A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF DOCTORAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN

AN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DOCTORAL PROGRAM

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my loving husband, Jeremy. Thank you for always believing in me. Without your love, patience, and support this achievement would not be possible. I love you, and I am grateful to have shared this process with you. *Here's to the Drs. Chance*.

To my precious children, Austin and Ava. I love you to the moon and back. To my parents, Victor and Gilda Chapa, thank you for helping me become the person I am today. I wish you were here to see me achieve my dream. I will see you both again one day.

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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF DOCTORAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN

AN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

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University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2018

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The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of doctoral students in two higher education doctoral programs in Educational Leadership. This research was conducted to learn the experiences and barriers faced during the dissertation phase of the doctoral program. Past research has shown that attrition rates are over 50% and there are several reasons why doctoral students do not finish their program and are considered ABD. Participants selected for this study were doctoral students from two different doctoral programs in Educational Leadership. These doctoral students completed all coursework required for the doctoral program except for the dissertation. These students were classified as ABD.

Data was collected through phone interviews and analyzed by the researcher once interviews were transcribed. Results from the study show three main themes which include outside support, competing demands, and program obstacles. Tinto's Doctoral Theory of Persistence was used to frame this study as research has shown that academic and social factors impact doctoral success. The findings suggest that support from the cohort, chair, and the institution is effective in helping doctoral students overcome

barriers faced during the dissertation phase. Recommendations for doctoral programs in Educational Leadership are provided. The study's findings suggest further research is needed to investigate the gender differences in doctoral studies, chair perspectives in ABD status, and Latino ABD students' experiences.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the experiences and barriers of doctoral students in Educational

Leadership programs started during my second year as a doctoral student. I started to feel

confused and not sure of the path to take during my dissertation process. I spoke to other

doctoral students and discovered that others felt the same way. Many had the same

concerns as I did, such as maintaining a family and career, going to school, and personal

worries about the future. I decided to conduct a study on doctoral students in the field of

Education Leadership in hopes of gaining insight into my own situation and to learn what

concerns and obstacles were encountered by other students in their doctoral journey.

Research has shown that the number of earned doctorate degrees has increased

over the years. According to the National Science Foundation (2014), during the 2012

academic year a total of 51,008 doctoral degrees were conferred in the United States.

This was a significant increase from the 1970s when only 32,000 were conferred

(Stallone, 2003). However, almost 60% of students who start a doctoral program in the

United States either drop out or do not complete the degree within 10 years–a

phenomenon that has occurred for decades (Bowen & Rudentine, 1992; Council of

Graduate Schools, 2008; Golde, 2005; Gravois, 2007; Smallwood, 2004; Tinto, 1993).

According to Lovitts (2001), the lack of understanding about the dissertation

process has led to increased attrition rates. The rate of student attrition in doctoral

programs has been high (Stallone, 2004). Sixty percent of all doctoral students in this

country fail to complete their programs and the number has remained constant (Stallone,

2004). More of a concern is the fact that most of the students who do not complete their degrees have already finished their coursework and comprehensive examinations (Stallone, 2004). Many doctoral students do leave the program during their coursework phase, yet approximately 20% drop out after completion of their courses during the dissertation stage (Johnson, Green, & Kluever, 2000). These students are referred to as those who are all but dissertation (ABD) (Stallone, 2004). Earning a doctorate is a process that is complex, with the dissertation being the greatest challenge towards degree completion (McCalley, 2015). Many doctoral students are successful in coursework completion; however, the dissertation process may be difficult (McCalley, 2015). Why do more than half of successful doctoral students fail to complete their degree? Why do students who have already passed all their courses and preliminary examinations and have moved on to be doctoral candidates still fail to complete their degree?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of doctoral students in two higher education doctoral programs in Educational Leadership. Stallone (2003) has stated that attrition rates have less to do with what the student brings to the institution and more with the learning culture and environment of the institution. Research shows that students face a number of barriers during the dissertation process including outside responsibilities, struggles with advising, and lack of research knowledge (Stallone, 2003). In addition, past research has indicated that individual personal factors also impact student success in a doctoral program (Stallone, 2003). These personal factors include,

being too busy with other responsibilities, not being motivated, and finding that the demands of a doctoral program can heavily impact work and family obligations and thus interfere with doctoral completion.

This research is adding to the conversation regarding the doctoral processes and will hopefully help increase the completion rate of doctoral students. This study can help university faculty understand how candidates can enter the all but dissertation (ABD) phase of a doctoral program and not complete it. This study also provides suggestions for ways in which university faculty can help students to become valued doctorate completers who increase the knowledge base and promote their self-worth in society (Hardy, 2015).

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, a phenomenology methodology was used. In phenomenological methodology, Moustakas (1994) believed there were two primary research questions: (a) What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon, and (b) What events influenced your experience of this phenomenon? In this proposed research study, the primary research questions will be:

1. What are the experiences of Education Leadership doctoral ABD students in the dissertation phase of their degree?

2. What, if any, are the barriers while completing their dissertation?

Definitions of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following are the definitions for the key terms used throughout this dissertation.

All But Dissertation (ABD). Students who have completed all coursework required by a doctoral program and have passed all required comprehensive examinations but need to complete the writing portion and defense of the dissertation (Malmberg, 2000).

Attrition. Is the loss of students from a program (Stallone, 2003).

Chair. The chair, who is also called an advisor, is the faculty member who is responsible for guiding and encouraging the candidate's design of the doctoral research project.

Course Completion. Student completion of all doctoral course requirements (Malmberg, 2000).

Comprehensive Exam. Written and oral examination of all previous coursework (Malmberg, 2000).

Doctoral Candidate. Those students who have completed all coursework and comprehensive exam requirements. The unofficial name for these students is ABD (Malmberg, 2000).

Persistence. Students' continued progress towards degree completion (Malmberg, 2000).

Completer. A person who completed all requirements for a degree and has graduated (Malmberg, 2000).

Non-completer. A person who did not complete all requirements for the doctoral degree.

Non-traditional Student. A doctoral student who is enrolled part-time, works full-time, and has dependents other than spouse (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

"Walking the road to completion of a doctoral degree is clearly and intensely a grueling, challenging, and sometimes lonely journey" (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012, p.12).

The literature review discussed below will provide a brief history of doctoral degrees, the barriers faced by doctoral students who are all but dissertation (ABD) and the factors that impact doctoral student success. Many doctoral students complete their program coursework, but some do not complete the dissertation process that is needed to complete their doctoral degree. This literature review will help provide insight on the factors and challenges faced by doctoral students. There have been several studies on doctoral student attrition, but most do not focus on the barriers, obstacles and experiences faced by ABD doctoral students as they work on their degrees. Most studies focus on completion rates.

The first EdD was awarded in 1921 at Harvard University. By 1982, EdD programs were offered at 128 universities (Willett, 2014). Doctoral students in the field of education are usually non-traditional students and face more challenges during the doctoral journey. These are students who work full-time, enroll in classes part-time, and attend school during the nighttime or weekend hours. The part-time option for these students is typical of an EdD program because it is usually more accommodating for working students (Willet, 2014). Those in EdD doctoral programs face several challenges because many work full-time and have other obligations that can affect degree completion.

Barriers Leading to Attrition

Attrition continues to be a concern at the doctoral level. Not completing their dissertations can prevent doctoral candidates from contributing to society as researchers and minimize their efforts to succeed in a career. Not completing the program can also impact their future job opportunities and goal options (Kelly & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016).

The following eight studies have addressed the problem of doctoral student attrition in the United States over the past half century. These studies focused on student attrition at the doctoral level at higher education institutions in the United States. Of these studies, five were quantitative and three qualitative. The focus of five of the studies was on faculty and students (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Ferrer de Valero, 2001; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). The remaining three focused on students only (Golde, 2005; Maher, Ford & Thompson, 2004; Nerad & Cerny, 1993).

Berelson (1960) conducted research on doctoral attrition in 1957 and met with faculty from seven universities. He mailed questionnaires to graduate program deans and faculty at 92 universities. Seventy-nine questionnaires were returned by the graduate program deans, and 1,821 were returned by 4,440 graduate faculty members. In addition, questionnaires were sent to 3,843 recipients of a doctoral degree, with 2,331 returned. Berelson (1960) studied different attitudes as the reason for attrition. Over 69% of the graduate deans who participated in the study indicated that lack of financial resources was the primary reason students did not finish their doctorate degree. Lack of intellectual

ability was the second reason cited by 50% of the deans. Lack of motivation (38%) was a

third reason (Table 1).

Table 1

Survey Responses to Reasons for Attrition

Which of the following reasons are involved in student attrition?	Percent respondents group indicated reason as most important		
	Graduate Deans	Graduate Faculty	Recent Recipients
Lack financial resources	69	29	25
Lack intellectual ability	50	64	52
Lack proper motivation	38	45	47
Lack physical and emotional drive	33	33	49
Degree wasn't necessary	19	10	12
Disappointed in program and quit	1	12	21

Note. Adapted from "Graduate Education in the United States," by Berelson, 1960, p. 169

Wilson (1965) studied time to degree for those who received a doctoral degree.

He surveyed 1,929 doctoral students who received a PhD between 1950 and 1958. A 12-

page questionnaire was mailed to 2,709 doctoral graduates with a response rate of 71.2%.

Wilson's results indicated that the average time to degree was six years. The factors that

were found to impact time to degree were: student attendance (32%), teaching assistant

job responsibilities (31.9%), topic selection of dissertation (30.4 %), writing dissertation

while working full-time (27.2%) and financial issues (27.3%) (Wilson, 1965).

Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) conducted research on attrition for the period from 1972-1976. Their work was on doctoral programs in the arts and sciences which included cohorts from six fields of study-- English, Political Science, Math, History and Physics. Their goal was to examine completion rates by program of study and program size. In addition, the relationship of the amount of time to complete the doctorate program and attrition was also studied. They studied attrition rates across three stages of the doctoral program. The first stage was coursework which lasted two to three years; the second stage was passing of the qualifying exam. The final stage was the writing and final defense of dissertation (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Bowen and Rudenstine found that only half of all doctoral students entering doctoral programs completed their degrees within 12 years. Thirteen percent of the original pool of PhD candidates in their study dropped out prior to the second year of the program (Phase 1); an additional 20% left before advancing to the dissertation phase (Phase 2). At the 10-year mark, 13% had not completed their dissertations.

Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) found three reasons that added to students' ABD status: isolation, difficulties in selection of a research topic, and advising. Isolation was a big factor for ABD students not completing their dissertation. Since the dissertation stage consists primarily of writing, many students are off campus and have no interaction with classmates. The selection of a research topic can take a certain period of time to complete. One participant stated "the writing of the dissertation was not difficult, it was the decision on the topic to write on. It was a challenge to make a final decision without guidance or ideas." Students also stated that dissertation advising could be problematic.

They stated that advisors and students sometimes had different expectations. They also stated that their advisors are not always available and that sometimes doctoral students are not able to contact or reach their advisors.

In addition, Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) conducted interviews with doctoral faculty and found a variance in dissertation advising. Results showed that dissertation advising ranked low in importance to doctoral students during the dissertation phase, when their advisors maintained certain requirements such as regular meetings to discuss their dissertations, set clear expectations and deadlines, and would help see the student through the dissertation process. However, the most common interaction that impacted dissertation completion, were those advisors who would just meet with students when requested. These advisors would not reach out to their students to check on progress. This type of support would let students drift in segments of time while advisors continued their efforts to just meet students when requested. Bowen and Rudenstine's findings suggest the importance of advisors being involved in the dissertation process.

Nerad and Cerny (1993) interviewed 40 students from fields that had low doctoral degree completion rates and for which time to degree was longer (i.e., History, English, French and Sociology). Students from fields that had higher completion rates and shorter time to degree were also studied (i.e., Psychology and Biochemistry). Nerad and Cerny (1993) found that those who took longer to complete their degree were isolated and spent more time researching a dissertation topic. Those in the social science and humanities fields responded that they were the least happy with advising services. There was a link between departments who did not have any support services available to those students

and the amount of time it took to complete their degree. Their findings suggest doctoral student attrition is linked to students' efforts and department support efforts (Nerad & Cerny, 1993).

Ferrer de Valero (2001) conducted a study on a doctoral program between fall 1986 and spring 1990. There were 1,438 students who participated in the study. Of the students who participated in the study, only 876 received their degree by fall 1995. These students started their doctoral program between 1986 and 1990. The average time to degree for these students was four and a half years. Data on the factors that affected the completion rates and the time to degree were obtained via open-ended interviews. Results show that financial support, department orientation and advising, and strong research skills impacted degree completion. In addition, findings suggest that departments with shorter timeframes to degree completion were those that provided more advising, In other words, there was a mentoring relationship between student and advisor, and students were treated as colleagues and were involved with department activities.

Lovitts (2001) studied high doctoral attrition rates of Ph.D. programs at a public research university and a private research university. Data were collected via survey from 816 graduate students and via interviews from 30 students who were non-completer students. Lovitts identified three stages of attrition: Stage 1-entry and adjustment during the first year. Stage 2-development of competence (all requirements except the research and dissertation completion); and Stage 3-the research stage or completion of the dissertation (Lovitts, 2001). Results showed that non-completers had limited interaction with their faculty. Lovitts (2001) found that the time faculty spent with doctoral students,

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the location where interactions (formal vs informal) took place, and the quality of time with students all influenced doctoral students' satisfaction with their dissertation chair.

In the Lovitts' (2001) study, data from the interviews with non-completers indicated that the students initiated interactions with faculty and that the students were disappointed with the lack of interest faculty had regarding their progress. The data also indicated that lack of integration was one of the main reasons students decided to leave a program. The lack of integration with faculty prevented these students from completing their dissertation. Nearly half of the students reported experiences would have improved if the graduate program would have addressed the integration-related issues. As a result of his findings, Lovitts (2001) suggested that departments should provide more opportunities for faculty and student integration and raise faculty awareness regarding student issues. Lovitts (2001) believed it was important for faculty to be more supportive and show more interest in student ideas, in their research, and in their development as professionals (Lovitts, 2001).

Maher, Ford and Thompson (2004) conducted a study on 160 women who had participated in a PhD program at Stanford University's School of Education. A 46-item survey was used to determine factors that affected the progress of women in the program. The survey was mailed to all recipients who were admitted to the Stanford School of Education between 1978 and 1989. The participants were divided into three groups: early finishers (degree completion in under 4.5 years), average finishers (4.50 to 6.50 years to complete) and late finishers (6.75 years or more to complete). The results show that a few factors impacted those in the early stage. Statistically significant survey

factors were strong commitment to finish, supportive advisor, and smooth process with the dissertation. In addition, significant factors at $p < .01$ in the late stage group were helpful advisors and support from department staff (Maher et al., 2004).

Maher et al., (2004) compared the responses of the early and late finishing groups. There were six themes that were different in the three groups. These themes were: commitment to timely degree, working relationship with advisor, funding assistance, family issues, research background and the resilience to get through the program. The early finishers group stated they had a strong goal to finish quickly compared to the late group. In addition, early finishers stated they had a supportive family and were more prone to seek out support from others in the department. The late finishers group lacked a plan, had poor mentoring, lacked funding, and had difficulty finding a dissertation topic, which impacted their degree completion (Maher et al., 2004). In relation to advising, advisors often chose the amount of support and the extent of support their students received. In addition, advisors chose the level of mentoring they would extend to these doctoral students. Overall, those students who had support, had motivation, and were confident finished their program early (Maher et al., 2004).

Golde (2005) conducted research on 58 doctoral students who left their doctoral program. Of the 58 participants, 20 were in history, 16 in geology, and 11 in biology and english. The goal of the study was to determine how the department impacted and influenced doctoral student attrition. Semi-structured interviews ranging from 60-90 minutes were conducted with the students. Half of the interviews were conducted face to face and the other half by telephone. The students discussed their time in the program

and the reasons they left the program. Follow-up questions helped to clarify and probe

further in regards to courses, advising, relationships with faculty, dissertation topic and

financial support. Results showed six themes across the department. The six themes

included: lack of research experience, poor fit within department, poor relationship with

advisor, lack of interest in a research career, poor job market, and isolation. The overall

results show that the structure and involvement of the department faculty and advisors

had an impact on the students' experiences and their decisions to leave (Golde, 2005).

All but Dissertation Status

Some studies have examined the reasons for the all but dissertation (ABD) status.

In a study by Jack, Chubin, Porter, and Connolly (1983), 25 ABD doctoral students were

interviewed. The students were in PhD programs in sociology, zoology, physics,

electrical engineering, and biochemistry. The interviews were conducted by telephone,

and each one lasted about forty minutes. The researcher noted that the students seemed

surprised that anyone would be interested in them and the reasons they left the program.

The interviews focused on three major issues. The first was the reason for leaving the

doctoral program, then possible impacts on life and career of not completing the degree,

and last the assessment of degree value.

This study found that students left their program due to several reasons.

However, the main reasons were financial difficulties, a poor relationship with committee

members, personal problems, and lack of peer support (Jack et al., 1983). Some

examples of the participants' responses were related to advisor conflict. For example,

one student stated that if he wanted to meet with his advisor he was told to "make an appointment". Another student mentioned she "just ran out of steam" since she was working full-time, going to school, and running a household. Based on these findings, Jack et al., (1983) suggest that it is important for graduate schools to meet students' individual needs in order for those students to achieve success.

Muszynski (1988) studied two groups of doctoral students: doctoral students who had a delay in completing their dissertations and students who completed the dissertation in a timely manner. Those who were delayed gave the following factors that impacted completion:

- they lived farther from campus;
- their priority for completing the degree was low;
- they were not interested in the dissertation topic;
- stressful events interfered with work;
- the advisor/chair was not helpful; and
- they showed high levels of procrastination (Muszynski, 1988).

Muszynski and Akamatsu (1991) found that 288 students in a clinical psychology program delayed completion of their program and thus jeopardized program completion. A Procrastination Inventory Survey developed by Muszunski and Akamatsu (1991) was used to determine whether cognitive and affective factors impacted doctorate completion. The results from the survey indicated that working with a supportive advisor, having a topic of interest, and making the dissertation process a priority were key aspects to minimize the time needed to complete a doctoral degree (Muszynski & Akamatsu, 1991).

In a later study, Green (1997) used the Procrastination Inventory to determine whether procrastination affected doctoral completion for 142 education doctoral students. The scores on the Procrastination Inventory were significantly higher for students who were ABD (Green, 1997) and confirmed Muszynski and Akamatsu's (1991) findings.

Kluever and Green (1998) believed that support systems were important. They conducted research on dissertation barriers students faced within the five years in the doctoral program of 142 graduates and 97 ABDs. Participants were from an urban private college of education. A Dissertation Barriers Scale, developed by Kluever and Green (1998), was used in the study. In addition, three focus groups were used to discuss dissertation preparation. One group included all who graduated, and the other two groups were ABD students. The research findings indicated that there were significant obstacles during the dissertation phase of the degree program: advisor relationships, personal organization skills, time management, and student research skills (Kluever & Green, 1998). Results also showed that support from the advisor and family affected students completing their dissertation. In addition, four key issues were found to impact doctoral student attrition. These issues are:

- structure of program;
- unrealistic expectations;
- advisor relationships; and
- gender differences (Green & Kluever, 1998).

Sigafus (1998) explored ways doctoral students handle the demands of doctoral study and why they withdraw after passing comprehensive exams. He completed a

phenomenological study with individual and group interviews. There were 25 students from the University of Kentucky's Educational Administration program who participated in the study. These participants entered the program in Fall 1990 and were between the ages of 30 and 53. Follow-up interviews were conducted with nine participants and a third interview with two participants. Sigafus (1998) found four main themes to doctoral student withdrawal which include: structure, support, authority and pressure. Structure referred to time management and set priorities, support related to access to significant others, and authority referred to faculty, employers, and family members. In addition, pressure referred to demand of time, stress and strain.

Another study by Golde (1998), stated that the first year of doctoral study was key for students to persist. He interviewed 58 students from four departments who had left their PhD programs between 1984 and 1993. Two of the departments were in the science field and the other two were in the humanities. All former students were interviewed about their experiences during their graduate careers. Attrition during the first year accounted for one-third of the overall attrition in three of the departments studied. Golde (1998) found that more than twice the students left prior to ABD status than after ABD. The main reasons mentioned for leaving the program were: lifestyle, job market, advisor mismatch, intellectual reasons, and career change.

In addition, Golde (2000) subsequently conducted a case study on 68 former doctoral students to determine why they withdrew from the doctoral program. The students were admitted to a Midwestern university in the fall of 1995 and spring of 1996. Semi-structured interviews were used to gain information about the doctoral process and

understand their reasons for leaving. The recorded interviews were an hour long. Golde (2000) selected three case studies to provide student experiences with attrition from the doctoral program. Results confirmed that integration into the academic system of the department is critical in doctoral students' persistence. Based on the results, the researcher found that two of the reasons students left were lack of academic integration and social integration. One student left the program because he failed the candidacy exam and his advisor told him she would no longer work with him. Another student left the program due to a job opportunity; and the last student left due to a falling out with her advisor/chair.

In a qualitative case study by Padula and Miller (1999), the experiences of women in a psychology doctoral program at a research university were examined. The study gives a perspective of the common issues experienced by women at the doctoral level and provides insight to possible strategies to help these students believe in themselves and achieve success. The researchers conducted a qualitative study to explore the experiences of four married women who were 32-48 years of age. The four women attended graduate school full-time, had children, and other home responsibilities. The experiences of these women were documented using observations and interviews (Padula & Miller, 1999).

The findings suggest there were eight specific themes including: decision to return, expectations versus reality, measuring up, frustrations and difficulties, changing family relationships, importance of the organization, finishing the program quickly, and rewards (Padula & Miller, 1999). Some of these themes are consistent with previous

studies which indicated that career and family were among the main reasons doctoral

students did not complete their degree (Padula & Miller, 1999). In addition, a common

theme found in the study was the lack of faculty support. Many of these women

mentioned that faculty in the program did not have much positive impact on them. In

addition, some students mentioned their desire to have a mentor and were disappointed

that they did not have a mentor (Padula & Miller, 1999). The lack of mentors was due to

the lack of faculty involvement.

Myers (1999) conducted a study to find the key factors in ABD status in the

College of Human Resources and Education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State

University. The study focused on 94 ABD doctoral students who were unable to

complete the dissertation and ended up leaving the program. Semi-structured interviews

were used to determine the experiences of doctoral candidates and the barriers that were

dominant in the process. Results showed that time and financial issues were a major

obstacle to completing the dissertation. In addition, frustration and lack of interest in the

program, family considerations, time, and support factors were also obstacles faced by

doctoral students (Myers, 1999). More than half of those who participated in the study

(54%) reported difficult relationships with their advisors. Sixty-four percent stated

family, personal responsibilities, and employment were factors that impacted completion.

Finally, 70% stated financial and employment factors affected their completion.

Hunter and Devine (2016) conducted research on doctoral students' emotional

status and the reasons they left the doctoral program. A total of 186 doctoral students

from nine countries were studied. The goal was to understand the factors that contributed

to doctoral students' emotional exhaustion and reasons for leaving the program. Findings

suggested that high levels of emotional exhaustion led to an increased plan to leave. In

addition, faculty support significantly reduced doctoral students' emotional exhaustion.

The researchers found that the department plays a significant role in doctoral students'

educational experiences (Hunter & Devine, 2016). When doctoral students felt cared

about and appreciated at the faculty level, doctoral students' emotional exhaustion

decreased. The more time doctoral students met with their advisors, the lower the

emotional exhaustion felt by the doctoral students. The results are consistent with

previous findings that advisors' support and accessibility play a key role in doctoral

student satisfaction and well-being (Hunter & Devine, 2016). Doctoral students who

reported a negative interaction with advisors spoke to the disorganization and lack of

responsibility shown by their advisors (Hunter & Devine, 2016).

ABD Status and College of Education

Previous literature has focused on traditional doctoral programs (Kluever &

Green, 1998; Nerad & Cerny, 1993; Sigafus, 1998). However, Pauley, Cunningham, and

Toth (1999) focused on a nontraditional program in educational leadership. Surveys

were mailed to 226 doctoral students who entered the program between 1980 and 1993.

The researchers received a response rate of 62% of those surveyed. Results indicated

reasons students completed their program were related to financial support, peer support,

faculty support, and committee support (Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999). These

findings suggest that there needs to be a level of support by faculty for doctoral students.

The level of support by faculty include cooperative faculty, better advising from faculty, and better communication between faculty and students. Faculty support and procedures to improve faculty and student communication are needed especially outside of the classroom (Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999). The significance of faculty in the doctoral process should not be ignored.

Willis and Carmichael (2011) researched the experiences of late stage attrition of six counselor education doctoral students. Late stage referred to those who dropped out during the dissertation stage of the doctoral program. Researchers used a grounded theory methodology and used semi-structured interviews. The participants were found using the CESNET national counseling listserv. There were two sections of the study, the Dropping Out section and the Leaving section. The Dropping Out section was for students who left the program due to negative experiences and the Leaving section was for students who withdrew due to positive experiences in their work and family life. Five participants were in the Dropping Out group and reported issues with dissertation chairs, feelings of helplessness, and a focus on career goals instead. The participants in the Leaving group left because they had a change of personal goals. When they left the program, it was a relief and they did not feel depressed anymore (Willis & Carmichael, 2011).

Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) conducted research on 76 doctoral students in the field of education. The purpose of the study was to examine the factors associated with completion of the doctoral program. The findings indicated that the journey through the doctoral program is lonely, stressful, and challenging. The findings

helped support Tinto's (1993) theory that doctoral students need to be academically and socially involved in order to persist and become successful. The factors that impacted success were supportive dissertation chairs and available advisors. In addition, the factors showed the amount of time to complete a doctoral degree has increased in education programs while it has decreased in other doctoral programs (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, and Bade (2014) studied the experiences of 76 doctoral students who completed a doctoral program in the field of education. A qualitative phenomenological inquiry was used to examine the beliefs, experiences, and persistence of doctoral students. A purposeful sample was used based on two criteria. The first of the criteria was that the students completed their doctoral degree in the field of education. The second criteria was that the students were employed in K-12 environments or higher education. The sample consisted of 59 Caucasian participants, 21 African Americans, five Latinos, three Asians, and one classified as Other. Results from the study indicated that there were five primary related themes including, relationships with family and faculty, time management, program flexibility, career advancement, and clear doctoral program expectations. Researchers found that doctoral students felt there was a lack of guidance in the steps to working with their research committee (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). Doctoral students who were stressed, isolated, and had a lack of social support were more likely to lose motivation and leave the program (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). Students need an environment that meets their basic needs. These doctoral students' needs included a sense of belonging, motivation to achieve, ability to

overcome difficult issues, personal sacrifice, and academic understanding (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014).

ABD and Relationship with Chair/Advisor

Doctoral student relationships with faculty and staff can impact doctoral success (Stallone, 2003). Tinto (1997) stated that human relationship factors impact doctoral student attrition. The relationship students have with their faculty advisor is one of the most important in graduate education (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010). The level of faculty/advisor guidance can create personal and academic issues for a doctoral student if the advisor does not provide the support that is needed during the dissertation process.

Research indicates the relationship between the doctoral student and the chair is key in determining students' success in completing their degrees (Bloom et al., 2007). The completion or non-completion of the doctoral program is based on students' relationship with their chair. In the past, an advisor was the key person who helped the student through the degree process until it was completed. Today, the role of the advisor has been taken over by the committee chair. This person is now the point person who oversees and mentors doctoral students (Myers, 1999).

Noy and Ray (2012) explored whether women and students of color saw a disadvantage in their advisor relationship. The researchers studied responses from 4,010 doctoral students who were in their third year or later in a doctoral program in 1999. The Survey on Doctoral Education and Career Preparation was used to ask questions about the participants' advisors. Advisors were classified into six types: affective,

instrumental, intellectual, exploitative, available, and respectful (Noy & Ray, 2012).

Results show that female doctoral students found their primary advisors to be more

affective. Students of color found their primary advisors to be less supportive and

respectful compared to how white men, men of color, and white women described their

advisors (Noy & Ray, 2012).

Researchers also compared student responses in departments (i.e.,

biological/physical science and humanities/social sciences). Those in the

biological/physical sciences showed more instrumental support from their primary

advisors and less support in all other areas compared to those in humanities and social

sciences. All these findings suggest that women of color are the most disadvantaged in

advisor support. Doctoral students need respect and instrumental support which are both

important characteristics of mentoring. Being an instrumental advisor includes providing

doctoral students with survival skills, helping to build professional relationships within

the department, helping to obtain funding, and advocating for their students (Noy & Ray,

2012).

Of major importance is the mentoring relationship a student forms during the

program. Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, and Castro (2011) discussed extrinsic supportive

factors related to positive mentors. They conducted a research study to determine

resiliency and emotional intelligence levels in female doctoral students. The researchers

wanted a better understanding of the experiences that encouraged these women to pursue

a doctorate degree in counseling and to learn more about their experiences. The main

areas of interest were school experiences, impact of mentors, achievement barriers, and

major life events. A phenomenological approach was used for the study in addition to semi-structured group interviews or focus groups. A counseling doctoral cohort that included seven female students was used for the study. Four of the seven female students were White and three were Latinas). They ranged from 28-52 years of age. The subjects, who had completed four semesters of doctoral studies, participated in group interviews (Castro et al., 2001). The data were analyzed using open coding, constant comparative method, and focused coding. The results of the study showed two overarching themes which included: (1) attributes, attitudes, motivation, and (2) extrinsic supportive factors. One theme not mentioned in previous research dealt with negative external factors.

Overall, doctoral student internal locus of control measured by attitude and motivation was high at 100%. In addition, there seemed to be a high percentage (85.71%) in several areas of external factors, including perseverance, aptitude, validation, and positive mentors. The findings suggested that individual characteristics, such as positive and negative external factors play a major role in motivating women to achieve success and increase their resiliency to negative barriers. In addition, mentor support was also a key factor to women achieving academic success. The researchers also discussed extrinsic supportive factors related to positive mentors (Castro et al., 2011). The researchers believe this type of study can help provide educators with information to help women overcome negative experiences and motivate them to succeed (Castro et al., 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Tinto (1975) stated that social integration is a major component in his model of retention. Research has shown that doctoral students feel their programs are not supportive and they feel isolated, which leads to them leaving their program (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). Social support for doctoral students can come from their family, spouse, and their doctoral student peers. In addition, support from faculty is also important and beneficial to doctoral students (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014).

The conceptual framework for this study will be based on Tinto's Theory of Doctoral Persistence (1993). Tinto's model is the primary model in research to depict doctoral student persistence (Willett, 2014). The model suggests that doctoral students' success in completion of their doctorate is impacted by their personal and intellectual interactions with faculty and students in the program, in addition to their personal experiences. Tinto (1993) described three stages that students go through in the doctoral process (Table 2).

The first stage is transition and adjustment which includes the first year of doctoral work. During this stage, students develop personal relationships with classmates and faculty. The relationships formed during the doctoral process are influenced by persistence (Willis, 2007). The second stage is development and competence. This stage includes the second year of study until the time students reach doctoral candidacy. The knowledge and research skills students obtain is crucial in this stage (Willis, 2007). The final stage of Tinto's model is dissertation research. This stage includes all doctoral work

and focuses on less interaction with faculty. The committee and chair are key members that influence persistence in this stage. The persistence will vary with each student, but it will depend on the faculty interaction with the student. More personal and emotional difficulty is faced at this stage than at the other two stages (Willis, 2007). Research suggests different barriers impact doctoral attrition at each stage of the doctoral process (Willis, 2007). Doctoral students need drive and motivation to complete their doctoral program. Tinto's (1993) model shows motivation to be a factor in doctoral student retention. Doctoral students need to make their program a top priority in order to achieve success (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade, 2014). Tinto believed that students need to integrate into the academic system to feel motivated. These students need to understand how the process works for their program. Those who lack knowledge become frustrated and stressed.

Table 2

Tinto's Theory of Doctoral Persistence

Stage	Time Period	Characteristics
1. Transition (Development of Community Membership)	1st Year of Study	- Seeks to establish membership in academic and social communities - Professional relationships are key - Influenced by student commitment to completing career and education goals.
2. Candidacy (Development of Competencies)	2nd Year of Study to Completion of Comprehensive Exams and Gaining Candidacy	- Depends on abilities and interactions with faculty - Obtains knowledge and competencies necessary for doctoral research - Intertwines experiences within the department, blurring the lines of social and academic

3. Doctoral Completion	Gaining Candidacy to Completion of Research Proposal to Completion and Defense of Research Project	• Individual faculty play a huge role as mentors and advisors • Works with one advisor and few committee members • Influenced by outside communities such as family and the support they provide

Note. Adapted from "*Leaving college: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition," by Vincent Tinto, 2012,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Doctoral students in the ABD stage face different barriers than they did while pursuing their coursework. Tinto suggests that successful completion of a doctorate is impacted by personal interactions with faculty. Those students who are persistent have strong relationships with faculty (Tinto, 1993). The student environment and the relationships they form impact their program completion. In addition, their goals, commitments, supports, barriers, and previous educational experiences can also impact their success (Tinto, 1993).

Summary of Findings

Based on the information provided in the literature review there was a need to continue research efforts to determine what factors affect doctoral attrition. The lack of faculty-student interaction, finances, and advisor support were some of the main reasons doctoral students do not complete their doctorate degree. There were other variables discussed, such as isolation, lack of mentorship, and conflict with the dissertation committee chair. Few institutions have published research on doctoral students in Educational Leadership. In addition, limited studies have asked ABD doctoral students about their in-depth experiences and barriers in an Educational Leadership doctoral program. Chapter III provided the research methodology for this study.

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CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview of Research Problem

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), from the year 1976-1977 through 2012-2013, the graduation rates among doctoral students decreased from 91.9% to 71.6%. The research literature on doctoral education has often focused on time to degree and completion rates (Berg, 2016). Although rates of attrition in doctoral programs are similar to the rate for undergraduate programs, the problem is perhaps more serious because students enter a program with more preparation and invest a great deal in doctoral programs. In addition, the attrition rate in doctoral programs in education is high (Berg, 2016).

Research has indicated that various factors impact student success in a doctoral program. Many students are too busy with other responsibilities, some are not motivated, and the demands of the program impact work and family obligations (Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999). In addition, research has found a relationship between certain situational variables and doctoral completion (Pauley et al., 1999). However, the research on doctoral completion is incomplete. Further research is needed as to why many students persist and graduate while others leave their program. It is vital to determine what factors influence attrition in order to provide the needed resources and intervention strategies to help doctoral students complete their degrees and improve retention efforts (Willis & Carmichael, 2001).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of doctoral students in two higher education doctoral programs in Educational Leadership. Stallone (2003) has stated that attrition rates have less to do with what the student brings to the institution and more with the learning culture and environment of the institution. Research shows that students face a number of barriers during the dissertation process including outside responsibilities, struggles with advising, and lack of research knowledge (Stallone, 2003). In addition, past research has indicated that individual personal factors also impact student success in a doctoral program (Stallone, 2003). These personal factors include: being busy with other responsibilities, not being motivated, and finding that the demands of a doctoral program can heavily impact work and family obligations and thus interfere with doctoral completion.

This research added to the conversation regarding the doctoral processes and hopefully help increased the completion rate of doctoral students. This study helped university faculty understand how candidates can enter the all but dissertation (ABD) phase of a doctoral program and not complete it. This study provided suggestions for university faculty so they can help students to become valued doctorate completers who increase the knowledge base and promote their self-worth in society (Hardy, 2015).

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, a phenomenology methodology was used. In phenomenological methodology, Moustakas (1994) believed there were two primary

research questions: (a) What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon, and (b) What events influenced your experience of this phenomenon? In this research study, the primary research questions were:

1. What are the experiences of Education Leadership doctoral ABD students in the dissertation phase of their degree?

2. What, if any, are the barriers while completing their dissertation?

Research Design

Due to the limited knowledge on the experience of Educational Leadership doctoral students in the dissertation phase of their degree, a qualitative methodology was used. In particular, a phenomenological design was used to determine a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of doctoral students. The goal of phenomenology was to obtain the essence of an experience. In addition, it provided a first person point of view. This design was used to help the researcher obtain and describe what participants experienced during the doctoral program, as well as how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's Theory of Doctoral Persistence model was the primary model in research to depict doctoral student persistence (as cited in Willett, 2014). The model suggests doctoral students are successful and complete their doctorate based on their personal and intellectual interactions with faculty and students in the program, in addition to, their personal experiences. Tinto's Theory of Doctoral Persistence was used to examine the

different stages doctoral students face during their dissertation journey. Tinto (1993)

described three stages that students go through in the doctoral process: (a) transition and

adjustment stage, (b) development and competence stage, and (c) dissertation research

stage. Tinto's theory helped provide an analytic framework that provides insight to the

doctoral student experience and the stages they go through during their doctoral work.

Population and Sample

The population for this study were doctoral students at two small universities who

were admitted to the Education Leadership Doctoral program. The first university is a

Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and has awarded over 62,000 undergraduate and

graduate degrees. Their doctoral program started in 2007 and has awarded over 64

doctoral degrees. In addition, the program is designed as a cohort model to help leaders

in the education profession grow in current and future educational environments.

The second university used for this study has graduated over 200 doctoral

students since 1999. This doctoral program was recognized as a Doctoral Research

University by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, placing it in the nation's

top 7 percent of all institutions of higher education. This university's doctoral program is

also designed as a cohort model to help leaders and administrators advance their

educational professional careers.

Both doctoral programs are competitive and admission to the programs have

specific requirements. Those interested in the doctoral program need to submit a

Graduate Record Examination (GRE). In addition, applicants need to have a Master's

degree from an accredited institution. Additionally, doctoral applicants need to include a personal statement, résumé, and three letters of recommendation.

For one of the doctoral programs, once admitted to the program, doctoral students are required to complete 18 hours of leadership core courses (Strategic Planning, Human Resource Administration, and Financial Management), 15 hours of research core courses (Quantitative Research I and II, Qualitative Research, and Program Evaluation), and nine hours of communication core courses (Dispute Resolution, Professional Writing and Intercultural Communication). Twelve hours of a specialization are also required. The specialization hours concentrate in different areas of interests in certain fields of study (Counseling, Curriculum and Instruction, Higher Education, or Reading). Once all courses are completed and doctoral students advance to candidacy, then doctoral students are required to complete nine hours of dissertation hours. Based on the structure of the doctoral program, doctoral students are expected to complete their degree within 3.5 years. In addition, the other doctoral program used for this study, has students complete 24 hours of leadership courses, 15 hours in research, 12 hours in cognate, and nine hours of dissertation.

The population for this study were those who have advanced to candidacy status and completed all doctoral course requirements for the doctoral program except for their dissertation (ABD). Therefore, purposive sampling was used (Creswell, 2013). The sample population consisted of 8 students (N=8) over the age of 18. In addition, the sample were those students from both universities who were selected to the doctoral

program were from cohort one through twenty-four and started the doctoral program in years 2007-2014.

The the criteria needed for the sample was obtained from the records held with the College of Education at both universities. On-time graduation was defined as those completing their degree within five years as stated in the program handbook from both universities. A request was made to Associate Dean of the College of Education to obtain the names and emails of students who were all but dissertation status (Appendix B). In addition, a request was made to the Chair of the Education Leadership program at the second university. A list of past and present ABD students from the program was compiled using data from different sources at the universities. This includes registrar enrollment records, dissertation advisor records, and comprehensive exam records. A review of the list was conducted by the departments to delete names of students who did not meet the criteria described above. Table 3 shows the number of ABD students at one university since the program started including Cohorts 1 thru 7.

Table 3

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program ABD Data

Cohort	Semester Started	# Students Who Started	Graduated	ABD, Still Enrolled	ABD, Dropped out	Dropped Out
1	Spring 2007	19	17	0	2	0
2	Fall 2007	16	13	0	0	3
3	Fall 2008	24	14	0	3	7
4	Fall 2009	21	12	5	0	4
5	Fall 2010	14	4	3	1	6

| 6 | Fall 2011 | 14 | 8 | 1 | 0 | 5 |
| 7 | Fall 2012 | 13 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 3 |

Note. ABD data from College of Education (2017, October).

An email was sent by the department to participants who were ABD in the Educational Leadership program. The email asked participants to contact the researcher directly if they were interested in the study. The email described the study and requested their participation (Appendix A). Once participants expressed an interest in the study, an informed consent form was emailed to the participants. Through email, an interview day and time was scheduled that was convenient for each participant.

Data Collection Procedures

As mentioned, the main source of data collection was semi-structured interviews with doctoral participants. The interviews allowed doctoral students to identify their own experiences and barriers. Kvale (1996) stated that semi-structured interviews are effective due to the fact that the format will give the researcher flexibility to ask follow up questions if needed.

This study began with the researcher submitting an application for approval of the study to the university's Internal Review Board (IRB), the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS). Data collection began when the approval was received. The participants were contacted via email to explain the nature of the study and to obtain letters of consent (Appendix C). The informed consent was sent to the students via email. After signatures were received, then the participants were cleared for the study.

Students were asked to provide information about the experiences and barriers they believed have impacted them most in the completion of the program.

A semi-structured interview guide consisting of 7 questions was used for this study. All questions were asked in the same order as presented in the interview protocol (Appendix D). Open-ended questions were used to elicit students' perceptions and experiences in the doctoral program. The interview protocol was designed to encourage responses about the dissertation experience from participants.

The researcher scheduled 40-50 minute phone interviews with each participant. With permission from each participant, the interviews were audiotaped using a digital recorder. As an incentive for completing the interviews, each participant was offered a $10 gift card to Starbucks. Each participant chose a phone interview and a time that was convenient for him/her. Once all interviews were recorded, they were sent to a transcription service. The transcription service signed a confidentially form (Appendix E). Once the transcription was completed, the transcribed interviews were analyzed.

Data Analysis

A qualitative analysis was used for this study. This process consisted of a six-step process to analyze data as described by Moustakas (1994). This six step process is part of a phenomenology study:

1. The data collected from the study was collected and organized.

2. The text was read at least once and notes were added in the margins of all transcripts. These notes helped determine any themes.

3. Coding was used to help themes emerge from the data collected.

4. Similar statements and sentences were clustered together into similar themes and meaning.

5. The textual and structural descriptions determined how the phenomenon was experienced.

6. The essence of the experience was presented through narration and tables.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Qualitative research takes into account whether results from a study are trustworthy and dependable. To ensure integrity of these findings, the researcher used credibility, triangulation, purposive sampling, and member checks. Credibility was achieved by recording the data accurately from participants. The information provided from the participants was extensive. In addition, triangulation also provided trustworthiness of the study in two ways. Data was collected by the use of interviews using the same research questions for all the participants in the study (Anney, 2014). This method allowed reoccurring themes to emerge which validated the findings.

Purposive sampling was used in this study to provide the researcher accurate data to address the research questions. The sampling technique gave the researcher key participants who meet the criteria under investigation. It allowed greater findings than other sampling methods (Anney, 2014). Lastly, the researcher used member checking to make sure results are truthful to each participant's experiences. A draft of the interview was emailed to each participant. This allowed the researcher to make sure the data collected was accurate and all information from the interviews was included in the analysis.

Ethical Issues

The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects reviewed the study. Information about the participants and the College of Education was kept confidential at all times. In addition, all the data collected from the participants was kept confidential. The data was saved by the researcher in a computer hard drive and will be preserved following the IRB guidelines.

Summary

In summary, a phenomenological study was conducted to find the experiences and barriers for all but dissertation doctoral students. The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of doctoral students in two Educational Leadership doctoral programs. This study contributes and raises awareness among doctoral departments about the doctoral student experience. In addition, based on the results of this study, department stakeholders will increase their understanding and knowledge of what doctoral students need to complete their doctoral degree in Educational Leadership while balancing a career and family life.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of doctoral students in two higher education doctoral programs in Educational Leadership. My goal was to determine the themes that are common with doctoral students who are ABD and have delayed completion of their program. In addition, the goal was to learn about their experiences related to writing their dissertation. For the purpose of this study, a phenomenological methodological approach was used.

In phenomenological methodology, Moustakas (1994) believed there were two primary research questions: (a) What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon, and (b) What events influenced your experience of this phenomenon? In this research study, the primary research questions were:

1. What are the experiences of Education Leadership doctoral ABD students in the dissertation phase of their degree?

2. What, if any, are the barriers while completing their dissertation?

Participant Demographics

There were eight ABD doctoral students interviewed for this study. Participants were accepted to an Educational Leadership doctoral program at one of two participating universities located near a large metropolitan city. One of these universities is a public four year university and above with over 4,000 total students and is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). It has awarded over 62,000 undergraduate and graduate degrees. This university has been recognized by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of

Teaching as one of 119 U.S. colleges and universities for its 2008 Community

Engagement Classification. In addition, this doctoral program started in 2007 and has

awarded over 64 doctoral degrees. The program is designed as a cohort model to help

leaders in the education profession grow in current and future educational environments.

The second university used for this study is also a public four year and above

university with over 19,000 students. It began in 1995 and has graduated over 200

doctoral students since 1999. This doctoral program was recognized as a Doctoral

Research University by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, placing it in the

nation's top seven percent of all institutions of higher education. In addition, this

doctoral program is also designed as a cohort model to help leaders and administrators

advance their educational professional careers. The sample of participants included three

males and five females. Their ages ranged from the mid 20s through mid 60s. Four of

the participants identified themselves as Caucasian, three identified as Hispanic, and one

as Other who did not specify.

Table 4

ABD Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Age at Time of Study	Program Start Date
Kate	Female	White	36	2011
Marcus	Male	Hispanic	52	2014
Pam	Female	White	37	2011
Kristi	Female	Hispanic	41	2010
Sophia	Female	White	35	2008
Rosie	Female	Hispanic	59	2007
Liam	Male	White	41	2007
Nate	Male	Other	50	2009

The semi-structured interviews took place over the phone via Skype Calls in a private office and each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. To ensure my recordings were audible, I utilized the recording feature on my computer and placed a Sony digital recorder next to my computer, allowing me two options of recording each phone interview. Once all eight interviews were conducted, each recorded interview was sent to a transcription service. The transcription service used for this study signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix E). Once all interviews were transcribed, I read each transcript to obtain insight into each participant's experience. The data collected was analyzed using Moustakas (1994) six step process for phenomenological research. Using this process to analyze the data helped provide a structured approach (Moustakas, 1994). At this time, I also gave my interviewees pseudonyms to maintain confidentially.

ABD Experiences in Program

The research found multiple meaning units in each transcript. Each meaning was coded into a cluster. These codes were based on participant quotes and began to present the description of the phenomenon. Similar clusters of meaning were grouped together to develop themes. The researcher coded each cluster using a color-coded system. There were 22 preliminary codes which were revised as data analysis progressed. Eventually, the codes were clustered into 13 subthemes. Finally, the results of the study showed three major themes as the reasons of the ABD status of doctoral students in the dissertation phase. The participants showed Outside Support, Competing Demands, and Program Obstacles as the recurring themes to their ABD status.

Outside Support

The first theme that was notable from the participant's experiences was Outside Support. Overall, participants had a positive experience in their program. Participants felt outside support efforts throughout their dissertation phase of the program. There

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were three support systems discussed as the reasons why participants were successful during the dissertation phase of doctoral program. They believed they received support from their cohort, chair and the institution. These three subthemes are described below.

Cohort support. The participants felt support from other doctoral students who entered the program at the same time as they did. The participants felt members of their cohort provided the support needed to write their dissertation. These efforts included meeting each other to write on the dissertation, calling each other via phone, and holding each other accountable.

Kate mentioned the following:

Our cohort itself was a very cohesive unit, very supportive of each other, not competitive. We really worked well as a group. The positive is that we were in a cohort and that we would push each other when we thought we couldn't anymore.

Other participants mentioned their "cohort was amazing" and "it was nice to have that cohort program because it was camaraderie." Rosie felt the main positive experience in the program was the cohort model and "we were working together as a group." Sophia felt the positive aspect of the program was the cohort. She stated, "We had a group of classmates that would push each other when we thought we couldn't anymore."

Liam felt one positive aspect about the program was the fact that they were a cohort and took every class together as a group. He believed there were lots of friendships kindled and there were definite support mechanisms that came out of these friendships within the cohort. Liam stated the following:

Of course, we formed our own little cliques, but even in doing so we still had a support system that stood across the entire cohort. For those who struggled in statistics, there was one student who was extremely gifted in statistics. She was

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there to help all of us. At one point we were all working on our dissertation.

There's a number of doctoral students that talk semi-weekly to check on you, your

family, and what chapter you were on.

Overall, Outside Support was a recurring theme throughout the study. Many participants

believed they received the support needed from outside sources such as their institution,

cohort, and the program chair in order to write their dissertation and make the progress

needed.

Institution support. In addition, the participants also felt a positive support

system from the institution in various ways. They believed the institution was supportive

of their efforts to complete their doctoral program. Participants mentioned faculty were

available for guidance on their dissertation and always encouraging when writing issues

occurred. The institution developed writing support and boot camps in order to provide

help on dissertation writing. In addition, the institution was supportive in extending

writing deadlines for those writing their dissertations.

Kate noted she had "great faculty involvement." She expressed the following

regarding her institution: "Amazingly supportive of me as I've tried to continue my

doctoral journey while dealing with my son's illness."

The institutions also went out of their way to help with their dissertation writing.

The institutions offered writing center support, library assistants, and various online

resources. Four of the participants mentioned writing support was beneficial to their

dissertation writing. Kate discussed her experiences in a dissertation boot camp. It was

an intensive weekend program that was offered in the fall and spring for students that

were ABD and needed writing help. In addition, Kate utilized the writing center where

doctoral students were paired with a writing center tutor.

Kate stated the following:

> I would go on Saturday and work for a couple of hours. I had a slow progress, but it was still progress and it was something I still wanted to do and push forward. I was using it more as an accountability partner in which I would, schedule days for scheduled drafts for the tutor, meet the tutor, bring a draft, read it, and review it together. Once complete, we would set another goal of how much to write by the next meeting. It was a really good motivator for me as well.

Marcus mentioned the institution had regular writing days on Saturdays throughout the semester and stated the following:

> You would come in to a room full of graduate students. It is open to all graduate students from different cohorts who need to do something in their writing. In addition, they would provide snacks and guest speakers to different topics. Not everyone from my cohort went, but I did. Even if it was to just one question I had answered. I want to feel like I can go to somebody and there was somebody there to be able to answer whatever it is you need. That is to me a good resource!

Pam also mentioned a dissertation boot camp on campus and stated the following:

> It's a weekend on campus of intense writing and research support, writing support, and all the support entities available to students. I participated in it once and was invited several times, but my schedule never worked. In addition, there are several writing weekends for students. It's an opportunity to meet with dissertation counselors for writing support. The writing session is free and provides one on one help. You can reserve the library and have quiet time and focus on your writing.

Pam also felt the writing support provided a template for the doctoral students to use for their dissertation. "The support has been very, very helpful and they go above and beyond." She stressed that this support was especially helpful for those struggling and ABD.

Liam felt having the writing days every third Saturday of the month was beneficial. Liam stated the following:

> We can go as early as eight am and we can write our hearts out! During this time, we are allowed to go to a classroom or the library and work on any stage of our dissertation. The university feeds us lunch and we have two professors to meet with. One professor is on staff at the university and can help us with questions about the relationship we have with our chair or just how to handle different chapters of the dissertation.

Chair support. There were four participants who had a supportive chair. Pam said her "relationship with my chair was amazing." He was supportive and helped her to meet deadlines. Kristi also had a positive relationship with her dissertation chair. She mentioned her Chair was the main reason she still was trying to complete her dissertation. In addition, Kristi felt her Chair provided research ideas, helpful research articles, and advice on what dissertation topic would be best. Kate and Nate also described having a good relationship with their Chairs.

Kate felt her Chair was supportive through the obstacles she faced in the program and stated the following:

> He and I worked well together and he would invite me to coauthor some papers with him. He felt a couple of the papers I had written for class had publication

potential and wanted me to work on that. He can be demanding in that he's

very demanding in detail and making sure that you got all of your stuff done and

done well. He was always very supportive personally. Before my son's diagnosis

and finishing up my comprehensive exam, I was pregnant with my daughter.

He was extraordinarily supportive of me through my pregnancy and helped

keep me on track and on task even post-partum.

Kate mentioned her Chair was supportive when her son was diagnosed with a rare illness.

She stated:

And then with my son, he was always in contact with me. He would say, you let

me know what you need to be successful. It was this level of support that I think

has gotten me to this point.

Competing Demands

Competing demands were priorities that impacted students' time away from

writing their dissertations. In this study, all of the eight participants experienced several

competing demands during the dissertation phase. Many participants had to balance their

time due to work responsibilities, family responsibilities, and personal issues while

finding the time to write their dissertation. Many participants found it difficult to manage

their time and to juggle all these responsibilities. There were three subthemes that

emerged under competing demands: work responsibilities, family responsibilities, and

medical issues.

Work responsibilities. Many participants stated their job responsibilities had an

impact on their dissertation writing. All participants for the study worked full-time as a

teacher, administrator, counselor, and several in higher education. However, their work

schedules and additional work activities affected the time needed to write their

dissertation. One participant had to change jobs during her time in the program and now

had a two-hour commute from home and back. Due to their work schedules, many could not find the time to write their dissertation and manage work obligations.

Sophia mentioned that other cohort members were taking time off from work to write their dissertations, but she did not have the vacation time to use for this option. Sophia stated:

> I don't have that kind of days when I have kids, small kids at home, or I don't have a job where it's easy to take off a day, because you are the assistant principal and you still have responsibilities. So, I just felt like when someone has to take weeks and weeks off work to be able to finish it, they weren't set up for that success through the coursework in the beginning, if that makes sense.

In addition, Liam was working a second job and stated the following:

> Being a teacher and making what I was making was not enough. I worked a second job on the weekend to help pay for school and to cover loan payments. I was working 12 to 14 hours on the weekend and coming home exhausted. I had no time to get my dissertation done. I was coming home exhausted and not having time to write my dissertation, among other things.

Family obligations. Many of the participants in the study also had family responsibilities they had to manage. All participants were married and had children except for one participant. Some were parents to two or three children and had to balance schedules for their children. All participants who were married mentioned they had a supportive spouse who was willing to provide support and the time to write their paper. However, it was difficult for them to manage the time needed to write their dissertation. Two participants had children with special needs. Therefore, they had to take time needed for doctor appointments and additional responsibilities. Marcus stated the following:

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It is not easy. It's difficult. The program is stressful. Not only stressful on yourself, but on those around you, your entire family, beginning with your spouse, if you are married. It is going to take a toll to family and work relationships.

Kristi mentioned that "life happens." During the program she had a baby and her relationship with the father did not work out. She is also a mom to a first-year college student. Being a single mom to two kids took priority over working on school. Kristi stated: "I'll try to do everything when he goes to bed at eight." In addition, Sophia expressed she was a full-time, single mom to two children. Therefore, she had to juggle mom responsibilities while trying to write her dissertation. Sophia said: "My two kids came in the middle of trying to work through everything." Another participant, Liam, had a child who kept his family busy with enrichment activities. Liam said: "I had to use time wisely because all of sudden you have more going on in one life."

Parent caregiver. Many of the participants had barriers related to being caregivers to their parents. Four of the eight participants described having caregiver roles for their parents. These four participants had to provide for the needs and wellbeing of their parents. One participant lived with her parents and provided financial support while living in their home. She mentioned one of her parents was sick, and she had to make sure he was cared for. In addition, she was dependent on her parents to help care for her child. Now that her father is ill, she has to focus her writing time when her son goes to bed. One participant cared for her mother-in-law until she passed and mentioned: "It was a stressful task while writing her dissertation."

Another participant, Pam, took care of her mother while in the program. Pam stated: "Having a full-time job, traveling, dealing with my mother's sickness, and being a full-time student kind of proves a little bit difficult." Unfortunately, her mother passed

due to cancer which hindered her efforts to complete the program. Lastly, Marcus also cared for his mother and oldest brother; the dynamic presented challenges. Marcus stated: "This is a major, major stressor that I'm dealing with right now."

Medical issues. Three participants had endured medical health issues for self or a family member during the dissertation process. Some had children who were sick and had to place their writing on hold to care for themselves or their child. During the dissertation process, one participant's son was diagnosed with a disease that could be described as a childhood version of Alzheimer's. Kate stated that this disease will cause "children to develop normally until about the age four or five and then they begin to stale out in their development and will eventually decline." While working on her dissertation, Kate son's was given a "death sentence" by doctors, and she stated "that this experience changed the trajectory of her progress in the doctoral program."

In addition, Nate had to take a leave of absence from the program due to medical reasons. He had completed his courses and passed his comprehensive exams. However, once he was ready to start the dissertation process he became very ill. Although he is now better, he was not able to start on his dissertation and had to leave the program.

Another participant dealt with depression and focus issues due to ADHD during the dissertation phase of the program. This participant felt a sense of pressure, because most of his cohort had graduated. He detailed the struggles he experienced: "I'm not gonna finish, everybody else is graduating, what's wrong with me. Of course, then trying to pull myself out of that deep depression and get myself writing again was a challenge." In addition, Marcus took care of his elderly mother and was the primary caretaker for her. He stated: "I handled everything for her. There was always something every week related to her health."

Program Obstacles

Although, participants had a positive experience in their doctoral program. They also mentioned program obstacles throughout their dissertation stage. These program obstacles occurred during the dissertation phase of the process and impacted the progress doctoral students made while writing their dissertation. These program obstacles were significant factors that prevented the doctoral students from writing their dissertation. The themes that were at the top of the list for program obstacles were the lack of support from chair and lack of structure with the program.

Lack of support from chair. There were participants who mentioned that they experienced issues with their Chair. Four of the eight participants had to switch to a different chair due to issues they experienced. Two of the participants were asked by their first chair to find another person to chair their committee. One had a chair who left their university, so the participant had to find someone new, and the last participant chose to find another chair on her own. These participants mentioned lack of feedback, lack of availability, and lack of accountability for the reasons they had to switch chairs. Marcus felt his relationship with his chair just didn't work out:

> We were just going in circles about the research questions. I just thought we would be on the same page, but then once I would leave, I wouldn't get the feedback from him that I would expect. In addition, my chair would give me the impression that we were going to do something, but he wouldn't, which drug out for the better part of a year into the dissertation process. It was getting to be too much and I needed help. So when I talked to him outside he suggested that I talk to the main department head and consider finding another chair.

Another participant felt a lack of communication with her dissertation chair. Her chair was not pleased with her writing structure and her chair would not meet with her on a consistent basis. Kristi had difficulties with her chair process. At the point she was trying to finish her dissertation, her chair left the university. Then she had to switch over to a different chair. However, at this point, she was not on campus anymore so it was difficult to set the time to meet with her chair every week. Kristi stated:

> Some people have good relationships with their chair. I didn't have that just because at that point, it was who's gonna chair me cause I need to find someone to try to finish. In addition, if I didn't contact my professor, he would not reach out to me.

Rosie also mentioned issues with her chair. She stated: "There was a lack of clarity and my chair was not pleased with my writing structure. One of my hardest barriers was not meeting on a consistent basis with my chair. It was too random."

Liam also had problems with his first chair. The issues started when Liam was having issues making progress with his topic and had to take steps back to rebuild his study and find something else to investigate. He was having a hard time at that stage and not making any progress, which he led to him feeling depressed. In addition, Liam was dealing with ADHD. Then his chair became frustrated, because Liam was having a hard time making progress. After the semester Liam was depressed, his chair sent a cordial, but short email letting Liam know "I don't feel like we can work together anymore." Liam knew it was because he wasn't making progress, but felt his Chair just quit on him.

Liam was devastated and stated, "I felt like my best friend and professor quit on me, because I was having a tough semester."

Lack of program structure. There were four participants who felt a lack of structure from their program. Many believed the program structure, once courses were completed, had format issues during the dissertation phase of the program. Participants felt the lack of deadlines and lack of follow up from the program created a barrier while in the dissertation phase. There was an issue with accountability with many of these participants. The lack of follow up from their chair and the lack of deadlines created an environment where the dissertation was not a priority.

Kristi mentioned there are "no set meeting times" when enrolled in the dissertation course. She did not have someone constantly holding her accountable or having deadlines. Kristi stated:

When you don't have someone meeting with you, especially being Latina, it is hard to make the time to write on your dissertation. When we were done with coursework, we were left on our own which was the most difficult part.

Sophia felt one of the most frustrating about her program was the lack of input and guidance. Sophia expressed:

Some people were like well, just send it to me and I'll give you feedback. But it would be feedback on the writing, not necessarily what needed to go into it. For someone like me, it was very unstructured and I needed some structure than that. Just really providing more levels of support for people. Without having someone

reach out to you, you kind of feel there's no accountability and you're like, well

okay, I'll get to it later because nobody is checking.

Rosie also felt a lack of structure was difficult. Rosie stated,

Especially, not meeting on a regular basis with my chair. Once or twice a week at

a specific time would have been awesome. It was just too random. Maybe I

wasn't as assertive and she expected me to be more assertive.

Suggestions to Faculty and Doctoral Programs

The participants had suggestions for faculty and staff of the doctoral program to

help doctoral students who are ABD. Many provided feedback that having cohort

meetings during the dissertation phase, providing course assignments that would help

during the dissertation phase, and helping with the dissertation topic at the beginning of

the program would be beneficial to dissertation writing success.

Kate suggested setting cohort group activities such as, "Hey Cohort 24, we're

gonna try to have a meet up here just to talk about where you are." She suggested it

would not have to be formal and could be a lunch meeting. She suggested an email that

would go out to the cohort and state, "Hey, let's get together!"

Another suggestion was that faculty should help doctoral students decide on a

dissertation topic right away. It would be helpful for doctoral students to have a central

topic from the start of the program in order to structure their class assignments based on

this topic. Three participants mentioned they did not have help with their dissertation

topic and had to decide on their own. When a topic was already found, they had already

completed a year of coursework.

Sophia stated the following:

I would have a topic, but they would go no that is too broad or that is not broad

enough. If I would have just written on something that I wanted to write, I could

have finished, but it was everyone who kept trying to morph my topic and change

my topic, and they weren't happy with it. And so, that also turned into something

where I can have tons of articles, it just didn't get written. If the doctoral program

had the topic lined out during the first doctoral class, maybe doctoral students

could have focused their assignments on their topic. If you are taking a Finance

course, then your finance course assignments would be based on your topic.

In addition, participants suggested it would be helpful during the Professional Writing

Course of the doctoral program to discuss topic ideas. This course is the first course

doctoral students take when they start the program. During this course, it would be

helpful for the professor to discuss dissertation topic ideas and mirror the class

assignments based on the topic the doctoral students chose. Perhaps, the first assignment

could be for doctoral students to decide on a dissertation topic.

Lastly, participants suggested during the dissertation phase of the program to have

set deadlines and structure of the dissertation process. Many students felt a lack of

accountability from their dissertation chair. Many felt since no one was checking in on

them during their writing, they did not feel a sense of urgency to write their dissertation.

Sophia stated: "Without having someone reach out to you, you kind of feel like there's no

accountability and you are like, I will get to it later." To avoid these issues in the future,

it was suggested to have a two-semester writing course for doctoral students writing their

proposal.

Essence of the Experience

Overall, the participants in the study felt support from the institution and their

cohort during their journey through the dissertation process. However, the themes related

to competing demands and program obstacles resulted in evident barriers for them to overcome while writing their dissertation. The experiences they endured while ABD was evident during the interview process and in the amount of information they shared. Some endured many struggles. Although, a few had to end their journey in the doctoral program, the rest have reached a stage in their dissertation where proposal defense has been achieved.

Trustworthiness Methods

Member Checks

After each participant interview was sent for transcription and completed, the researcher emailed the transcription to the participant. Participants were asked to review the transcript and inform the researcher if any changes were needed. Five of the eight participants responded to the member check request and determined no changes were needed. One of the eight participants requested a minor edit to a section of a response. Two of the eight participants did not respond to my request for member check. Due to minor edits that were requested, no changes to the analysis, themes, or essence were conducted.

Conclusion

Overall, the results from this study revealed the experiences of doctoral students who were ABD in an educational leadership program. The interviews provided helpful information on the phenomenology of doctoral students in an educational leadership program and the experiences and barriers they faced. The data collection process included 107 pages of interview transcripts which resulted in over 22 preliminary codes. These themes provided insight to the experiences and barriers ABD doctoral students faced during the dissertation phase of their program. After final analysis, three main themes emerged. These themes included (a) outside support, (b) competing demands,

and (c) program obstacles. Chapter 5 discusses the results of the study in relation to the literature. In addition, it summarizes the finding and implications of the study and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Chapter five presents a summary of the findings of this study and implications for Educational Leadership doctoral programs. In addition, the chapter continues with the limitations and closes with the recommendations for future research. Finally, suggestions and advice to Educational Leadership doctoral programs are discussed.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of doctoral students in two higher education doctoral programs in Educational Leadership. A phenomenological research design was used to evaluate the experiences of doctoral students and to provide an understanding of their overall experience. The results of the study indicated outside support, competing demands, and program obstacles as the major themes impacting degree completion. The findings from this study were comparable to other studies on doctoral attrition. Participants described their struggles to finish their dissertation and the barriers they faced through their doctoral journey. Similar to other doctoral students, participants in this study had families, work obligations, and other priorities that created a barrier for them to write their dissertation. Due to these barriers, the outside obligations took priority over their dissertation. The results from this study support previous research stating that family, work and other personal obligations were one of the top reasons doctoral students did not complete their doctoral program (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Myers, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) found three reasons that added to students' ABD status: isolation, difficulties in selection of a research topic, and advising. Many participants found it difficult to work independently without structure and schedule to

follow. Many preferred the structure of following a cohort model and syllabus; so when it was time to write the dissertation, many were lost. Cone and Foster (1993) stated a doctoral student will need 10-20 hours a week for one to two years to complete their dissertation. In addition, doctoral students need guidance and structure by their dissertation chair throughout this process (Cone & Foster, 1993). Many of the participants discussed how "life happened" and without deadlines and frequent meetings with their chair and cohort, the determination to write on their dissertation was not there. For instance, one participant shared: "Life took over and the dissertation took a back seat." In addition, due to the lack of interactions with professors and their cohort, many doctoral students felt isolated.

Four out of the eight participants in the study received writing support throughout the dissertation process. Several mentioned how beneficial the writing boot camps and writing workshops were. Many utilized the monthly writing opportunity on a regular basis. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the importance of institutional support such as library resources and writing support were beneficial to dissertation completion. In addition, participants mentioned how helpful faculty and their dissertation chair were throughout the dissertation program. Three participants had a great relationship with their chair and believe the chair provided the support needed through the dissertation process. The type of support included constant feedback about the dissertation, frequent meetings, and providing emotional support.

Three participants felt the relationship with their dissertations chair was difficult. These participants had to find new chairs due to difficulties with them. In addition, they had to switch their topics during their dissertation stage. Many felt the lack of accountability and the lack of follow up from their chair to see how they were doing or to make sure they were writing their dissertation added to their struggle. These findings

confirm past research findings that if doctoral students experience lack of support from their chair during the dissertation stage, these doctoral students can have issues completing their doctoral program (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Fletcher, 2009; Green & Kluever, 1997; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Willis and Carmichael, 2011). In addition, past research has shown that students with a strong motivation to hold on to relationships, even if they are not working, will face emotional feelings when they need to change chairs. Therefore, the students may decide to not finish their dissertation then make the decision to approach their chair and end the relationship (Hardy, 2015). Jacks et al., (1983) found that issues with the chair relationship was a major reason for a doctoral student not to finish the doctoral program.

To help doctoral students succeed, D'Andrea, (2002) recommended that dissertation chairs create short-term goals, specific assignments, and regular feedback with their doctoral students to incorporate structure to the process for a dissertation. In particular for educational leadership doctoral programs, doctoral chairs need to meet with their doctoral students after they pass the comprehensive exams. The dissertation chair should schedule a time and date to meet and create an outline for their doctoral student. This outline would have deadlines to submit each chapter of the dissertation. In addition, expectations and goals would also be discussed during this meeting.

Lovitts (2001) mentioned that 70% of doctoral students listed personal issues as a reason for ABD status. These reasons included family, employment, health, and other obligations. For the participants who participated in the study, one participant got married, two participants got divorced or had a relationship end, and four had children while in the doctoral program. These life changes were positive changes but created a barrier for them in the doctoral program. Two participants mentioned they received a speech from a faculty member at the start of the doctoral program. The doctoral students

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were told: "If you are not married, don't get married while you are in the program. If you are married, you may end up divorced." One participant thought this information was a joke, but she got married and divorced through the process of the program.

According to Haynes et al., (2012), balancing school, work, and family can be a challenge for students in educational doctoral programs. Many participants also struggled to maintain their job responsibilities and requirements for the program. In addition, many struggled to find the time to write their dissertation when they had to work long hours and take on extra-curricular activities at work. Those responsibilities took up most of their time available to write their dissertation. It is important to have a balanced schedule for the various responsibilities in life while maintaining the dissertation process (Malmberg, 2000). The ability to balance these responsibilities is a major factor in degree completion (Hagedorn & Doyle, 1993; Tuczek, 1995).

To help doctoral students in the Education Leadership program, doctoral programs can help their students gain an awareness of the issues that could arise in balancing work and school obligations. Doctoral programs can provide guest student speakers who are completing the doctoral program to provide their perspective when they were in the doctoral program. These guest speakers can provide insight into their own experiences and their ideas on what can help balance work and school obligations. In addition, the doctoral program can provide a time each semester that someone from the Counseling and Career Center can provide a presentation on effective stress and time management efforts.

According to Margerum (2014), employed students do not have flexibility in their professional life. Therefore, the institution should structure their program and support to meet the needs of doctoral students. Educational Leadership doctoral programs can offer writing workshops and program meetings in the evening and weekends, in addition to

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making sure the library is available for students to write their dissertation during the evening and weekends. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012), suggested that doctoral students reduce job responsibilities, limit sleep, and reduce the number of hobbies in order to complete their dissertation.

Many participants in the study also used the phrase "life happens" several times in the interviews. All the barriers and experiences they faced were part of life and steps they had to overcome. It was interesting to hear them say this phrase, because it came across as a positive quote and a sort of acceptance that they had to experience these obstacles. In addition, several had life obstacles occur that took them away from the dissertation process. Three participants made the decision not to continue the doctoral program. Life happened and they made the decision to focus on their families and careers. Two of the participants defended their proposal or were scheduled to defend. The other participants were still focused on writing their dissertations. In addition, the average of the participants in the study was 43 years of age. It is important that the institutional culture change to accommodate older doctoral students who are dealing with several life changes.

<div align="center">**Implications for the Doctoral Program**</div>

Manathunga (2005) stated there were four warning signs that show whether doctoral students are not succeeding in the doctoral program. The first sign is that they are changing topics several times. Next, they avoid communication from faculty, the institution, and their fellow doctoral students. Third, they isolate themselves from the school. Finally, they avoid providing a draft of their dissertation to their committee chair (Manathunga, 2005). It can be easy for the doctoral program to miss these signs when there is not much interaction during the dissertation phase of the program (Manathunga, 2005).

Therefore, the suggestions below can help doctoral students continue on their journey to the doctorate and be successful. According to the participants in the study, they provided feedback for the doctoral program to help other doctoral students succeed in the dissertation phase of the program. The feedback provided was specific to academic and social integration such as family support, cohort support, and institutional support. Tinto (1993) stated that doctoral students' success in the doctoral program was dependent on their social and academic integration in the program. Terrell, Snyder, and Dringus (2009) also noted that high levels of student to student connectedness are crucial to persistence in the dissertation process.

First, one suggestion to help the doctoral students in the program interact with their peers would be to implement a social gathering each semester for each cohort during the dissertation phase. This would help continue the connection students had with their cohort during the coursework phase of the program. In a study conducted by Pauley et al., (1999), peer support was key in degree completion.

According to Estaville et al., (2006), the department should provide a welcoming environment for students. He also suggested a kick-off event. This event would be useful to help students meet faculty, staff, and current students (Estaville et al., 2006). In addition, Mahler et al., (2017) suggested that program administrators consider providing ways for doctoral students to interact with their cohort or other doctoral students. These opportunities will provide the social support and structure needed to complete their dissertation. Mahler, et al. (2017) believed doctoral students should schedule a set time to meet with their cohort on a regular basis during the dissertation phase to help with accountability. In addition, Dorn et al. (1995) believed that peers make great educators. He recommended that student mentors could be partnered with new incoming doctoral

students. Many students are lost and mentoring from a student would help the doctoral experience and improve their chances to succeed (Dorn et al., 1995).

Next, the doctoral program should create a mentorship system where faculty members know their doctoral students and background. Most of the participants recommended better interactions with faculty. Mansfield et al., (2010) believed that mentorship relationships needed to begin once a doctoral student enters the program. Dorn et al., (1995) also believed faculty mentors should be established at the beginning of the program. This is a crucial time and doctoral students are the most vulnerable (Mansfield et al., 2010). In addition, Lovitts (2001) suggested that departments should provide more opportunities for faculty and student integration and raise faculty awareness regarding student issues.

Estaville et al., (2006) also suggested mentoring and recognition as a useful system. In addition, he suggested that department chairs email new students providing a welcome and discussing services, courses, and contact information for the department. The first impression is key and definitely can set the tone for the experience a student will have. Estaville et al., (2006) stated the new student wants to feel welcomed and part of a family, not just a number. Cooper (1997) suggested that experienced faculty could serve as mentors.

Third, in order for doctoral students to be successful choosing a topic, it is suggested that from the start of the doctoral program professors parallel class assignments to dissertation topics. This will help doctoral students start thinking of their dissertation topic from the start of the program. According to Williams (1997), early topic choices that are interesting and manageable provide more promise to complete the dissertation process. Margerum (2014) stated it was important to make the dissertation priority for doctoral students from the beginning of the doctoral program. It would be beneficial to

provide doctoral students the opportunity to look at potential topics and areas of interest for their dissertation during their coursework.

Malmberg (2000) suggested that faculty and program departments help students arrive at a topic in the early stages of coursework. There are advantages to picking a topic early such as focusing class assignments on dissertation topic, seeking opportunities for research publications, and improving contact with your chair (Malmberg, 2000). According to Madsen (1992), topic decisions should be interesting, be manageable, within an area of understanding, have the potential to contribute to society, and be able to allow the student to show understanding of the topic and the method for research (Malmberg, 2000). During the time the faculty and chair help students determine a topic, it would help doctoral students to identify their academic focus and whether they see themselves in academia versus a non-academic setting.

In addition, it is suggested to implement a second version of a research seminar course for doctoral students in the dissertation phase of the program. Margerum (2014) suggested that providing opportunities for doctoral students to learn how to research and write early in the dissertation process was beneficial. Those with limited research experience would benefit from training and opportunities to learn about research during the dissertation stage (Margerum, 2014). One of the participants in the study, Liam, suggested a two-semester course which would give doctoral students an opportunity to write their dissertation, meet weekly with the professor, and interact with faculty and peers. Liam also suggested the course could be titled "Research Proposal Part Two or a post proposal course."

Finally, many students do not complete the program because there is a lack of understanding of the final stages of earning the doctoral degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde & Dore, 2001). The doctoral program should create deadlines in order for

doctoral students to meet with their dissertation chair on a regular basis and to map out their dissertation and expectations regarding time to completion. One of the participants of the current study, Sophia, suggested that the doctoral program give students the opportunity to have a mandatory meeting with their chair once they pass the comprehensive exams. According to Margerum (2014), creating dates and targets, which the chair and doctoral student agree on, will go a long way to help doctoral students know how to move forward. In addition, Strite (2007) believed those who are successful and complete their dissertation, made first contact with their chair, implemented a timeline with dates, held regular meetings with their chair, and followed a meeting agenda.

In addition, highly effective chairs who meet with their doctoral students, provide direction, and keep track of their progress can be proactive in making sure the student is successful (Margerum, 2014). The dissertation chairs should take into account that non-traditional students expect their chair to reach out to them on a frequent basis during the dissertation process. It was suggested by Margerum (2014) that a chair should have office hours when students do not work and for the chair to be more accessible (Margerum, 2014). Mahler et al. (2017) suggested that the doctoral program should create more structure on the dissertation portion of the program. The improved structure would include deadlines for writing and benchmark dates.

According to Malmberg (2000), the department should have support seminars for doctoral students. The seminars would give doctoral students the opportunity to receive information about the program. They would be mandatory and offered twice during the program. The first one would be for new students during their first semester in the doctoral program and the second session would be offered when students reach doctoral candidacy as ABD students. During these sessions, doctoral students would receive information and resources about the dissertation process. In addition, resources will be

available to them such as the following: A Dissertation Proposal Guidebook, books on surviving the doctoral dissertation, and online resources such as the Dissertation News (Malmberg, 2000). During the first seminar, doctoral students would also receive guidance on the transition from being a doctoral student to being a scholar. It is important that doctoral students understand this transition.

<center>**Recommendations for Future Research**</center>

Future research should be conducted on the experience and barriers faced by doctoral students. There were four recommendations for future research. First, I recommend further exploration on the differences between male and female doctoral students be conducted. This study did not discuss gender differences. However, family obstacles were discussed as a competing demand. The female doctoral students might be impacted on a different level than men, especially if the female student is also a working mother. In addition, there were only three males in the current study. These male participants also had children and family obligations which impacted their dissertation writing. It would be beneficial to know gender differences of doctoral students based on competing demands and work responsibilities.

Next, I recommend that research on the chair perspective of ABD doctoral students in education leadership be conducted. This would help provide a different view on what takes place when the dissertation chair meets with the doctoral student during the dissertation process. Since it was found in the research that many participants had conflicts with their chair, it would be helpful to know the other viewpoint of this process. Three of the participants in this study had to switch to a different chair. These participants mentioned they had issues meeting with their chair and a lack of accountability. It would be beneficial to know the other perspective on why the chairs

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did not meet with the doctoral students and whether they felt there was a lack of accountability.

Third, it is recommended that studies be conducted on dissertation development courses during the doctoral program to learn their effectiveness. All doctoral students should be required to attend the development course to help develop their proposal and dissertation. In addition, students should be required to attend one dissertation proposal defense and one dissertation defense before they complete the development course (Malmberg, 2000). One participant in this study mentioned it would be beneficial to have a second research proposal course. Perhaps, the development course would benefit ABD students.

Lastly, I would recommend that research be conducted on the Latino/a doctoral students' experiences and the barriers they faced. The Latino population has increased in colleges, but their success falls behind other minorities (Winkle-Wagner, Hunter, & Ortloff, 2009). Many Latino students have faced adjustment issues, pressure that they are unable to succeed, and insecurities. In addition, research has found that Latinos struggle with anxiety and depression, and this can impact educational goals (Chang et al., 2011).

The current study only had three Latino participants. In addition, these three participants faced the most barriers out of all the participants. Of the three, one quit the program and the other two have not reached the proposal defense stage. Many Latino students in the doctoral program feel faculty do not value their research interests. Many are questioned about their research interests, and these students begin to question their self-worth and leave the program (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). It would be beneficial to continue research on Latino doctoral students and what the university can do to support and provide resources to the Latino population.

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Limitations of Study

In this study, there were several limitations. First, the department sent out the email request for doctoral student participation in the study. The number of participants could have been higher if the researcher had sent the email directly to the participants. The participants might have been hesitant to participate since the department was aware of the study and knew who was ABD. Next, the researcher of this study was a current doctoral student who was enrolled at the same university as some of the participants from the study. The participants may have held back their barriers and experiences because some knew the researcher was enrolled in the same doctoral program. There might have been a fear of embarrassment. In addition, many participants might have worried that the information provided during the interview would not be anonymous, and the information would be relayed back to their own chairs.

Third, there were only three males who participated in the study. This was unavoidable because only three responded to my study. In addition, four of the participants were Caucasian, three were Latino, and one did not respond to my question about ethnicity. This raised the question whether the findings would apply to all ethnicities. In addition, all eight interviews were conducted over the phone. Due to travel and time restrictions of all participants, face to face interviews were not an option. The eight participants preferred a phone interview instead of Skype video or face to face interview. Therefore, I may have missed nonverbal cues over the phone. Finally, only one interview was conducted for the interview. The researcher would have received additional information about the doctoral student experience if a follow up interview had been conducted.

Conclusion

According to Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012), the dissertation phase of a doctoral program can be the most difficult and challenging for doctoral student. This study provided insight into the experiences of eight doctoral students in an educational leadership program. Findings suggest that the balance of family, job obligations, and personal obstacles can affect the progress they make on the dissertation phase of their doctoral program. Although, participants found it challenging to balance outside obligations, the support from their dissertation chair and cohort was beneficial. In addition, findings suggest that doctoral students create a strong working relationship with their chair in order to make the progress needed to overcome the dissertation phase of their program.

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APPENDIX A DOCTORAL STUDENT PARTICIPATION LETTER

APPENDIX A

DOCTORAL STUDENT PARTICIPATION LETTER

Dear Students,

I am in the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at the University of Houston Clear-Lake. I am conducting a research study on the experiences and barriers faced by all but dissertation doctoral students. Your input through interviews will help to understand the experiences and barriers faced by ABD students during the doctoral program journey. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may refuse to participate or stop your involvement in the study at any time. Should you refuse to participants or stop, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits. This study will include a 60-90 minute interview. Your information will be treated anonymously and will be kept completely confidential.

I appreciate your efforts to participate in this study! Your participation in the interview will provide consent to take part in this study. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me directly.

Sincerely,

Erica Chance

APPENDIX B ASSOCIATE DEAN APPROVAL LETTER

APPENDIX B

ASSOCIATE DEAN APPROVAL LETTER

ASSOCIATE DEAN APPROVAL REQUEST LETTER

January 19, 2018

████████████████

Dear █████████,

I, Erica Chance, request your permission to conduct a doctoral research study on the experiences contributing to doctoral degree attrition at the "all but dissertation" stage for students enrolled in the College of Education. The information needed is on those ABD students who were enrolled from Spring 2007 through Fall 2012. The names and emails provided will be handled in a confidential manner which will not affect the integrity of the department or university. As an Enrollment Coordinator, I am aware of privacy rights. I request your permission to access doctoral student records for those in the in the Educational Leadership doctoral program.

I appreciate your willingness to support my research!

Sincerely,

Erica Chance, MS
Doctoral Candidate

APPROVED SIGNATURE

████████████████████

01/23/18
Date

APPENDIX C INFORMED CONSENT FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

INFORMED CONSENT FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in

this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop

your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study or should you

withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or

loss of benefits to which you may be otherwise entitled. You are being asked to read the

information below carefully, and ask questions about anything you don't understand before

deciding whether or not to participate.

Title: A Phenomenological Study of Doctoral Student Experiences in an Educational
Leadership Doctoral Program
Principal Investigator(s): Student Investigator(s): Erica Chance

Faculty Sponsor: Judith Marquez, PhD

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of doctoral students in a higher
education doctoral program in Educational Leadership.

PROCEDURES
1) Gain participants agreement to join the study.
2) Interview participants after work. Interviews will take no longer than 60-90 minutes using
   interview questions. The interviews will be audiotaped.
3) Data will be analyzed and results reported
4) Research documentation will be retained for at least three years

EXPECTED DURATION
The total anticipated time commitment will be approximately 60-90 minutes.

 RISKS OF PARTICIPATION

There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this project. {or, as appropriate, see below.}

{Many of the studies performed by UHCL faculty or students do not involve physical risk, but rather the possibility of psychological and/or emotional risks from participation. The principles that apply to studies that involve psychological risk or mental stress are similar to those that involve physical risk. Participants should be informed of any foreseeable risks or discomforts and provided contact information of professional agencies (e.g., a crisis hot line) if any treatment is needed.}

BENEFITS TO THE SUBJECT
There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator(s) better understand your experiences and barriers throughout your program.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS
Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and publication purposes, however, you will not be identified by name. For federal audit purposes, the participant's documentation for this research project will be maintained and safeguarded by the Erica Chance for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

FINANCIAL COMPENSATION
A $10 gift card to Starbucks for participation.

INVESTIGATOR'S RIGHT TO WITHDRAW PARTICIPANT
The investigator has the right to withdraw you from this study at any time.

SIGNATURES:
Your signature below acknowledges your voluntary participation in this research project. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(ies) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. By signing the form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, and explanation of risks or benefits have been

explained to you. You have been allowed to ask questions and your questions have been answered to

your satisfaction. You have been told who to contact if you have additional questions. You have read

this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in this study. You are free to withdraw

your consent at any time by contacting the Principal Investigator or Student Researcher/Faculty Sponsor.

You will be given a copy of the consent form you have signed.

Subject's printed name: _____

Signature of Subject: _____

Date: _____

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed

above with the subject.

Printed name and title

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Demographics:

1. Gender: ___Female   ___Male

2. Ethnicity: White___Hispanic____Black _____Other ____

3. What was your age at the time of entering the Education Leadership Doctoral Program?

4. What is your age? _____

5. In what cohort did you begin the program?
   ____1_____2____3_____4_____5____6___7

Part II. Please respond to the following questions.

1. What were your experiences in the educational leadership doctoral program? Positive or negative.

2. What barriers have hindered your efforts to complete the program? Describe those barriers.

3. How would you describe your chair/student relationship in the program? Describe your relationship with your Chair.

4. What resources are available for support to you in the program?

5. What are your family responsibilities outside of the doctoral program? Please describe them.

6. What would you suggest to the doctoral program members to help doctoral students complete their dissertations?

7. Any other comments regarding your experiences and barriers faced during the doctoral program?

APPENDIX E CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT FOR TRANSCRIPTION

APPENDIX E

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT FOR TRANSCRIPTION

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT FOR TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES

I, ███████████████, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality pertaining

to any audio recordings received from Erica Chance for her doctoral study on A

Phenomenological Study of Doctoral Student Experiences in an Educational Leadership Doctoral

Program.

1. I agree to hold in the strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may accidently revealed during the transcription process.

2. I agree to not make copies of any audio recordings or computerized files of the transcribed interview unless requested by the researcher.

3. I agree to store all audio recordings in a safe, secure location during my possession.

4. I agree to return all audio recordings to the researcher in a timely manner.

5. I agree to delete all electronic files from my computer or any back up devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this agreement and for harm

individuals from the study endure if I disclose any information contained in the audio recordings.

Transcriber's Name (printed) ████████████████████_____

Transcriber's Signature ██████████_____

Date ____ 2 - 9 - 18 _____

Adapted from the dissertation by Dr. Angelica Tello, 2015.

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APPENDIX F CHAIR APPROVAL LETTER

APPENDIX F

CHAIR APPROVAL LETTER

███████████████████ - APPROVAL REQUEST LETTER

March 6, 2018

████████████

Acting Chair, Education Leadership

Dear ██████,

I, Erica Chance, request your permission to conduct a doctoral research study on the experiences contributing to doctoral degree attrition at the "all but dissertation" stage for students enrolled in the College of Education. The information needed is on those ABD students who were enrolled at your university. The names and emails provided will be handled in a confidential manner which will not affect the integrity of the department or university. As an Enrollment Coordinator, I am aware of privacy rights. I request your permission to interview your doctoral students in the in the ████████████████ Educational Leadership doctoral program. I appreciate your willingness to support my research!

Sincerely,

Erica Chance, MS
Doctoral Candidate

APPROVED SIGNATURE

████████████████

██████████, Program Chair

3-5-18
Date