding to questions via the telephone or Skype (a software application that allows users to make voice and video calls over the Internet).

<https://www.surveymonkey.com>

Username: degree

Password: survey

Please forward this email if you know someone who has withdrawn from an online Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education program during the last three years and have been enrolled in the program for at least one year. Completion of this survey and interview are crucial to my degree completion. Your efforts will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Bernadette (Midge) Wyman, Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
508-823-5973

Appendix F

Email to Liberty University Students

To Liberty University students:

My name is Bernadette Wyman and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Liberty University. I need your assistance in helping me complete my dissertation. The title of my paper is *A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Non-Completers in the Doctoral Program*.

Please forward this email to someone you may know who has withdrawn from an online Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education program during the last three years and was enrolled in a program for at least one year. Please do NOT send this to individuals who were enrolled in the Ed.D. program at Liberty.

Completion of this survey and interview are crucial to my degree completion. Your efforts will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Bernadette (Midge) Wyman, Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
508-823-5973

Please forward the section below to possible participants. Thank you.

To students who have withdrawn from an Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education program:

I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University and need your help in completing my dissertation. The title of my paper is *A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Non-Completers in the Doctoral Program*. If you have withdrawn from an online Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education program during the last three years and have been enrolled in the program for at least one year, please complete a survey by clicking on the link provided below within the next 3 days. (If you attended Liberty University, you are unable to participate in this study)

If you agree to be in this study, please take approximately 20 minutes to complete this online survey and agree to a 40-minute interview. Your email address and telephone number is requested on the survey and you will be contacted within the next two to four weeks to arrange for an interview. With your verbal consent at the time of the interview, you will be recorded while responding to questions via the telephone or Skype (a software application that allows users to make voice and video calls over the Internet).

<https://www.surveymonkey.com>

Username: degree

Password: survey

Also, please forward this email if you know someone who has withdrawn from an online Ed.D. or Ph.D. degree in education program during the last three years, enrolled in a program for at least one year, and have not attended Liberty University. Completion of this survey and interview are crucial to my degree completion. Your efforts will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Bernadette (Midge) Wyman, Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
508-823-5973

Appendix G

Interview Questions

Hi, my name is Bernadette Wyman. Before we begin the interview, may I have your permission to be recorded? The purpose of recording the interview is for data accuracy. Thank you.

1. Please describe your decision to pursue your doctorate degree and your level of commitment at the time of enrolling.

Question number one determined the level of commitment from the participant. The interaction between individual commitment to completion and commitment to the university are determining factors for completing or not completing the doctoral program (Tinto, 1992).

2. Try to think of one or more situations you experienced after enrollment that resulted in a significant impact while attempting to complete your degree. Can you tell me what came to mind?

Participant's background generally molds their characteristics. However, what happens to students after entering the program affects them (Lovitts, 2001). This question tries to determine if any experience during enrollment may have created a setback for the participant.

3. Do you view higher education as gaining knowledge or do you view higher education as a process of steps to completion?

Question three attempts to verify Tinto's (1988) method of predetermining the success rate of a student. The successful student will view education as gaining knowledge while the unsuccessful student sees education as a process of steps to completion.

4. Please describe the extent of social integration you encountered while enrolled in the program. For example, how many friends did you have? How many staff knew your name? How many staff did you actually interact with?

Tinto's (1975) theory on integration is addressed in this question. The question attempts to determine the degree of integration the participant had while enrolled. If students lack social integration, is likely to result in withdrawal (Tinto, 1995).

5. Why was this university your school of choice?

Tinto (1993) stated that if the student's rating is high for a university, they are more likely to overcome obstacles than those who placed no importance to their school of choice. The chances for success are also dependent on how much thought went into choosing the university they attend (Tinto, 1993).

6. Were there aspects of your doctoral program that you found problematic or that slowed your progress?

This question allows the participant to share and express their experiences that may have resulted in their withdrawal. Golde and Dore (2001) found that many doctoral students do not clearly understand what is expected of them.

7. Please describe the level of writing required to complete the program and if you felt you were prepared for this level of writing.

This question is aimed to determine if the student had trouble with the writing skills needed for the program. D'Andrea (2002) found that the most frustrating and overwhelming aspect of the dissertation process for students was their lack of writing skills. They became humiliated at their inexperience (D'Andrea, 2002).

8. Please describe your view of the personal motivation and commitment required while enrolled in the program.

Without motivation and commitment, students may exit the doctoral program (Lovitts, 2001). Motivation is a major factor in completing the dissertation (Green & Kluever, 1997).

9. Please describe your perception of the doctoral program before entering the program compared with that of your experience while enrolled in the program.

Golde and Dore (2001) found that many doctoral students do not clearly understand what is expected of them. Tinto (1993) focused on how individual educational experiences affect the chances of student attrition. Such factors include the length of time a student planned to complete the degree. Some students choose the university because it will increase their chances of future employment.

10. What circumstances have typically influenced or affected your experience of an online doctoral student? (home life, financial, career, university, personal)

This question directly addresses the hermeneutic aspect of the research. The answer will provide a written transcript to review so that I can look for meanings in their situation, using their words, telling their stories (van Manen, 1997).

11. Where there any competencies you felt you were lacking in the program? Any competencies that the participants felt they were lacking will help answer the questions involving barriers and obstacles that participants face. Competence is required for students to participate at this higher level of learning (Grover, 2007).

12. What would you like to change about the process?

This question collects feedback from the participants to help answer and support the research questions. As pointed out by Lovitts and Nelson (2001), if faculty and administrators are not supplied with feedback from students, improvements are difficult to implement. It also focuses on the ideas of Gilliam and Kritsonis (2006) in that universities need to change their ways in which doctoral students are viewed and provide solutions in helping them navigate through the doctoral process. These answers are anticipated to help universities provide new opportunities for retention (Gilliam and Kritsonis, 2006).

13. What do you think universities can do to remove some of the barriers that you experienced while attempting to complete the program?

Again, as stated by Lovitts and Nelson (2001), if faculty and administrators are not supplied with feedback from students, improvements are difficult to implement. The question also provides the experience of the phenomenon being researched.

14. Please explain why you chose not to re-enroll in the program.

This question attempts to get the participant to reveal the reason for withdrawal. It also tries to distinguish if the participant perceives their withdrawal as a lack of support from both inside and outside the university, or a lack of knowledge to complete the process (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The question tries to

distinguish the perception of the withdrawal reason from the participant. Do they relate the reasons as personal, or do they perceive the reasons are linked to the structure of the doctoral program (Green and Kluever, 1997)?

15. Depending upon the participant's answer to the previous question, I may ask this follow-up question: Do you agree with this statement? In order to succeed in graduate school students must have the sheer determination to overcome the alarming hurdles they will face (Landon, 2008). Please explain.

16. What reason or reasons will cause you to re-enroll in the program?
In order to improve student retention, we must understand how students experience the program (Lawley, 1999).

17. Please describe how you felt after making the decision not to re-enroll in the program.

Students are continually reminded of feelings of regret due to not finishing the program (Lovitts, 2001). This question tries to draw out the feelings experiences after withdrawing from the program.

18. Are you glad you enrolled in the program or do you feel your efforts were wasted?

This question is asking students to reveal their feelings of their decision. This is a personal reflection for participants to reflect on their educational learning experiences. Tinto (1993) looked at the learning experiences of students in terms of opportunity costs. If students believe they will receive greater benefits from discontinuing the program, their chances of withdrawal are greater. Students may also withdraw as they feel they can use their skills learned in other ways (Winerman, 2008).

19. Were you ever encouraged in any way by the university to remain in the program?

Universities need to encourage students to remain in the program and receive their degrees (Lovitts & Nelson, 2001). This question should reveal how students perceived support and encouragement from the university. Students who withdraw feel that the university should have supported and encouraged them more (Katz, 1996).

20. Do you have any additional comments you would like to share?

21. In reviewing the dates of enrollment listed on your survey, would you say the following sequence of events of your doctoral journey is accurate?

Examples include date of undergraduate degree received, date of enrollment into the doctoral program, completion date of coursework, start date of dissertation, and date of withdrawal. This information provides a participate timeline for data triangulation. (Examples include date of undergraduate degree received, date of enrollment into doctoral program, completion date of coursework, start date of dissertation, and date of withdrawal)

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to interview you. I will send you a copy of your transcribed answers. If you wish to make changes, please send them to me and I will adjust your answers accordingly. Thank you again.

Appendix H

Participant's Timeline of Events

Age Category (taken from survey) _____

Date received undergraduate degree _____

Date of enrollment into graduate study _____

Date of coursework completion, if applicable _____

Start date of dissertation, if applicable _____

Date of graduate study withdrawal _____

Possible date of re-enrollment _____

Appendix I

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.

The Graduate School at Liberty University

January 12, 2012

Bernadette Wyman
IRB Approval 1236.011212: A Hermeneutical Phenomenology Study of Non-Completers in Doctoral Programs

Dear Bernadette,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
IRB Chair, Associate Professor
Center for Counseling & Family Studies

(434) 592-5054

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.
40 Years of Training Champions for Christ: 1971-2011

Appendix J

Themes

Individual Themes

Family or Personal Situations key words: family, kids, children, husband
I took time off started a family I have a family kids running around what was important was it family a house full of kids took lots of hours away from your family take care of my husband and my family two kids and one on the way family family life my children home life three kids should be flexible for families husband was sick family issues take care of my family
Financial key words: tuition, financial, money, debt, cost
no tuition reimbursement financial reasons money was wasted it wasn't worth the time or the money financially financial constraints the mountain of student debt it will cost me

Frustration resulting from lack of academic and social integration

key words: frustrating, depressed, discourage, needed

frustration
balance some of the work
I don't really know
discouraged place
felt like I was marking time
wasn't getting anywhere
kind of hurts
frustrating
nothing I can do
just wasn't there for me
stress
be back to myself
life got turned upside down
inhibiting personal growth
stagnation
depressed
wasn't thrilled
discouraged
I put way too much pressure on myself
I was not able to perform to my standards
needed a break
needed to regroup
humongous hurdles
never off my mind
exhausted
needed to look into it more
just jumped into it

<p>Perseverance and Self-Motivation key words: motivation, self</p>
<p>lost momentum I lost that motivation at the end lost motivation intrinsic motivation intrinsic drive very motivated self-determination self-guided disciplined process very structured I had to be very structured need some sort of work ethic</p>
<p>Commitment key words: commitment, committed, hour, hours</p>
<p>fully committed fairly committed wasn't too committed very committed demanded more commitment than I was able to do commitment was significant level of commitment went to zero huge commitment very strong commitment level It took lots of hours Spend an hour or two every day I spent lots of hours could not devote those hours</p>
<p>Program was Harder than Anticipated</p>
<p>was not my experience once I got into it doctorate was different out of the three, only one still in the program too much with everything else going on I thought the program was going to be easier I thought it was going to be easier expectations from professor to professor changed toughest part I thought it was going to be easier turned out to be more difficult I thought it would have been more like my masters It was a lot harder than I thought going for my doctorate was a lot harder</p>

demanding
taking my classes on line, it was just way too hard
what it required
very challenging
thinking it was just going to be easy and it wasn't
required a lot more focus
very demanding
challenges
difficult
worked extremely hard

Personal Skills

Academic skills, time management
key words: level, difficult, writing, time

level of writing was extensive
level of writing was very high
required APA to the letter
writing was a very critical skill
you read constantly and go online and answer
I was not prepared at all with scholarly
it was very difficult for me
I don't think I was prepared for the level of writing
a lot of revisions I had to make remake
more time
seven year limit
level of time
amount of time I spent reading
it did take a lot of time out of my day
too long of a time frame
what it required for me to be able to sit down

Institutional Themes

Institutional Procedures Student and program support, program flexibility, lack of compassion
wasn't very pleasant unnecessarily demanding unreasonable expectation just keep working . . . it wasn't clear nothing was ever really explained not enough direct instruction no critical feedback bothered me didn't get feedback had to wait sometimes was not getting the critical feedback I needed difficult to get in touch with getting a hold of them didn't seem like they cared I am a person no transfer credits be more understanding
Adviser Relations key words: adviser, support, guidance
distance program is a mickey mouse program issues with my adviser in a long distance relationship adviser informed me he was leaving his commitment impacted my ability wait long periods before I got it back didn't have guidance need support system wasn't any support wasn't a lot of guidance lack of support not supportive

Opportunities for Academic and Social Integration
academic integration, social integration, sense of community, isolation
key words: face to face, one, no one, lonely

focus and maintain memento to finish
I would have liked more communication
I talked with one guy
collaborate with people
only social integration I had was just one time
no opportunities for it to be one on one
never have the same name
I have never met anybody
No connection
social interaction
needed to collaborate
face to face
completely virtual
few of the same people
dissertation work was virtual
made it difficult
problematic just not having somewhere to go
somebody to just pick up the phone and go to

Appendix K

Reasons for Non-Completion

Question 22 asked participants why they chose not to re-enroll in the program.

Please list the reason or reasons for withdrawing.

Reasons for Withdrawal – Actual Transcription		(1) Primary Reason (2) Secondary Reason
-I wish just to have that . . . that social interaction. -I began to question the perception of earning my doctorate from an online institution.	Joey	(1) Integration (2) Perception of an online degree
-More commitment that I was able to do at the time. -Schedule overload.	Raymond	(1) Commitment (2) Family
-Lack of support from my superintendent. -Lack of support from superior, financial reasons.	Dean	(1) Family or personal (2) Financial
-My husband being sick. -The health of my husband.	Cindy	(1) Family
-Frustration, student/advisor relationship difficulties. -Difficulty with feeling connected to the adviser and lack of sufficient training and support through the research process.	Ellen	(1) Adviser relations (2) Frustration
-The loss of her only son. -I didn't officially withdraw—my son was in an accident and he passed away. I just never went back.	Millie	(1) Family (2) Depression
-Family issues, financial. -Financial constraints.	Sutter	(1) Family (2) Financial
-Frustrated. I needed a break, I needed to regroup. -Exhausted and overwhelmed with working full time and trying to keep up with the course work.	Glenna	(1) Frustration (2) Perseverance
-Family. -Pregnant. -Needed face-to-face instruction.	Kimberly	(1) Family (2) Integration
-No critical feedback, they would not transfer credits. -The degree was an Ed.D. in teacher leadership and Georgia would no longer give a degree raise for leadership degrees out of state and when the teacher was not in a leadership position.	Louise	(1) Institutional procedures (2) Financial/Knowledge of the process

Appendix L

Participant Timeline

Name	Age Range	Sex	FT-PT	Courses Complete	Year Enrolled	Year W/D	Time in Program	Dissertation Begun?	Site
Joey	30-40	M	FT	4 to 5	Fall 2008	Fall 2009	1 yr.	No	A
Raymond	30-40	M	FT	3 to 4	Summer 2008	Fall 2010	2 yrs.	No	A
Cindy	40-50	F	FT	11 to 12	Spring 2009	Summer 2011	3 yrs.	Summer 2011	A
Dean	50-60	M	PT	2	Spring 2008	Spring 2009	1 yr.	No	B
Millie	40-50	F	PT	13 +	Fall 2006	Fall 2010	4 yrs.	Summer 2009	A
Ellen	50-60	F	FT	7 to 8	Spring 2007	Fall 2010	3 yrs.	Fall 2010	B
Louise	50-60	F	FT	7 to 8	Spring 2007	Spring 2009	2 yrs.	No	A
Glenna	40-50	F	PT	13+	Spring 2009	Spring 2011	2 yrs.	No	C
Sutter	30-40	M	PT	2	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	1 yr.	No	D
Kimberly	30-40	F	FT	2	Spring 2008	Summer 2009	1 yr.	No	A

Note. All participants were of Caucasian ethnicity. Four participants fell within the age of 30-40, three participants within the age of 40-50, and three participants within the age of 50-60. All participants graduated before 2000; all enrolled in the doctorate program within the last three years; only three participants completed their coursework and started their dissertation; all participants have withdrawn from the program within the last three years; and only one participant has immediate plans of enrolling in 2013.

Appendix M

Selected Interview Quotations

1. Please describe your decision to pursue your doctorate degree and your level of commitment at the time of enrolling.

Joey: I wanted to pursue my doctorate in educational leadership so I wanted to find a school that would be flexible for a Dad and a current administrator. A lot of it. In terms of like very committed? Yes. Oh, I was fully committed in fact I . . . I attended a couple of the residencies as required as part of the program.

Raymond: Ultimately, it just came down to um . . . trying to . . . um . . . make more money . . . um . . . as much as anything.

Cindy: I just wanted to finish a complete circle, get my doctorate degree, and go as high as I could.

Dean: It seemed like the thing to do at the time. It seemed logical at the time.

Millie: Wanted to further my education and have another degree under my belt and the pay raise would be nice too.

Ellen: I actually made the decision I wanted to pursue my doctorate after my masters but I took time off, started a family, so I waited until my children were school age and then I would have the time to devote to coursework so my decision was based upon master's program. I wasn't done learning yet. I still had a lot to learn. I wanted to continue my education. My commitment to the program was complete.

Louise: I was very committed and in fact was ahead in 2 classes with the people that started with me had a 4.0 in University A requires that a couple of times a year they meet in different paces all over the country. I had already been to one in Atlanta and one in Florida. Looking at possible chairs, research design, questions. I was very committed.

Glenna: I have a pretty strong interest in development methods.

Sutter: I wanted to do it because eventually get out of the high school level and into the collegiate level. Fairly committed.

Kimberly: Actually one of the main reasons I did consider my doctorate degree is for money purposes and pretty much that was the only reason was to make more money. It was I guess I wasn't too committed prior this degree was all on line and I was pretty committed for my master but as far as my doctorate as I continue I complete 2 classes I realized that I would have to be somebody that went and sat in the classroom in order to finish it so I guess I wasn't too committed if I just made it through 2 classes.

2. Try to think of one or more situations you experienced after enrollment that resulted in a significant impact while attempting to complete your degree. Can you tell me what came to mind?

Joey: Ah . . . No it was just having to deal with the uh . . . self-discipline or the self-regulatory. Ya know of trying to do the uh . . . the uh . . . work without really having a cohort that I would belong to. Ya know.

Raymond: Um I just . . . I just remember . . . I guess I remember some way thinking that this was a lot more than I thought . . . entailed a lot more than I originally had thought. Then I went to informational meetings about um . . . about the program. Um . . . I guess it just became a lot more in-depth um . . . than originally um . . . I thought it would.

Cindy: Nothing. Not really.

Dean: I was only there for two courses, but it seemed like it wasn't worth the time or the money.

Millie: All online so . . . is that what . . . disciplined and structured. I did pretty good with that until right up at the end.

Ellen: The issues with my adviser in a long distance relationship. The first time I was working on my lit review I had a deadline and my adviser informed me he was leaving for the Orient for six months. Just keep working and when I come back you can send me the material and I will review it then. You lose momentum. I only met him twice. He made a disparaging remark about the program. Distance program is a Mickey Mouse program. During the course of the time when I was working with him, he went away twice. Once for 6 months and then again for three months. So he was away for nine months. You wait long periods before I got it back. So his commitment to the program impacted my ability to be able to focus and maintain memento to finish.

Louise: The biggest problem I had was that Georgia changed their requirements and especially anything that had the word leadership in it and I was doing teacher leadership and that was going to be my Ed.D. because I really love helping new teachers . . . and Georgia said if you are not in a leadership position than they would not give you the pay increase and I would need the pay increase to pay off my loans for the doctoral program. So anyway, I tried to work with the university but I found them less than honest. They would say oh ya your degree will be accepted in Georgia. And I said that is not what I am saying. I said yes the degree will be accepted, it will say Dr. on my certificate but I won't be eligible for the pay increase and it took ya know several . . . well I completed two more classes with their assurances that this was going to happen . . . that everything would be ok until I got final word from the Georgia Professional Standards Commission to say it wasn't . . . and that their office sent me a copy of the letter they sent to the university. So the university knew and they were acting like everything was going to be ok. It wasn't very pleasant.

Glenna: One class that the level of work was double. I had a minimum of four different kinds of writings and within the four times I had to do three comments and on top of that I needed observation with administration with 100 hours. I could not get administration to go 100 hours. I dropped the class.

Sutter: Financial constraints . . . other things. Kids running around. Difficult to keep up the pace. I think especially the level of time that was spent. It was difficult. Nuisance. Seven year limit. Availability of courses. Problem. Hard.

Kimberly: Not a particular instance. I had a pretty good professor in my second class. She was very motivating and she did try to encourage . . . convince me to stay in the program. However, I realized I was pregnant with my third child so that kind of made me think what was important, was it family or am I doing this just for the money?

3. Do you view higher education as gaining knowledge or do you view higher education as a process of steps to completion?

Joey: Gaining knowledge.

Raymond: Gaining knowledge.

Cindy: Steps to completion.

Dean: Gaining knowledge.

Millie: Gaining knowledge.

Ellen: Gaining knowledge.

Louise: I think in the beginning it was steps to completion. Here is a list of courses check them off as you do them. Now I think, because I move into the dissertation phase, it is more of the knowledge. I will be the expert in my dissertation topic and that is kind of a neat thought.

Glenna: Little bit of both some. Some courses taking steps.

Sutter: Gaining knowledge.

Kimberly: I view it as gaining knowledge definitely.

4. Please describe the extent of social integration you encountered while enrolled in the program. For example, how many friends did you have? How many staff knew your name? How many staff did you actually interact with?

Joey: Well the social, beyond the uh . . . beyond the online forum that you are sort of commenting on that sort of thing there was this required residency periods where I had a chance to collaborate with people who were in the program. I mean advisers and staff and so forth.

Raymond: Very little.

Cindy: I had none . . . the only kind of communication . . . I talked with one guy . . and pretty much that was it. As far as people in the program, you could do live chats. Communication? I would have like more with my colleagues.

Dean: None.

Millie: We went to one face-to-face meeting in Dallas Texas and we had some workshops there . . . and then we had some groups that we had to work in and online classes we had group discussions and that kind of stuff.

Ellen: Advisement was completely virtual. I enjoyed the coursework very much and the cohort that I was in. Very gifted very talented people was in the cohort. The dissertation work was virtual and that made it difficult. There wasn't a lot of guidance around what the expectation was. You sent it in and it came back completely marked up. Learned by submitting. So that went back and forth back and forth. So that's what the expectation was.

Louise: Actually, I have several friends that most of the people that were in the program with me they had their degrees conferred in December. So I have kept in touch with several of them. We talk probably a couple times a month. And as far as the staff not so much. There were a couple of professors that I had approached about being on my dissertation committee when I thought I was going to finish there that I kept in touch for a year afterwards but I have kind of lost in touch with them.

Glenna: Very limited. Lonely. I find online very lonely but then every course and when you go to the next course very few of the same people. Never have the same name. I think whenever an email is sent. That's what I think it is. Yet when I did my residency every professor that I was not at the residency. I have never met anybody. No connection.

Sutter: Not too much. Wasn't involved.

Kimberly: The only social integration I had with other students in the program was just one time when we had to go out of town and we were able to meet. I think we stayed 3 days and we were able to meet some of the other students in the program. But there were well over 500 students at the time. We were also able to meet some of the professors but we did not have any opportunities for it to be one on one. It was more like an introduction to the entire program.

5. Why was this university your school of choice?

Joey: Uh . . . really just kind of their marketing and I heard about some things and explored them and that was pretty much it.

Raymond: My wife.

Cindy: I already experienced it with my masters . . . but the doctorate was different. I had a good experience group peer in county . . . small group we could work. My doctorate was all online and on the computer. Responding to people's answers to questions. I didn't care to respond to people's stuff. I rather hear from my professor.

Dean: The schedule they had fit what I needed. The online courses. The price was decent.

Millie: A buddy of mine got a degree there and recommended it and I was just looking online. Because I thought about going to another university, I just can't think of it. Stone Brook (pseudonym). That's where I was thinking about going to.

Ellen: Well . . . um . . . they contacted me. They . . . uh . . . sent me some information on the description of the particular program I was interested in was very interesting and very engaging for me personally. This could be doable especially doable within the time frame they were suggesting. That was not my experience once I got into it.

Louise: I loved Empire (pseudonym). Empire was very structured. Um, I don't know how to put. They knew what they were doing. This is the process . . . everybody . . . everybody there every student, every faculty member, every advisor on the phone, everybody knew the process. So if you had a question they had an answer. And things didn't change along the way. It was very structured. You knew that whatever was expected of you at the beginning of the program. If you did everything you were supposed to do that you would earn your degree by the end.

Glenna: I was going for course curriculum and instruction, but most universities didn't have the college program and if they did, it was double the money.

Sutter: Geographic location.

Kimberly: I thought it would be a pretty easy task to take. To be completely honest I chose it with my husband and with another friend that he actually coaches with and out of the three the other guy is the only one still in the program.

6. Were there aspects of your doctoral program that you found problematic or that slowed your progress?

Joey: No. I don't think so. I think for me personally it was problematic just not having somewhere to go to or having somebody to just pick up the phone and go to and call and a little bit sort of self-guided if you will.

Raymond: Um . . . I really didn't get that far into it to get to a place that I had trouble with committees or not liking ideas or proving parts. So for putting hours, everything was kind of streamlined and I got good feedback from every group of professors that I had to help me along with it. It was just too much with everything else going on.

Cindy: The only problem was when my husband had health issues getting a hold of

them. They didn't even seem like they cared. I am a person, I have a family, and yes, they put me on hold. But that did not happen.

Dean: No.

Millie: Um . . . no I did okay until I got to the dissertation part and that was kind of frustrating as far as choosing a committee and that kind of stuff.

Ellen: I would say there was not enough direct instruction on the expectation including the dissertation proposal. Also the lit review process they treated the lit review almost as a full dissertation. It took two years to do the lit review. That wasn't even considering the proposal, the methodology, so by the time you were done with the lit review you actually had to go back in and change some of the references because it was just too long of a time frame. But there was very little institution on the expectation and then you met your adviser twice. So here is something as important as your dissertation and you met your adviser for two hours and everything else was done virtually. It really made it very challenging.

Louise: There was some of the classes it was almost like people were completing assignments but there wasn't the feedback that I got was not that critical feedback to make your paper better or make your ideas stronger. It was just kind of of a cursory good job go on. And that kind of bothered me. That I really didn't feel like I was getting the critical feedback I needed from the professors. And Most of them were rather because it was all online were kind of difficult to get in touch with.

Glenna: Yes. Some of the classes being without talk to somebody all just paper. Quantitative research – did not have it for more than 20 years. Balance some of the work.

Sutter: Not with the program.

Kimberly: Just the difficulty.

7. Please describe the level of writing required to complete the program and if you felt you were prepared for this level of writing.

Joey: Ya the level of writing and expectations was very high and there were a lot of tutorials. There were a lot of uh . . . high expectations in terms of writing qualities and I felt like I could fulfill that requirement.

Raymond: Oh ya. I was fine with the type of writing that um . . . was required. I was well prepared for that. I just think that ya know for me it was that . . . the amount of . . . the amount of time I spent reading and what it required for me to be able to sit down and write that way required a lot more focus . . . and that's hard to get in a house full of kids.

Cindy: The only thing like I said you read constantly and go online and answer. People

responded. One big topic to write about. But was it gearing to me towards my dissertation? No it was gearing me towards what I was going to be doing. It wasn't clear how my dissertation was going to turn out. No I never went out of my home. Nothing was ever really explained.

Dean: I thought it was easy.

Millie: Well I did a lot of writing through all my classes and I made good grades on all that and then when I got to working on my dissertation cause I had the first two chapters finished or the first three chapters well two chapters finished um then, than there was a lot of revisions I had to make remake so I guess I needed more practice than that.

Ellen: I think that I was prepared for that level of writing only because I read a lot. I don't think I was prepared for the level of writing in terms of the re-visioning process. What they had us do for the lit review was every article we read had a five pages. Very demanding . . . and then you would submit those articles and then they would get approved. Then submit that and then revise that. I was not prepared for the writing as far as the re visioning process.

Louise: The level of writing was was very high. They required APA to the letter ya know the two space after the period kind of thing. Whenever there was a question, you could always go back to APA and then they also most of the time the feedback on your writing was they did a lot of discussion and talk and thing about the syntheses. Ya know it wasn't that you were reporting on something you were synthesizing what you have read and using it in your paper. It's not a dry report of this is what I read, this is how they agree but it's not only this viewpoint but the counterpoint and the nuance of it and it was writing was a very critical skill. Not in the beginning. No. I know that I was lucky. In the beginning of the program that I would turn something in early and get feedback, make corrections and turn it in for a final grade. And those first few classes really did strengthen my early writings. Especially professional writings.

Glenna: No one to bounce ideas off. Need to balance.

Sutter: I felt like I was because I had my masters in literature so I did that kind of writing literacy analysis.

Kimberly: No. I was not prepared at all scholarly. It was very difficult for me and that was another thing. After my second class and the review of the literature, I realized that I would need to go and sit in a classroom and have a lot more one on one attention in order to be able to continue to write scholarly and to be successful in a doctorate program.

8. Please describe your view of the personal motivation and commitment required while enrolled in the program.

Joey: Uh . . . I think just self-determination and good time management skills.

Raymond: I think it just . . . it was just . . . it demanded more uh . . . commitment that I was able to . . . to do at the time.

Cindy: and make it great. Spend an hour or two every day on the computer, reading. When I did statistics, I hired someone local so I had someone to talk to. Online did not help me at all. So I spent lots of hours. When my husband got sick, I could not devote those hours. I had to take care of my husband and my family.

Dean: The commitment was significant. I decided that the benefit I would get was not worth it. The amount of time. I didn't want to just throw things together at the last minute and hand it in.

Millie: Um . . . well I had to be very structured and it did take a lot of time out of my day and I guess I lost that motivation at the end but . . . (she broke down and I started the next question).

Ellen: I think it was unnecessarily demanding. I think they were trying to prove that the program had as much rigor as more established schools. And so I think that they had an unreasonably expectation for people who were working adults. The people I know who did finish the program and did well with it had advisers who graduated from the program. So they understood the process they kind of had walked through the process. So they were able to coach their advisees in ways that I think allowed it to be manageable that I just didn't have that kind of guidance on.

Louise: Because it's online and like I said I had three or four friends and some professors but a very, very small group. It was a lonely process so you had to have intrinsic motivation. Why I want to get that diploma and degree. I'm really not sure why but I just know I'm going to. It's this intrinsic drive other than yes there is a pay raise that comes with it in the end there is also a mountain of student debt. But there is something about the process that I don't know just keeps me going. I do know that in the first classes, I started with they would have 2 sections and 25 in each section and within a year it's down to five sections and 15 people a section as the classes went on. I don't know what kept me there. I think part of it is my age. My children are grown they live on their own I have the time . . . and . . . ah . . . but that's the part that kept me going. I'm not dealing with the children or God forbid the teenage years.

Glenna: Very strong commitment level. You need some sort of work ethic that helps you through it. Need support system to help you through it more than you think. Need back up.

Sutter: I think you need a huge commitment. I have two kids and one on the way.

Kimberly: I am a very committed person. I am very motivated and sometimes I put a lot of pressure on myself and it is almost like I feel like I put way too much pressure on myself that it wasn't really good for my health because I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere and I was not able to perform to my set of standards.

9. Please describe your perception of the doctoral program before entering the program compared with that of your experience while enrolled in the program.

Joey: Uh . . . Ya know what to be honest with you I found the program to be more difficult than I thought an online learning model would be. Um . . . so that was kind of ah . . . kind of eye opening . . . and then also for me was just that isolation. That feeling that you were just doing it on your own. Um . . . I didn't expect it to be so quite isolating as part of that process. There was two kinds of learning that I experienced there.

Raymond: I just . . . I think ah the way they presented it originally . . . ya know when you go to the informational meetings and I think it's ya know they present it in a light that says . . . ya know we're gonna give you this this and this and it's pretty . . . pretty uh . . . step by step easy. Ya know relatively easy process. But uh . . . you know you get in uh . . . you get in and you find out more details about each step and each checkpoint that's going to require you know . . . significant amounts of work and time.

Cindy: No. I thought it would have been more like my masters. I enjoyed my masters. That's why I chose the same university to get my doctorate.

Dean: I had a higher expectation. I found it easy. Then again, maybe it was the program. I had a friend of mine in a doctorate program and her studies were pretty extensive.

Millie: Um I thought, I really thought I would have more interaction with people during the program because originally, we had to meet more and then they changed it. So, we just had to meet that one time in Dallas.

Ellen: My perception of the program was that the goal was to have graduates that could be representative of the program and what I found was that the goal of the program was really to make the college some money and so like the advisers were paid based on the number of advise-es they had and so it was in their best interest to not have you graduate to soon because then they would have to be go looking for another advisees. So they were actually paid based upon the number of people they were retaining not on the number of people that were exiting the program. So they had a vested interest in retaining you and the longer you stayed in the program the longer you paid for ya know at least graduate level services so I think that my expectation was that this was a program that really wanted to have graduates in the field what the reality is that it was really an opportunity to have a cash cow for the university.

Louise: Actually, I thought the program was going to be easier. Ya know they gave you a list of classes. The university does not do a dissertation they do a project. They give you step by step so as you go through so that at the end when you get your committee it is a matter of getting your project through IRB and implementing your project and then writing about it and I thought it was going to be easier because I had it all laid out. But I think sometimes the expectations from professor to professor changed I got some great critical feedback from this professor and then the next one was very cursor and you would end up with this parts strong and this part is weak. I think one of the toughest

part I thought it was going to be easier turned out to be more difficult.

Glenna: Before I thought the doctoral program was more about talking about theory learning the theory a lot more than having to. A lot more to it. A lot of research work. Challenging . . . and challenging yourself.

Sutter: Yes. I guess so.

Kimberly: I was actually completely wrong. It was a lot harder than I thought. Like I stated earlier I was able to acquire my masters all-online. That program was really easy because there was not that much in-depth scholarly writing and things you had to do and so getting my doctorate it was a lot harder. I just I couldn't do it. Just you know taking my classes on line. It was just way too hard for me.

10. What circumstances have typically influenced or affected your experience of an online doctoral student? (home life, financial, career, university, personal)

Joey: No. No other circumstances.

Raymond: Home life. Three kids.

Cindy: My husband being sick.

Dean: Lack of support from superior and no tuition reimbursement.

Millie: skipped the question (emotional due to the loss of her son)

Ellen: I just was in a very discouraged place. I felt like I was just marking time. I wasn't getting anywhere. I had just submitted some material on methodology to my adviser and he called and I was on the phone with him and I got off the phone with him and I was very rattled and very upset uh and ya know ended up talking to my husband and said you know I just can't do this anymore. And this is very unlike me in terms of my personality I'm not somebody who calls it quits or raises a red flag or I should say a white flag. I'm definitely somebody who likes to complete the job and so it was affecting my health and it was affecting relationships. I just came to a place where I knew this was no longer a good fit for me and . . . uh . . . made the decision to leave.

Louise: I got my masters online and I loved it. I'm a pretty techy person so I had no problem with online relationships and making friends and colleagues, that way wasn't difficult.

Glenna: Um . . . a little bit of everything. Career wise I teach a lot of special ed courses. Challenges to where is too hard to where you shut down. Motivates. Wanted to publish. Personal career. I am an expert in the field.

Sutter: Personal more than anything. If I was younger, I would have more time on my hands. When I went for my masters that is all I did. Read and write. Nothing else to do.

Full time job now . . . family.

Kimberly: Family life. My children.

11. Where there any competencies you felt you were lacking in the program?

Joey: Nope. No competencies.

Raymond: No.

Cindy: No.

Dean: Not really.

Millie: No I don't think so.

Ellen: No.

Louise: When I began definitely, APA was a mystery to me because I was ALA back in the 70s the other part was time management. I would take 2 or 3 classes at a time and it starts off slow and then you have those last weeks when everything is due and you are trying to juggle and make sure you complete everything and that was a little difficult.

Glenna: I didn't feel I had any but my math skills were not up to par. My writing grammar. I bought a software program . . . little realization on spelling. Knew about time constraints. I knew it would take time. I spent more time on online classes. Only certain classes I knew nothing about took more time . . . or just writing took time. I spent more time on my classes that I thought.

Sutter: Not really. Just difficult and complicated.

Kimberly: Yes. Very much so. I after I guess after I returned in my review of literature and I felt like I had worked extremely hard on it and the professor sent it back to me and it was just torn to pieces. And ya know that's when my lack of confidence just really dropped. And I said ya know I may not be able to do this. This level of work, I may not be cut out for it. And so that's when I kind of made the decision and soon after I found out I was pregnant so that made it kind of a little bit easier.

12. What would you like to change about the process?

Joey: No. I think for the right people for the right person it's the right fit. There's nothing I can think about changing.

Raymond: I can't think of any in my experience. My views seem like each course was built on the previous course and was taking one step closer to it. Um . . . so ya know I don't think though . . . that within that . . . why I kind of wish things were just more up front from the get go.

Cindy: More face-to-face time with my adviser or professors. Able to get some ideas about my topic of research. So I am not waiting so long to make a change.

Dean: Nothing. At the time the superintendent here wanted nothing to do with it. He was not supportive.

Millie: skipped

Ellen: I think that if . . . I think it's important for them to have advisers who are graduates of the program. Because it is a unique program and unless somebody understands . . . I mean you know you can't have somebody who thinks . . . has a low opinion of the program being an adviser for the program. And that's what happened in my case. He definitely had a low opinion of the program and so he didn't . . . he didn't take the work seriously. So, I think that . . . that definitely would be my recommendation to them if I was given the opportunity. Wherever possible have an adviser who understands the program from the inside and think that the program is viable. Don't think the program is ya know less than what it is.

Louise: I'm not sure the process needs to change as much as some of the administration of the process. I would still be at University A (pseudonym) if they had allowed me to change from teacher leadership to teaching and learning or something like that but number one they didn't offer it and if I had changed to any other if I had went with a Ph.D. in special education. I would have to start all over again after being there over a year Nothing the credits wouldn't change from program to program. So that was my difficulty. I liked Pequot I liked the way it was set up I liked how organized it was I liked how everything worked. I liked that part of it. Like I said what what I did not like was that once you started something you were locked in and you couldn't transfer credits from program to program. You had to start all over again.

Also working with some more than once and also starting your dissertation use the methodology and also someone right there at the beginning of methodology. My classes had nothing to do with my dissertation. No recourse. No one to talk to.

Sutter: Organize differently. Encourage people that have lives on the outside. Geared more towards single people without a family. That's just the way it is. Maybe later in life because of time involved.

Kimberly: No. I think that their process was great. It was very organized. I had many opportunities to interact with the professors online or to call them anytime I needed to. The classes I felt like they had, the order that they were in, I think that it was great. I just wasn't cut out for it I guess.

13. What do you think universities can do to remove some of the barriers that you experienced while attempting to complete the program?

Joey: I don't.

Raymond: Um . . . about the difficulty and that it entails in each step. I know that I didn't find out until the first course . . . and I guess it was a symposium. It was a four-day thing we went to out of town and found out about each checkpoint and all the hoops we had to go through to get to the next step.

Cindy: I don't know. I think I would have been fine if it hadn't been for my husband's health issue. There is no communication there to say is everything going ok? Do you need to sit a class out? If I had been asked to help but I could tell someone what was going on. If I could tell someone what was going on and the kind of road we were going down and had an option there I could have prevented myself from calling and saying can I talk to somebody because I need to get out of this class. More communication between courses . . . not assuming everything is okay . . . so that you could have time instead of getting in there and having to drop it or something.

Dean: University had nothing to do with it. It was my choice.

Millie: I guess a little more um inside on when you get to the dissertation part exactly what's involved and how to pick your committees making sure you're with the right person. Do you know what I mean?

Ellen: Again, I think it's important for them to have advisers who are graduates of the program.

Louise: Well like I said, one of the things I really would have appreciated was some critical feedback. The other part was that within that institution you would think that credits from one area would transfer to another.

Glenna: I would say before you enroll you want to maybe accepted or else which and the people there are going to require all the parts of the websites, the library how to navigate around the website or you trying to take also have that faith. How to get help . . . make connections . . . expectations.

Sutter: Slightly different program through satellite campus.

Kimberly: Be a little more flexible for families. Just I don't really know. Be more understanding maybe.

14. Please explain why you chose not to re-enroll in the program.

Joey: I wish just to have that . . . that social interaction. I also needed to collaborate with others and uh . . . have uh . . . that face to face experience rather than online.

Raymond: I think it just . . . it was just . . . it demanded more uh . . . commitment that I was able to . . . to do at the time. We had two young kids. Um . . . and while we enrolled we kind of had a third one on the way and there was just no way we were gonna um . . . continue ya know take care of family and . . . and meet the demands of the . . . the program. We just thought it was the wrong point in our lives to . . . rather I thought it

was the wrong point in my life to continue to um . . . continue on with it. Ya know at this . . . at that time.

Cindy: My husband being sick.

Dean: Same. Lack of support from superior, financial reasons.

Millie: That's a good question. Um, hopefully in the next year. I think I have five years to finish it so I think that's going to be coming up. Just I need to get it done. Um ya know just that need that to get it done. I got to get motivated again though cause I lost that motivation. I also owe a lot of money and it will cost me some to get it finished. I have a lot of student loans now.

Ellen: Frustration.

Louise: That was the biggest barrier right there was that they would not transfer credits. Even basic things like research in a qualitative and quantitative research that's going to be the same no matter what they would not transfer it between programs.

Glenna: I needed a break. I don't need the degree. I needed to regroup.

Sutter: Family issues, financial.

Kimberly: Family.

15. Depending upon the participant's answer to the previous question, I may ask this follow-up question: Do you agree with this statement? In order to succeed in graduate school students must have the sheer determination to overcome the alarming hurdles they will face (Landon, 2008). Please explain.

Joey: Yes.

Raymond: Yes.

Cindy: Yes.

Dean: Somewhat.

Millie: Yes.

Ellen: Yes.

Louise: Yes I agree. I know some people who have had humongous hurdles.

Glenna: Yes.

Sutter: Yes.

Kimberly: Yes. I would 100% agree with that statement. I do. I know way too many people that have gone through and yes you have to have that determination.

16. What reason or reasons will cause you to re-enroll in the program?

Joey: Uh . . . none at this point. Maybe another program with cohorts.

Raymond: Ah . . . I'll probably do it again. I mean I'll probably re-enroll. Ya know. Um once our kids are a little bit older and they'rethey're involved doing their their things and we're just at a different stage in our lives when . . . when our kids are all grown up and we are not trying to do so much for them. It was just too much. It just demanded a lot more than I ever thought.

Cindy: I just got the desire that I am going to complete it. That is my goal and I will go back if they will let me back in to complete it. As a matter of fact, I have already started my letter to go back.

Dean: I cannot think of any reason. It just demanded a lot more than I ever thought.

Millie: (needs to regroup)

Barbara: Well I still have it hanging over my head. I'm somebody who finishes the job. It's very difficult for me to put so much time and effort in to trying to finish and then not finish. If I go for superintendence, I definitely need the degree.

Louise: I chose the University for three reasons. They have the program I wanted, accepted credits so I didn't have to start all over again. The other part of it was that I had several people within my system that earned their Ed.D. and it was such a wonderful experience for them. They loved the process. They sold it. But boy has it changed some.

Glenna: My own reasons. Self-determination. To finish something I started.

Sutter: Slightly different program through satellite campus

Kimberly: Yes. I would I think when I decide to go back I have already thought about it. It is something that I do want to pursue in the future but it's gonna be when my kids are older and ya know they are not gonna need so much of my time any more. They are just a lot more important right now . . . and so that's my outlook. Eventually I would love to be able and go back and purse something like that . . . but at this time in my life, no. I'm 34, my kids are still young, and I feel like I need to spend the time with them.

17. Please describe how you felt after making the decision not to re-enroll in the program.

Joey: Uh . . . well. Uncomfortable. It just wasn't the right match for me.

Raymond: I just . . . it was just . . . um . . . another something on my plate . . . that I felt good to get off at that time. I wasn't thrilled . . . that . . . ya know we spent that amount of money and not gotten through. But honestly, at that time . . . it just . . . it was a relief. Ya. I just had too much on the plate and to be able to pursue that and knowing that each subsequent step was going to get a little bit tougher.

Cindy: I felt like I had a break because I could take care of the stuff I had to take care of and my family. But it is never off my mind. I'm always thinking about getting finished and my topic.

Dean: I felt I had more time. I didn't have to follow a schedule to get things done. More time to do the things I wanted.

Millie: Besides my situation? I guess I just um . . . I guess just um . . . discouraged. I didn't get a lot of feedback from them which I don't think they had to give me feedback. I kind of just quit going because ya know my whole life got turned upside down. But um I mean I don't know I just didn't have any more contact with them. I have been out for so long. This will be almost 3 years I guess. I haven't done anything since . . . I haven't done anything at all. What will that be? Kyle's been gone almost 3 years.

Ellen: I felt incredibly relieved.

Louise: Depressed. I had put over a year in this process and basically had to start all over again. I got credit for some hours but not as many as I had and right now with all of my friends that continued in the program they graduated in December and I could have been one of them. But I got an extra year kicked on.

Glenna: Exhausted, relieved, go home and relax, go out with friend, be back to myself. I was already successful so it didn't bother me.

Sutter: Depressed. I have been at the high school level 11 years and it's ok . . . but inhibiting personal growth. Stagnation at lower level. Cannot use present ability to do more. I am not allowed to grow. It's frustrating. I have ability but not allowed to grow.

Kimberly: I felt a heavy weight taken off of my shoulders honestly. I felt very free and because like I said, ya know I put a lot of pressure on myself especially with academics and I've always been that way. But when I made that decision, I spoke to a very close friend of mine and she made me realize that at this time of my life it is ok to not complete this. That there is always some other time but she said it just wasn't the right time so I felt so much better when I made that decision.

18. Are you glad you enrolled in the program or do you feel your efforts were wasted?

Joey: No. That's a good question. Uh . . . as a matter of fact, I don't think it was a

waste of time. It helped to uh . . . to better appreciate a blended learning. An online learning and understanding that my perception was of I thought it was going to be much more easier. Which it wasn't. It was much more writing intensive. Ah . . . so I don't feel it was time wasted although now it will take me much more time to finish the doctorate. Uh . . . I think uh . . . I learned a lot. I met those people at those residencies and I learned a lot along the way about . . . about an online education. So I don't think it was time wasted.

Raymond: I mean, I learned a lot personally. Knowledge wise it was neat to learn about but um . . . and I got to . . . I did a lot of reading on some areas that I'm interested in . . . and um . . . so that was um . . . that was . . . I felt good about that. It was just the work thing and the amount of money we spent and because I failed when we did, I didn't get um . . . ya know I didn't any additional ah . . . diplomas or certifications.

Cindy: No. I'm glad. I hope to finish someday.

Dean: Ya. I'm glad I gave it a shot. It seemed like the next logical step.

Millie: Yes.

Ellen: I felt the dissertation part of it was wasted.

Louise: I feel like it was wasted. If I had known in the beginning and they had been honest with me in the beginning I would have either enrolled in another program they offered or went ahead and enrolled in another university . . . and if I had done that, I would be a year ahead.

Glenna: Yes. I learned a lot.

Sutter: I was glad.

Kimberly: Um. I kind of feel both. I feel I feel I am glad that I did experience that because if I didn't I would feel like there would still be a part of me that would think that I would want to continue to do it. However, ya know looking back on the money was wasted ya know that kind of hurts. But ya know there is nothing I can do about that now. Ya know I learned something from that that ya know I maybe I needed to look into it a little bit more before just I did I kind of just jumped into it pretty quickly thinking it was just going to be easy and it wasn't.

19. Were you ever encouraged in any way by the university to remain in the program?

Joey: Ya . . . no . . . I withdrew and never heard from them.

Raymond: And no. I don't think I had anybody. I think after my wife had a baby my professor and adviser encouraged me to keep going with it because of the work I had done . . . but it was just too much.

Cindy: No.

Dean: Only to get my tuition.

Millie: Did they email or try to contact you? No, No. ah . . . ah . . . no. I emailed them and told them what happened to my son. My committee chair emailed me and said I was sorry and I never heard from her again.

Ellen: I did have somebody from the registrar's office call and had several letters saying would you be interested the opportunity is still there but I was always very anxious about the idea that I might may still have to work with that same adviser who I just found to be very difficult.

Louise: Oh No. It is an online institution. It is a big institution and my slot will be filled by the next person. They did not seem concerned at all.

Glenna: Yes. I was two weeks into the last course when I called my adviser. She said many students have a hard time with this course and try to stick it out. I withdrew and the university called every month to see if I wanted to re-enroll.

Sutter: No.

Kimberly: The only way they encouraged me was they kept sending things in the mail. I never received a phone call but they did keep sending things in the mail to me and I think I eventually probably told them. I think someone actually called me and I just told them I wasn't going back.

20. Do you have any additional comments you would like to share?

Joey: No. No additional comments.

Raymond: No.

Cindy: No. Not really.

Dean: No. I guess it means different things to different people. It just wasn't there for me. I just have better things to do with my time. Like I said, there just wasn't any support. If my superior wasn't interested in seeing me succeed with my degree, then I couldn't see it. I don't know how he couldn't call it professional development when I am an administrator and I was enrolled in an administrative program.

Millie: I upset my chairperson. I didn't know how to do something . . . I didn't mean to. She was actually not happy with me after that. Kind of crazy to come this far and quit. I just got to get myself motivated again.

Ellen: I knew people who were able to go through the program and be very successful

with it. So I think that there is some value to offering that kind of program but I think that it is not a good fit for everyone. For me being the kind of person that I am the social person that I am I work better knowing my adviser. And knowing that I could arrange for a meeting and go over and have a face-to-face conversation about what I was doing well what I wasn't doing well what needed to be improved what revisions needed to be accomplished that works better for me. I think that ya know when I was enrolling it was not it was early in the development of various programs. And so I think that probably they were still learning too. I certainly learned from them. Ya know what I'm able to take from online learning is maybe not as much as maybe somebody else. Maybe somebody else that learning environment is perfect for them. But for me it wasn't. So it's about ya know having having programs that can meet individual learning needs.

Louise: No.

Glenna: Frustrating – changing adviser. Face-to-face. Same group.

Sutter: Not really. Live is long ultimately. It can work out.

Kimberly: I think we covered it all.

Verification of timeline:

**21. In reviewing the dates of enrollment listed on your survey, would you say the following sequence of events of your doctoral journey is accurate?
(Examples include date of undergraduate degree received, date of enrollment into doctoral program, completion date of coursework, start date of dissertation, and date of withdrawal)**

Appendix N: Survey Results from Open-Ended Questions

1. Please list the reason or reasons for withdrawing. (10 responses)

Joey: I began to question the perception of earning my doctorate from an online institution.

Raymond: Schedule overload.

Cindy: The health of my husband.

Dean: Lack of support from my superintendent.

Millie: I didn't officially withdraw - My son was in an accident and he passed away. I just never went back.

Ellen: Difficulty with feeling connected to the adviser and lack of sufficient training and support through the research process

Louise: The degree was an Ed.D in teacher leadership and Georgia would no longer give a degree raise for leadership degrees out of state and when the teacher was not in a leadership position.

Glenna: Exhausted and overwhelmed with working full time and trying to keep up with the course work.

Sutter: Financial constraints.

Kimberly: Pregnant.

Section IX - Comments 1. Describe your experience while enrolled in the program. Include details of your successes and struggles. Reflect upon things that could have been done differently to make your journey easier. (10 responses)

Ellen: I only met my advisor twice over three years. He was condescending and referred to the program as Mickey Mouse University.

Glenna: Each course lasted seven weeks. In that time period it was required to log on a minimum of 15 hours a week, complete two mini papers, read three peers work and critique, and one major paper a week. At the end of seven weeks was a major project-at least 10 pages of work. At lot of the course work and courses was not connected to your dissertation. Each course was taught be a different professor. I never had the same professor twice so no substantial connection was there. It became very frustrating and confusing being told to think about your dissertation but not clear defined steps on how to organize and develop. There was no real feedback or anyone to talk too.

Dean: The classroom and online interactions were informative and helpful. I found the admissions office and the information I received less so. My struggles were with a superintendent who did not support either financially or professionally the goal of the doctorate. I felt that the classwork was not challenging to the extent I expected doctoral work to be so.

Millie: My program was all online. I did fine with all of my coursework. The dissertation process was more difficult.

Joey: I found the doctoral program at University A to be very rigorous. Generally, I feel that perceptions about online learning (e.g., easier than traditional learning models) are misinformed. Yet, I am personally part of that problem by withdrawing for a more traditional pathway myself. I enjoyed the residency requirements while at University A, but had difficulty with the limited human interfacing as part of the program when learning wasn't blended (online coupled with on-ground opportunities, beyond the three residencies).

Sutter: Mostly my withdrawal was a matter of prior personal financial obligation.

Raymond: Very focused coursework that progressed and built upon each previous course.

Louise: The program was excellent. The dissertation committee was very helpful and really wanted the candidate to succeed. They held residencies so that the students could meet and receive essential information to be successful.

Cindy: It was hard to talk with someone when my husband's health was a big issue and I needed to take care of family needs.

Kimberly: This was an online program. I only met with my professor one time. I am the type of person that needs to meet face-to-face in this type of program. I also needed classes that I could go and meet with other students on a regular basis to help me with my struggles.

2. What was the reason(s) for enrolling in the doctoral program? (10 responses)

Joey: I enrolled in the doctoral program at University A as an alternative to the more traditional brick-and-mortar institutions figuring that would be a more flexible route with a young family and full time work as a new school superintendent.

Raymond: To obtain advanced degree to improve salary base.

Cindy: I wanted to advance my career.

Dean: An attempt to improve my options in the event I wanted to pursue other careers after leaving my current situation.

Ellen: I wanted the advanced degree.

Millie: To further my education which would help open more doors for me.

Louise: To become a more knowledgeable leader in my school and a better classroom teacher. I wanted the knowledge to help the new teachers in my school.

Glenna: Career advancement and personal growth in the education field. Also the degree is more cost effective online than in traditional campuses near me.

Sutter: Career advancement, knowledge.

Kimberly: Money

3. Based on your experience, what changes would you recommend in your doctoral program in the future? (9 responses)

Ellen: The candidate needs to have some choice who the advisor is for online learning

environments.

Glenna: There needs to be a set course of teachers and a professor assigned at the beginning of the program to assist and discuss the whole process with you. Every class should have a small component of the dissertation included so that you're not overwhelmed at the end of course work.

Dean: I would prefer more face-to-face time for discussion and a little less time spent sitting in front of and communicating through a computer.

Millie: More face time with the committee chair.

Joey: I honestly think the doctoral program at University A was very good. I personally struggled with the lack of human interaction (I'm a pretty social guy) and knowing how others perceived an online education (regardless of the rigor of the program).

Sutter: I will probably attend another program in a slightly different field of study.

Louise: An Ed.D in teaching and learning or other classroom based focus NCATE and SACS accreditation for Georgia.

Cindy: I would recommend more contact with advisors.

Kimberly: Nothing. The program was fine. Like I stated earlier, I need to choose a place where I can actually sit in class and meet with my professors more often face-to-face.

4. Please tell me any additional information you would like me to know about your doctoral experience. (6 responses)

Joey: I am currently looking into doctoral work at Northeastern University to pursue an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership.

Raymond: no response

Glenna: I think online allows people flexibility but the down side is no personal connection with a core group of professors and peers. I don't know one professor from my doctorate program.

Millie: I enjoyed the online experience, the dissertation process was a little more difficult and I probably would have benefited from some face time with my committee chair.

Ellen: The doctoral advisor for my program left the country for long periods of time and was out of contact with me for months. I lost momentum each time and eventually gave up.

Louise: I LOVED University A. It was fast paced, easy to follow and I would still be there if they offered a program in curriculum and instruction or teaching and learning. My peers in the program have all completed their degrees.

Sutter: no response

Kimberly: no response

Appendix O

List of Contacts Used to Solicit Participants

(a) I attended Fitchburg University with an individual to obtain my Certificate of Advanced Graduate Degree during the 2000's. This individual continued on to Northeastern University to complete his doctorate. I believe he may know someone who has discontinued his or her studies while enrolled in the program with him.

Results: One. Disqualified after giving false contact information. Although my associate supplied me with four additional emails of possible participants, two came back as undeliverable, one emailed me to tell me they were still enrolled in the program, and the remaining individual did not respond.

(b) I previously worked with this person within a public school district. She is now enrolled at Northeastern University in the Ed.D. Program. I believe she may know someone who has discontinued his or her studies while enrolled in the program with her.

Results: None. After my original email did not receive a response, I made a follow up telephone call. She did not know any possible participants.

(c) A current co-worker who holds a doctorate degree in engineering. Also teaches in a Community College with connections to additional educators.

Results: None. After personally speaking with this individual, he did not know of any possible participants.

(d) X2 Aspen/Follett Software users group. A school based student information software. Thousands of educators use this software in the United States.

Results: None.

Results: None.

(e) The Chronicle of Higher Education. This is a weekly newspaper and is a source for news, commentary, and jobs. The newspaper's website has an educator's forum for viewers to login at <http://chronicle.com/forums/>.

Results: None. After posting on the website, my request received over 100 hits within the first two hours. However, the webmaster sent me an email stating that my request for survey participants was deleted from the site, as it could not be used for the solicitation to complete a survey. Interestingly, an individual posted that someone should tell me that solicited surveys are not accepted by universities while completing a dissertation. However, a three-paragraph response followed stating that his dissertation committee accepted the data collected due to the fact of the caliber of readers. The dissertation committee felt the chances of someone going through the trouble to fill out false information without any residual was near zero.

(f) The school district where I am employed. An email was distributed via a list serve to the administrative staff, teaching staff, and school committee members. Co-workers may go the extra step in helping locate qualified participants.

Results: Two

(g) The supervisor of data collection at the Massachusetts Department of Education. This audience is appropriate due to the field of education and the level of education needed to work at the state level of government.

Results: None

(h) Superintendents, principals and other school administrators who I meet when

attending workshops, school functions, and training that are job related in the education field.

Results: None. After approximately 35 informal requests, no results.

(i) Students at Liberty University. These students are acquaintances the researcher has acquired while enrolled in the doctoral program at Liberty University. This audience is appropriate to send an email because they are doctoral candidates and may have acquaintances that did not complete the program at another university. The snowball sampling method was appropriate here as well.

Results: Five. Four qualified, one was disqualified for attending Liberty University.

(j) After obtaining permission from the Dean of the School of Education at Liberty University and the Internal Review Board, a separate email was anticipated to be sent to current students in the Doctor of Education program at Liberty University via list serve (Appendix G). This request was asking my colleagues to forward the email to any possible participants. Participants were defined in the email as meeting the criteria along with having no affiliation with Liberty University. This snowball technique was anticipated to be used to expand the sample size. However, after several attempts made to distribute my request, this procedure failed.

Results: None

(k) My daughter's teacher mentioned to the class he had started his doctorate but never finished. I contacted the teacher via email.

Results: One

(l) The superintendent at my place of employment posted my request for survey participants on the state's superintendent support user group.

Results: Two. One qualified, the other disqualified due to attending a traditional program.

(m) I randomly chose a school district on the Massachusetts Department of Education website and obtained the names and email address of school principals. I chose the state where I am employed because I used my email from the state public school system where I am employed. I thought recipients might be more receptive to a doctoral student employed at a local school district. Approximately 200 personalized emails were composed and sent to principals at schools in the state of Massachusetts to expand the pool of participants.

Results: Two

TABLES

Table 11

Participants Were Asked If They Would Select the Same Dissertation Adviser/Committee

Definitely Would	Probably Would	Probably Would Not	Definitely Would Not	Rating Average	Response Count
0.0%	22.2%	55.6%	22.2%	3.00%	9%

Note. A response *rating* of more than 2.50 means that this falls to the right of neutral and closer to probably would not select the same dissertation adviser/committee. Response count less than 10 indicates participant(s) skipped the question as they felt it did not pertain to them.

Table 12

Frequency of Meetings with Adviser/Committee (N=9)

	At Least Weekly	One or Two Times	Less than once/Month	As Needed	Rating Average	Response Count
Doing Research for Dissertation	11.1% (1)	11.1% (1)	33.3% (3)	44.4% (4)	3.11	9
Writing the Dissertation	11.1% (1)	11.1% (1)	33.3% (3)	44.4% (4)	3.11	9
Meeting with Committee	11.1% (1)	11.1% (1)	33.3% (3)	44.4% (4)	3.11	9

Note. A response *rating* of more than 2.50 means that this falls to the right of neutral and closer to less than once per month. Response count less than 10 indicates participant(s) skipped the question as they felt it did not pertain to them.