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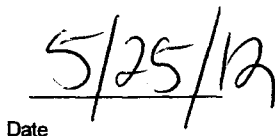
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Non-completion in Thesis Required

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THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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NON-COMPLETION IN THESIS REQUIRED MASTER'S PROGRAMS

Emily Ritter

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Counseling and Student Development of
Eastern Illinois University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF SCIENCE

February 16th, 2012

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my parents. You have been a constant support to me my entire life, wherever I am or whatever I am doing. Thank you for continuing to support me in my journey and through this process of graduate school and my thesis, even though I know you still aren't really sure what I am going to be when I grow up. I love you both so much and am proud to be your child.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this project could not have been attained without the assistance and support of so many in my life. I would like to thank those that have made this possible. I could not have asked for a better thesis chair. Dr. Roberts was supportive, encouraging, and pushed me when I needed it most. I certainly could have not done this without you. To my committee, Mona Davenport and Bill Elliott, your support of this project was immeasurable. I am extremely grateful for all of you.

To the Student Life Office for allowing me to have a schedule that was flexible in order to complete my thesis, I thank you. I want to especially thank Dana Barnard, for asking me every week during our one-on-ones where I was in my thesis progress and for letting me vent in order to get through this second year.

I want to thank my professors, especially Lou “Thesis” Hencken, for going the extra effort in order for me to complete my research. Without you, this may not have gotten completed.

To Kiel, thank you for putting up with me during this process. Thank you for listening to me complain, vent, and talk about a subject that you weren’t that interested in. I love you and thank you for just being you.

To my cohort, and especially to Brittany, Kate, Tiffany, and Alex. Thank you for the laughs, the tears, the memories, the stories, support, encouragement, and for the constant reminder that life is a journey and you should treasure every moment along the way. I love you all.

ABSTRACT

This study examined phenomena associated with non-completers enrolled in a master's level graduate program with a thesis requirement at medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university. Both program coordinators and program-identified non-completers were interviewed based on five research questions in order to discover themes emerging from thesis non-completion. Ten themes emerged, including peer and academic support, assistantship factors, influencing factors, choice, and perceived thesis value. Although previous research of master's degree thesis non-completion is not extensive, a review of literature is included. The researcher found that while there were similarities in many themes among the program coordinators and students, areas in which there was the strongest disconnect between the two were in the area of choice and perceived thesis value. Students wanted to feel that they had choice in their thesis process, especially in a thesis required program either through the selection of their topic or the selection of their thesis chair. In perceived thesis value, it was concluded that students need to see the same value of the thesis as the program requiring it, which suggests that more education and discussion may be needed at the time that students are applying for the programs and continue throughout the thesis process.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Nearly 428,000 students enrolled for the first time in graduate school in 2008 (Bell, 2008), but one cannot assume that all of those students have completed their master's degree. According to Bell's (2011) Council of Graduate Schools' Graduate Enrollment and Degree Report 2000 – 2010, graduate enrollment has increased on average 3.3% in the last decade. As the number of students seeking degrees rises, there is also a rise in the potential for degree non-completion. Students who do not complete their degrees in a timely fashion, or not even at all, pose a large cost to both themselves and the university. While students attending graduate school may be faced with an opportunity cost in their attendance, what is the real cost to the student who is a non-completer? Montgomery & Powell (2006) found the average cost of cost of a graduate education when factoring in both actual cost and opportunity cost can be around \$24,000 a year.

The navigation through post-bachelors education can be arduous as students seek to find a program with the right fit, acquire the monetary resources to fund their education and balance outside obligations that may distract from their education. The research suggests that having a mentor in undergraduate school plays an important role in preparing the potential candidate both selecting a program and being successful while in it (Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, & Hansen, 2002). Students who choose to enroll in a degree program that has a thesis requirement add an additional difficulty in obtaining their degree.

Success in graduate school can be impacted by several variables. Things such as GPA (Malone, Nelson, and Nelson, 2000; Onasch, 1994), undergraduate program culture including

vision and anticipation of students moving upward in education (Lee, Hyman, and Luginbuhl, 2007), and non-academic issues such as financial status (Nelson, Nelson, and Malone, 2000) all have an impact of completion of the master's degree. Likewise, graduate programs have an obligation to maintain a robust admission process and procedure which has been shown to impact goodness of fit (Smallwood, 2004).

Interests in graduate school completion shouldn't be seen as just internal to the graduate program and the non-completer, but outside of the institution as well. The Council on Graduate Schools also has a vested interest in completion outcomes and progress. As reported by Stewart (2011), president of the Council of Graduate Schools "education should be more accountable and responsive to students' aspirations and public needs, and that changes in teaching, curricula, and academic structure should be informed by evidence" (p. 12).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore phenomena associated with non-completers enrolled in master's level graduate programs with a thesis requirement at medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university. By exploring non-completer phenomena, themes may emerge that previous research did not review. It is hoped that perspectives can be explored from both the program coordinators and non-completing graduate students. Specifically, programs with a required thesis will be examined.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore phenomena associated with non-completers enrolled in a master's degree program with a thesis requirement at a medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university. Questions were posed to both the Graduate Coordinators of programs

containing a thesis requirement and students identified as non-completers in these programs. Non-completer status was determined by each department based upon the departmental requirements for completion. Questions posed to program coordinators and students identified as non-completers in the master's degree program with a thesis requirement are as follows:

1. To what extent are participants' non-completers?
2. What are the participants perceptions related to the overall structure of the program?
3. What are the participants perceptions related to support systems?
4. What are the participants perceptions regarding to factors leading to non-completion?
(ie: personal - family, medical, etc, financial - loss of aid, loss of graduate assistantship, etc, or institutional - lack of support systems, etc)?
5. What are the participants perceptions in relation to factors associated with non-completion of the thesis?

Significance of the Study

As Hahs (1998) stated "there is a great need for information and research for the general population of graduate students" (p. 6). The costs of non-completion are high to both the student and the university, resulting in not only financial resources expended by both parties, but also loss career opportunities for the student. By use of qualitative interviewing techniques, the present study will help to examine current phenomena within the process of securing a degree where the thesis is required.

It is important to discover what limitations students experience in completing their graduate degrees, as well to identify perceived measures of success. By doing so, data may help

broaden our understanding of what may be going on as program and student work toward completing the degree.

Limitations of the Study

The data will be collected from only one master's granting comprehensive institution, so local characteristics may be very different than the general population. Generalizability of the results will apply primarily to the home institution. In addition, the programs that require the thesis even within the researched institution is small as many master's level programs do not require a thesis.

Definitions of Terms

At – Risk Graduate Student. In this study, at - risk graduate students will be defined as those who did not meet the minimum grade requirements for graduate school admission and were admitted on academic probation.

Attrition. Reduction in the population of graduate students within in the program, through departmental removal or withdrawal by the individual.

Completers. In this study, a completer will be defined as a graduate student who was admitted into both the Graduate School and their degree program of choice who successfully completed the requirements set-forth by the Graduate School and the degree program in order to complete their degree within a reasonable time frame set forth by both the Graduate School and the degree program.

Long-Term Completers. In this study, long –term completers will be defined as a graduate student who was admitted into the Graduate School and degree program and successfully

completed the requirements set-forth by the Graduate School and the degree program in order to complete their degree *but not* within a reasonable time frame set forth by both the Graduate School and the degree program.

Non-completer. In this study, non-completers will be defined as a graduate student, once enrolled at a medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university who was successfully admitted to the both the Graduate School and their desired degree department, who began classes but has failed to meet the requirements laid out by both the Graduate School and the academic department in order to obtain a graduate degree from a medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university.

Opportunity Cost. Opportunity cost is the cost to the student for attending school (Montgomery, M. & Powell, I., 2006), not in terms of a financial cost owed to the institution, but in lost wages, etc., that the student would not receive if they were to attend college.

Summary

The completion of the master's degree has importance to both the degree granting program and institution, as well as students seeking the degree. An added requirement of a master's degree thesis can add the difficulties students face in the attainment of their degree. The purpose of this study was to explore phenomena associated with non-completers enrolled in master's level graduate programs with a thesis requirement at medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

While limited, previous research has shown themes emerging from data in regards to successful completion of master's students. The following literature review will cover graduate school preparedness, contributions to non-completion, contributions to completion, support services, effects of non-completion, advisory components, thesis and research, and perceived ability level.

Graduate Student Preparedness

In order for a student to be successful in graduate school, it is important for them to be prepared for the experience. In some cases, a student's perception of preparedness differs from what is observed by their educators, but even in the area of self-preparedness, a number of factors must be considered. According to Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, & Hansen (2002), the largest single contributor to perceived preparedness was quality interactions with an undergraduate mentor. In many ways, graduate student success must start at the undergraduate level. By studying factors in undergraduate productivity rates, as was done by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (1992), it can be seen that the increase in time that students are taking to complete their bachelor's degree could have a direct effect on their ability to complete graduate school in a timely fashion, as well as affect the manner in which students perceive their success. However, in quantifiable variables, such as the GRE score, undergraduate GPA, publications, etc, there were no direct effects on perceived preparedness according to Huss et al. (2002). Regardless of a student's perception of preparedness, students entering a master's program as an at-risk student add additional difficulties to the pursuance and completion of a degree. However, there can be some correlation between undergraduate success

and graduation completion in terms of completion time. According to Onasch (1994), students with higher undergraduate GPAs took less time to graduate than students with lower undergraduate GPAs.

The same factors for success in individualized departments can be the same as those within a graduate program. According to Lee, Hyman, and Luginbuhl (2007), factors for success at the undergraduate level can exist in the variables of departmental vision, disciplinary characteristics, relative strength of basic academic values, existence of protected subunit or subculture in the department, general support of undergraduate education and support of department leadership, reward structure, and external support. These same variables may also apply to work at the master's level.

Students admitted provisionally or on an at-risk basis may also be at an additional detriment to success. Malone, Nelson, and Nelson (2000) sought to discover the effects of success on at-risk students in a graduate program. They looked at various factors, including undergraduate grade point average (UGPA), Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, graduate grade point average (GGPA), and undergraduate majors to determine the probably success rates of each student studied and then compared their prediction with actual completion rates. Their "logistic regression analysis allowed the researchers to predict 90.5% accuracy whether or not students would complete the degree" (p. 15). Their prediction rates for those that would not complete were below average at 85.7%, while their prediction for those completing were 92.9% accurate. They also found that the most accurate indicator was indeed a low UGPA.

Additionally, fit between a program and a students may increase or decrease the ability for them to find success in the thesis process. According to qualitative research by Smallwood (2004), the majority of graduate deans surveyed said:

The problem is not usually students' struggling to measure up. A larger portion of the dropout total can be attributed to grad schools' having made bad admission selections. That doesn't mean the students aren't bright enough. Deans and researchers talk, instead about that hard-to-define bad fit (p. A10).

Contributions to Non-completion

Academic difficulties are not always the reasoning behind a student's inability to complete their degree. Nelson, Nelson, and Malone (2000) maintained that "non-academic causes, e.g., financial consideration, health or family problems as cited in Tucker, Gottlieb & Pearce (1964) or dissatisfaction with their faculty advisor as cited in Heiss (1970) may determine the withdrawal of a student who, up to the time of discontinuance, could have been performing satisfactory academic work (at least a 3.0 Graduate GPA) (p. 3). Opportunity cost can also be factored into non-completion, especially when considering non-traditional students who have been in the working world prior to their return to graduate study. Montgomery and Powell (2006) demonstrated that high opportunity cost tends to reduce enrollment and degree completion.

McCormack's (2005) longitudinal study based at the University of Canberra in Australia explored the idea that non-completion isn't always a failure, but instead a beginning to another path. McCormack followed four female Master's by Research degree students who either withdrew, did not complete, or took a very long time to complete. The study was completed by in depth interviews and focused on two questions: How universally applicable to individual students' experiences are the factors associated with higher degree by research non-completion identified in the existing literature and is research non-completion always experienced by students as a failure. The study found that in support with previous literature, the following are

contributors to non-completion: isolation (social and intellectual), lack of support from other students, lack of resources, departmental colleague and supervisors including 'absence' of, or poor supervision, and personal and professional crises. McCormack (2005) also suggested the possibility of mismatch between institutional conceptions of postgraduate research and the understanding about research held by postgraduate research students as an additional contributor to non-completion.

Contributions to Completion

In order to facilitate success, it is essential to work towards success both as individual departments and as an institution. One way to do so is to ensure that there is an understanding of the students within a program, however students must also understand themselves and why they are there. According to Rossman (1995) students must understand the inherent differences between undergraduate and graduate study and the need to be in control of the process of graduate school. In addition, a student's perception of their own preparedness has some significance towards their progress. Huss et al. (2002) concluded that the largest contributor towards a student's self-rated preparedness was the faculty-student interaction that student experienced at their undergraduate institution.

Factors in support of completion can also be evaluated in term of traditional versus non-traditional students. According to Nevill and Chen (2007), rates of persistence and completion were higher among students who entered graduate school immediately after earning a bachelor's degree, as long as they attended full-time and enrolled continuously.

Support Services

A study by Gardner (2010) showed the perspectives of the subjects researched in six separate departments with four themes emerging: support, self-direction, ambiguity, and transition. Support can be an integral part of the success of any student, particularly on the graduate level and can be found in the form of external support, such as family, friends, or employment, or internally through the institution, department, and organizations. For example, at one university, students in the College Student Affairs program (CSA), as well as other graduate students with an interest in student affairs can join membership in College Student Personnel Association (COSPA). Other graduate programs may also have additional organizations for their students. One important aspect of organizations is highlighted by Hellwig and Churchman (1979), as they view a graduate student association as an essential aspect of the program because it provides peer support and a mechanism for faculty and student interchange. Internal support is extremely important especially when considering international students, as the support system of friends and family may not be readily present. Citizenship was considered as an important variable in Sheridan and Pyke's (1994) study which focused on predictors of time to completion for graduate students. According to Kluever (1997), the students' needs from and recommendations for the departments included more course work, support groups, and improved committee communication.

Cohort styles of learning may also be seen as an avenue for peer support. In a qualitative observation study completed by Maher (2004), the goal of the researcher was to discover what factors really exist inside cohort learning. The most notable findings were the level of information students were given as to what cohort learning was prior to their admittance in a cohort based program. Additionally, if group strength is created, students may begin to lose

some self-identification and may begin to describe interactions with themselves and their instructors as “we – they”, rather than “I – she” or “I – he”. Cohort learning may also bring a significant level of strong interpersonal students relationships. According to Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter (2011), benefits of cohort education include: positive peer relationships, strong familial and emotional ties among many students, increased delegation of tasks, increased open and honest discussions in class based on familiarity, better relationships with instructors, greater utilization of study groups, increased opportunity for professional growth and development due to academic and professional networks, and higher retention, graduation, and success rates of students. However, Maher (2004) also found that “some students reported a tendency to limit their thinking patterns to those commonly used and accepted within the cohort” (p. 22).

Effects of Non-completion

Johnes and Taylor (1991) completed a pilot study of non-completers and graduates during an eight to nine year period at the University of Lancaster. The research focused specifically on the differences between graduates and non-completers in their post-university experience in the job market and in future educational endeavors. Questionnaires were sent to 607 graduates and non-completers that registered at the university between 1979 and 1980. All 299 non-completers were included. The response rate was 26%, with 32% of graduates responding and only 21% of non-completers responding. The survey found four main results and are the following: non-completers are less likely to undertake no qualifications and more likely to undertake two or more qualifications than graduates, non-completers are more likely to undertake a higher education degree or diploma and less likely to opt for teacher training, there is not significant differences between the two groups in the completion rate for post university

qualifications, and 225 of the non-completers who responded successfully completed a higher education degree or diploma since leaving the University of Lancaster. In addition, while there was no significant difference between graduates and non-completers in their general employment status, the starting salary was 20% higher for graduates than non-completers. Non-completers also experiences longer periods of unemployment in the three years preceding the survey.

Opportunity Cost

The ability to finance education is often an important aspect to students at any level of their educational career. However, it can be noted that the cost associated with attendance is not always just the amount of tuition, fees, and research costs of the students. Opportunity cost is also an area of financial burden for many students, especially those in higher-level degree programs. As Montgomery & Powell (2006) stated, opportunity cost is the cost to the student for attending school, not in terms of a financial cost owed to the institution, but in lost wages, etc., that the student would not receive if they were to attend college.

Advisory Component

The relationship built between a thesis advisor and student may directly affect a student's ability, or their perceived ability to complete the thesis. The amount of time spent between the adviser and advisee is great, and lack of a relationship, cohesion, or compatibility may place a strain on the thesis process. A qualitative study conducted by Rodrigues, Lehmann, and Fleith (2005) sought to discover factors in the interactions between the two parties. The study was conducted from 60 pairs randomly selected from the 376 master's theses looking at seven academic contingencies and three non-academic contingencies. The results showed more factors in interaction from the advisees' perspective than the advisors with seven and five factors

respectively. There their perspectives converged was in the areas of complimentary partnership, advisee's initiative/sharing, and individualism/process denial.

Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin (2008) also found there to be importance in supervisor assistance in the thesis completion process. In a subsection of a larger study, it highlighted 15 students who had just finished the dissertation of their master's thesis. The perceptions of supervisory assistance found that the majority of students, 12 of the participants, were that they were content with the overall amount of contact; however the levels of contact perceived were varied among the participants. Regardless, more importance was placed on the flexibility of the meetings if necessary. Additionally, when normative expectations of the supervisory relationships were examined, participants were much more consistent in their shared beliefs and expectations. They believed that supervisors should be wholehearted in the process and genuinely interested in the project and the student. Participants were also adamant that supervisors should not adopt a laissez-faire approach and there should be a consistent standard of work.

Thesis and Research

Navigating through graduate school may be difficult in itself for some, as it differs greatly from undergraduate experiences. The addition of the thesis component adds another layer to the challenges that may be faced. As it can be seen as a test of self-regulated learning, the outcome of the thesis, as well as the perception of the thesis can differ between students and faculty. A study conducted by Sachs (2002) sought to show a path model for a student's attitude towards the thesis writing process. Finding correlational significance at the .01 level, the author concluded that effects of the three action-control beliefs (academic ability, luck and knowledge

orientation) were mediated by students' academic experience and learning approach. Also, one's learning approach impacted his/her academic experience.

According to Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin (2008), "the experience of researching and writing a dissertation had a distinct impact on their professional identity" (p. 45). They found that additionally, some participants "also describe in similar terms how successful completion of the dissertation had an empowering effect and positively shifted how they positioned themselves within the workplace" (p. 46).

As research is the largest component of the actual thesis process, a students' ability to do and understand research is essential. Regardless of whether a student plans to continue on to a research based career field or PhD program, Drennan and Clarke (2009) found the attitude towards research aspect extremely important. In their study of 322 students who obtained coursework master's degree between 2000 and 2005 at University College Dublin, they concluded that many gains can be made by completing a research dissertation. These are identified in Drennan and Clarke's (2009) study and included "the ability to understand research methodologies, the development and cognitive skills, and the ability to plan and organize work" (p. 497). Additionally, a study by Reis-Jorge (2007) found the development of an understanding of research takes place through three modes: reading, formal tuition, and immersion. Moulding and Hadley (2010)'s study of 81 students in a master's degree program found that approximately 75% of students did not understand that research was a means of producing knowledge.

Perceived Writing Ability

While the research component is a substantial portion of the thesis process, putting the entire document together in a clear and concise manner can be daunting to many students. The

actual document is likely to be the largest written output that the master's student has encountered in their academic career. Their perceived ability to write such an extensive document may inhibit their ability to actually finish the document. Grodnick (1996) sought to discover if there was a positive correlation between self-concept and writing ability among 50 randomly selected undergraduate English composition students at Union County College in the fall of 1995. The study concluded that at least for these students, "a low self-concept was not a valid indicator of a low level of writing ability" (p. 12).

Summary

Although the literature review does not fully explore the effects of non-completion of a thesis in master's degree programs, research does suggest that the components that attribute to graduate school success, thesis completion, and thesis non-completion are great and widespread. Thesis support is explored at both the academic and peer level, as is preparedness in both the attendance of graduate school and the thesis writing process itself. While more literature discusses thesis writing at the doctoral level, previous research also indicates factors that may impact thesis completion at a master's degree level.

Chapter III

Methodology

Design of the Study

The design of this study focused on graduate student non-completers in a thesis required master's program and the experiences that are unique to the students' program of study. The purpose of this study was to examine and explore phenomenology as it relates to master's level students who are required to complete a thesis. Qualitative methodology was used to gather information in regards to the factors that contribute to non-completion. The use of the qualitative method was essential to examining the unique perspective of each non-completer interviewed.

Qualitative methodology was used to obtain the perceptions of participants in regards to the master's degree completion, as well as the thesis process. Benefits to this methodology are stated by McMillan and Schumacher (2001): "qualitative research describes and analyzes people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions" (p. 395). Additionally, Morrow and Smith (2000) found that using qualitative analysis allows for the exploration of complex human phenomena and allows for the researcher and participant to find meaning in their experiences. In order for information to be deeply explored, the use of in-depth interviews is important to the extraction of perceptions of the individuals studied. These interviews are defined by McMillan and Schumacher as "open-response questions to obtain data of participants meaning – how individuals conceive of their world and how they explain or 'make sense' of the importance of events in their lives" (p.443).

Participants

Participants were determined through the records of both the Graduate School and the departmental coordinators of the four thesis based master's program at a medium-sized mid-

western comprehensive university. In order to obtain an appropriate measure of responses, all students identified were contacted. The Graduate Coordinator of each department contacted individuals via email or postal mail. Snowball sampling methodology was used as only the graduate coordinators of each department know the participants. Snowball sampling is a chain reactionary method of sampling in which potential individuals are identified and then are asked to further identify additional participants. This method can be highly beneficial in research that may not have participants that will readily step forward as “the use of snowball strategies provides a means of accessing vulnerable and more impenetrable social groupings” (Atkinson & Flint, 2001, p.1).

Interested individuals were asked to contact the author of the study in order to set up an interview. Due to the sensitive material that may be extracted during interviews, focus groups were not used. Instead, interviews were conducted one-on-one to ensure that the best information is extracted from the participants. Responses were kept anonymous and were given a key code, based on both their department of study and the number in which their response is received.

Initially four programs agreed to interview with the researcher to discuss the thesis process within their program. However, after numerous attempts at obtaining assistance, only two programs agreed to identify qualified participants who fit the criteria for selection. Likewise, snowballing was hindered in that participants were also reluctant to identify other participants. The result was that participants were reduced to four program coordinators, one faculty member, and four student non-completers from two different programs.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, identifying information about the student participants was not included. However, as already stated, all were graduate students who had completed their course work with the exception of the thesis.

Site

Research was conducted at a medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university offering four graduate programs with a thesis requirement. Interviews were held in a location on site whenever possible. For those individuals who resided out of the area, phone interviews were conducted in a private area with a secure phone line.

Instrument

The instrument used was personal interviews with both the graduate coordinators and those they determined to be non-completers. Interviews were also videotaped and transcribed for accuracy.

Data Collection

Data was collected in the Fall of 2011 at a medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university. Interviews were held both face-to-face in one-on-one interviews and through phone interviews. In person interviews took place in the personal offices of participants. Phone interviews were conducted from a private office with a secure phone line. The interviews were video recorded to ensure that all information obtained was accurate.

Treatment of Data

Prospective participants in the study were given informed consent forms (see appendix) to sign in order to maintain confidentiality. Information collected, including transcripts, informed consent form, and video recordings were kept and stored to be used only by the researcher. The names of all participants were kept anonymous.

Data Analysis

The data from transcribed interviews were constantly compared to find emergent themes between participants. The data were identified and analyzed to discover emerging themes.

Summary

The study was designed to discover the phenomenon associated with non-completion in master's required thesis programs. A qualitative design was used to allow participants to express their perception and experiences of the graduate programs and thesis process. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to identify common themes.

Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and summarize the themes that emerged through one-on-one interviews with five program coordinators from four degree programs, as well as four students who are listed as non-completers within two of those programs. Participants in this qualitative study will be referred to using an alphanumeric code to ensure anonymity. Program coordinators will be referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5. Participants will be listed as S1, S2, S3, and S4.

Research Question 1: To what extent are participants' non-completers?

The process of completing data found that the majority of non-completers within the degree departments are those that have not completed the thesis requirement. Several departments noted that in some cases, students have self-selected out of the programs for personal or professional reasons, but those that are listed as non-completers have finished the academic requirements set forth, with the exception of the thesis. "We do occasionally have students who decided to move on for whatever reason. We had one student recently who decided to go into another field" stated P4. Not matching with the program was a reason P3 lost a student. "We had one student leave because she was displeased with her professors, but she came in and started voicing her displeasures from day one". One program did discuss losing students to academic progress, as P1 shared, "we have some students who don't make it through the coursework. If they don't get a GPA of 3.0 for so many semesters, then they usually don't stay".

Research Question 2: What are participants' perceptions related to the overall structure of the program?

Provisional admittance

Due to regulations from the graduate school where participants attend, the category for provisional admittance into any master's degree program is narrow. A requirement for admittance to the Graduate School is a minimum GPA of 2.75. Students admitted to the Graduate School are allowed to enroll in up to 12 credit hours in any program as a provisional student and then they must be admitted to a specific graduate program or they must stop taking classes. However, it is the general consensus of graduate program coordinators within the four degree programs studied that provisional admittance is not common. There are however several reasons for that. P1 states: "We have a student who currently has a GPA of 2.749 and it was close enough to admit her on a contingency basis". The sentiment was echoed by P2:

Anyone can take 12 hours...it does not guarantee admissions. But I mean, if you come in right now and I'm talking to you and you're telling me that you have a 2.70 GPA, all I can tell you is that I'm sorry and you can take the 12 hours but you have to pay for the 12 hours with your own money.

Some programs however feel that provisional admission does a disservice to the program and to the student. It implies the appearance of admission when in fact the student may be rejected later on. From the students' perspective, taking classes may suggest "a squatters" mentality meaning they assume some rights to the program when they may not be ready or adequately prepared to maintain the academic standards set for by the program. When asked about the admission of at risk students, P5 replied "At risk? No. I'll tell you why. (Program) is a

pretty intense field and if the students struggle through the program, we know they will struggle in the field. So we try to be very selective from the beginning.”

Choice

Choice can play a significant role in the success and progress of the thesis. For some, the ability to make their own decisions through the process allows for the experience to be more valuable to themselves, especially if they feel that they have the freedom to choose their topic, thesis chair, and their committee. For some departments, the topic isn't always an area where students have a choice. Instead their ability to choose lies in being able to choose the professor whose research may interest them. According to P3:

We really do try to encourage them to think about who might be the best chair....sometimes that's based on who's available, also things like what are the student's interest...if they choose somebody as their chair who's not (program name) faculty, then they have to have one of the (program name) faculty on their thesis committee.

The same program also talked about discouraging students from certain avenues. For instance with types of data collection, P3 says “there is the option that they can do a non-empirical project also. Students don't do this very often and we try to discourage them from doing this also”. This program feels very strongly that empirical research is valuable to their career goals so they attempt to steer students in this direction. As P3 states:

It might be difficult to do a non-empirical project ... and because they're not getting the full research opportunity. If they want to go on for a Ph.D., which a fair number of our students desire, that's [non-empirical research] obviously not going to be accepted for a Ph.D. program.

Another program that doesn't necessarily allow for choice in topic, but in advisor is Program 1. According to P1, "we have a process where they interview a number of faculty and they give an ordered list of faculty that they would like to work with and then we try to match them up with the faculty on that list." This doesn't always allow for perfect matches for the students since there are only so many faculty to pair with them, otherwise there would not be enough quality time between the two. This forced pairing may unfortunately result in negative feelings by either party.

Other departments allow students to choose their topic, at least in broad form and then match each student according to faculty area of expertise. According to P3, "students are welcome to select their own advisor and many do". It is then the role of this advisor to help them "tailor the topic so that it is more manageable and identify[ing] the areas that they may need help in". P5 finds that it's extremely important for students to have choice in the selection of their chair. P5 shared the advice that is given to students:

Well that's one thing I tell them, don't choose a chair you have a difficult time working with because that by itself will delay you because if you cannot communicate, if you're not comfortable with your chair, because you spend so much time with that person. You don't want to go to that person. There has to be some comfort level.

Students who had an active role in the selection of their thesis chair have a stronger desire to finish for their advisor than for themselves. S1 shared:

He definitely helped me a ton when I was down there and he supported me a ton and you know I feel like indebted to him to finish that and that kind of is the part where I feel bad

that I didn't finish it, you know? Cause I put a lot of time into the work and into the stuff and I would like to have it done, but it'd be less for me and more for him.

Other students don't recall there being an option to have input in the selection of the advisor. S3 said "you know, I think they just split us up if I remember correctly...and I don't know that we had a whole lot of say in that". S4 added, "I was just given a chair". S2 stated, "originally I was assigned one" and due to a personal issue in the advisors life "I had to select my own". S2 had strong negative feelings towards the process of selecting a thesis advisor and the overall experience and spoke with nervous laughter and a carefully worded answer.

The thesis process is long and tedious and it is important for students to have a certain amount of choice during the process. Choice can be important in the topic, as devoting a significant portion of your graduate experience to material a student has no interest in will most likely not propel them towards completion. The availability of choice of thesis chairs and committees is also important, as the amount of time spent between the student and the chair is significant. A poor match between a student and their advisor can result in lower success of completion.

Program observation

The consistency of factors within each department is unique to that department and most likely the faculty and students perceive the level of consistency differently. In all of the programs reviewed, the thesis hours that students take are not in the form of a structured class and are instead an individual one-on-one meeting between students and their thesis chair. When asked how the program could have made them more successful S4 reflected, "I think it would be structuring those thesis hours. You get three thesis hours every semester. You get a "class" for it.

Actually making that into a much more structured class than just randomly meeting with your advisor would help.” S1 added:

I think a big thing towards putting people in the right step would truly be to set out a timeline of expectations for people. Even if your chair doesn't adopt it, make it available from whoever is the strictest chair out there. I know people who had certain thesis chairs all finished their stuff. And it was because the students were like 'I don't want to disappoint them because I'm supposed to have 5 articles read by this time' or '(gender identifier)'s expecting to see my chapter one'. Having that sort of accountability versus "this is your time, you do what you want with it", I think would really help.

The inconsistencies that students see may be perceived by the department as individualized attention toward the students. Additionally, in a master's program the faculty may expect students to be more self-motivated and mature in their ability to adhere to the requirements of the program. In reality, especially in a Millennial mindset, students may need to feel like they are given the same or better attention than their peers and that they need more direction when it comes to tasks.

Research Question 3: What are the participants' perceptions related to support systems?

Peer support

Peer support can be an important part of the completion of one's degree and the amount of support that is perceived by each individual and each program varies, as does the importance of peer support to each individual. Mentorship was a common theme among two of the programs. P5 states:

Each incoming student is assigned to a mentor with the second year students and that happens before they even get on campus; it happens during the summer once they are admitted....we build as much as we can a support system for them.

P4 also found great value in a mentorship program and stated:

We also added a big sibling program recently where the first year students are paired with a second year student as soon as they get admitted to the program so that they can ask questions of the second year student and get some information before they arrive on campus as well as have a mentor, especially, while they're on campus here.

In addition to mentorship, some programs see professional or student organizations as important to supporting the students in their programs. Some programs are newer and have emerged out of a perceived need by the department. According to P4:

We found that there really wasn't a lot of contact between first and second year students traditionally...which I thought was something we should try to rectify. So we now have the (Program name) Club which this first year, we're making fairly social.

The program coordinator (P4) also has goals for expansion of the program to meet more needs of the students and the department stating:

We want it to be a liaison between the students and the faculty, in particular between the first year students and the faculty members so that there's a second year student who can go and talk to first year students and see what kind of questions and concerns come up on a regular basis.

Some organizations are more professional in nature and have a long-standing tradition with the program or have a blend of social and professional aspects. P5 thinks that (Club name) “is a good support systems and also getting them used to the professional because it is run just like the professional organizations”. Some program coordinators find the balance between professional and social aspects incredibly important to the support of the students when it comes to organizations. P3 shared that:

(Program identifier) [is] composed of graduate students and some faculty; we’re able to join if we wish to and we do usually. I’m really pleased with some of the things that they’re doing. I mean, they’ll do things like have professional development seminars, have fund-raising events. They also say things like ‘let’s go play volleyball, let’s go to Buffalo Wild Wings to eat and watch the football game’ or whatever the case may be. I think that support, the social support, is just as important as meeting with the advisor.

The cohort, for some, tends to be an important form of support. According to P2, “most students tend to use their peers as sounding boards and the word spreads this is where you go to get this done, this is where you do that”. P2 also added, “most people, by and large, get along very well with other members of their cohort and they’re not afraid to ask questions”.

The perspective of the student participants was that student organizations were not necessarily that instrumental in helping them complete the degree or thesis. However, cohorts, depending on how close knit, were seen as a more positive influence on matriculating. In terms of a student organization, S3 said:

I don't know that that was necessarily a support network, we were fairly close as a cohort I'd guess you'd call it. But it was really just certain individuals that I went to for support, but it wasn't really a big focus.

When asked to contrast the professional organization with the idea of a cohort class, student participants found the cohort experience helped to support them through the process. S3 stated, "More than anything it was a good place to vent. We were all kind of going through the same thing". However, in order for the cohort to have impact, students stated it perceive as "close knit". For example, S4 didn't necessarily find the cohort system to be as beneficial because the group was not as "tight": "I don't think our cohort was as tight as other cohorts I had seen. It's not like I felt that there was no support through them, it just wasn't quite what I had seen in other years. "

Other participants found the cohort to be an important part of their support.

I think it's the cohort that you're a part of and I mean just sitting there and being like 'alright, let's bust this out, let's do this, or be like 'okay guys, I really need to sit here and read so don't let me come out and watch TV, turn off the TV if I walk out of the room, like just shun me. But yeah, I think that was the big thing is the cohort system, really helped get you through (S2).

Students who were not part of a cohort system didn't feel any outside support from their peers. When asked about peer support, S1 stated, "I would say no. I think that for the most part there was pretty much me".

So, from a coordinator's perspective, peer support is very important to helping students succeed. However, the student participants thought professional organizations less helpful than

the cohort model, assuming the cohort group was cohesive. Of note, neither the coordinators nor the students identified mentorship as a key ingredient in completing the thesis.

Research Question 4: What are the participants' perceptions regarding factors leading to non-completion including personal (e.g. family, medical, etc), financial (loss of aid, loss of graduate assistantship, etc) and/or institutional (lack of support systems, etc)?

Academic support

The perceived academic and social support by professors is important to the student participants, especially support that is consistent across advisors with the same program and perceived as genuine. As S4 stated:

I certainly think that I don't know that I'd be where I am in terms of getting to the point where I hopefully will be completing very shortly without the push from the thesis advisor and that relationship that we developed. I think that's a very important piece to completion is having someone who will push you and will make you work even when you don't want to and who looks out for your interest and is there to be able to vent to when it's not going well or things like. And so you know I'd certainly say that that advisor process there is extremely important.

Students wanted to perceive their advisor as genuine in his/her approach to supporting the thesis process. As S2 reflected:

I think that was like my big thing that derailed me was just that I felt my first chair didn't really care what I did. All they cared about was really my reference list and making sure that it was in the correct APA format. It got to the point where it was almost a joke,

where I would go in there with it and I would have in the draft that I submitted electronically three days before, I'd put in there a sentence that says 'If you are reading this, x here, If you are at this point, put a dot or a smiley face next to this in the paragraph'. No marks. So part of me was like, okay, you're not reading my stuff, why should I have to come back here and where's the part of you feeling value as a student that someone is actually trying to get you through the process.

According to the participants, it was not enough to schedule a meeting to review the thesis document. They wanted to perceive that their time spent with an advisor was worthwhile to both parties and that the advisor had a vested interest in helping a student stay focused, organized and moving forward toward the completing of the thesis. They were sensitive to feelings of not being valued by the advisor, which in turn impeded their motivation to work on the project. In turn, this lack of progress may be communicated to potential students thus reducing the prestige of the program and some applicants may decide to look elsewhere.

Assistantship factor

The assistantship, whether required for admittance to a program, as a financial means to attend school, or for gaining practical experience in the field, is an important aspect to the graduate school experience for many students. According to the graduate school, most student contracts are limited to 16-18 hours a week at their assistantship site. For some students, this added a time commitment outside of normal academic requirements may have a negative impact on their progress towards the completion of the thesis. For others, it may not impact their progress at all. S1 stated, "it required some time but it wasn't like, overwhelming like that was

the reason why I didn't finish my thesis or anything". For some, the assistantship was helpful towards their progress. S2 found that it helped them to establish their topic. S2 also added:

I know I've heard other people say their GA position did derail from it just because of the time requirement or I don't know if maybe they felt guilty stepping away from it, but I don't think my GA position derailed from it at all. If anything it was supportive of it.

Another participant (S3) echoed some of the same sentiments, adding:

It helped me in the area of my research; it related to what I was doing at work. My boss was very supportive. Certainly the time commitment was not a positive factor in completing a thesis but I can't say that it was unreasonable or it hindered the process too much either.

One participant found their GA position especially difficult in the completion of their thesis. S4 stated:

I found no support whatsoever from my boss. It was always more important that I do the work in the office before the rest of it because my assistantship was paying for my schooling so I should put that first. I definitely think that it took away from completing it.

In programs that require assistantship for admittance, it should be noted that the relationship between the program department and the assistantship department should be solid and well-formed as to help deter any difficulties that may arise in a students' ability to complete both the requirements of the program and the assistantship.

Contact consistency

When it came to contact with their advisor while in the program, there were varying views of satisfaction concerning the consistency of the process. Some found great continued support whereas others did not. When asked about the structure of meetings with their advisor, S4 answered:

No, definitely not, it was up to me to make the meetings happen, and they did. I was in there at least every other week if not every week, but the meetings were not structured by any means. My advisor was often doing other things at the same time that they were talking to me.

The tone of the students indicated that they felt slighted by the interactions. Additionally, when S2 was asked about expectations for meeting with their advisor, they were adamant about their displeasure of the process:

I don't think there really was an expectation. For some, it was up to the student to make out that kind of expectation and the advisor left it up to the student to kind of set up a guideline for how to get it done and what their timelines were going to be and what they needed to do. Then there were other chairs that when you walked in that first day, they set out, "okay, you need five articles written by this, you need to have an annotated bib by this, I expect to see chapter one by this time" and that it was very structured. And I know with my first chair, I was very much self-motivated and they asked "What do you want to talk about, this is your time, what do you want to talk about". What I want is for you to tell me what I need to do, or give me some kind of guidance as to what would be a good path or timeline for this or anything like that.

S4 also added their frustrations with their chair's advising style, saying

I think (gender identifier)'s a great mentor, but I don't feel like (gender identifier) really gave me much service when it came to being my thesis chair. It was awesome, it was great to see (gender identifier) every week, or every other week, but it wasn't that structure that I think that I needed.

P2 recognized that perhaps some students do require more structure or more consistency with contact than others.

Some students really need to meet with the advisor once a week and they're afraid to ask. The advisor will say come when you have something finished and so they'll keep putting things off. There's something else that becomes more important.

From a student perspective, it appears that a variety of advising is noted and shared with other students and some see this variety as a negative rather than a positive issue. Students did not appear to note their own need for a variety of style or think that a structured approach might be a negative experience.

The contact students have past their academic term is important as well. From an institutional standpoint, when a student is no longer taking part in academic classes on campus, unless they choose to enroll in an additional thesis class and pay fees, there is no requirement for the department to continue to work with them towards their thesis progress. P3 added,

Once you've exhausted your first 2 years or 24 months with us, then you're on gratis time, meaning professors don't have to work with you. Fortunately, we don't make

students continue to pay for services or time with us. The Graduate School may institute a continuous enrollment requirement.

The frequency of contact between a non-completer and their advisor is not consistent between departments, or even within departments. According to P4, there are changes that need to be made:

I think the way it's traditionally worked is it's been mostly up to the advisor to stay in touch with them, so whoever their thesis chair is. Different faculty members handle that in very different ways. I think some of them are very active at keeping regular touch with the student, encouraging them, threatening them, whatever. I think that a lot of other faculty take a much more laid back approach and essentially say it's up to the student to contact me and let me know when they're ready to finish up their thesis. I tend to use a much more of a direct approach, so that's something I would like to address with the faculty, talk to them a little bit more about, how can we maybe have a little more structure about the process.

Not completing the program can bring some embarrassment to a student but it is likely that the contact, sent with the best intentions by the department, will be well received. The type of contact that is made is important too. S4 has had "some" contact with their chair in the last 3 years:

My advisor's friends with me on Facebook, so they'll see me online everyone once in a while and pop up and say, you know, how's that thesis going. We had a couple of Skype dates sometime last year, probably about this time last year actually.

As time continues on, the frequency of contact can also diminish. S1 discusses the contact between them and their advisor:

We've talked a little bit but we haven't talked in quite some time now. It's been a number of years at this point since I've left but following my departure over there, about a year afterwards we were in contact, we'd talk a little bit. But essentially we all know I'm not done with my thesis and it's just still hanging out there.

Distance can add to the difficulty of contact, but if the student is still located near the institution, it can sometimes be overwhelming. S2 often saw the chair quite frequently and was in contact via email:

You start feeling so guilty when you get that email from your chair that's like 'thesis question mark, exclamation point, question mark. How's it going?' then you're just like 'I can't ignore this, like you really want to put it into that delete pile, but no. I think it's something that I've grown to appreciate since finishing classes.

Contact can sometimes become more frequent as the progress towards completion progresses. As S3 recalls, "prior to that it wasn't really very common, it was more maybe once a semester we'd check in with each other".

Lack of consistency in post academic contact can be detrimental to the progress of thesis completion for many reasons. One, students who have made little if any progress on their project may feel guilty contacting their adviser. They may want to discuss roadblocks but feel they need to have something to show instead. Second, the length of time between meetings is significant since advisors may need to spend the majority of the meeting refreshing themselves as to the

student's area of study. Participants in this study were aware that a post-academic plan would have been beneficial.

Influencing factors

Internal factors within students' lives can lead toward their non-completion. The extensive and time consuming process of the thesis can be hindered by additional factors which also requires the time of the student such as an assistantship, internships and practicum, and additional classes or training. Time management skills, as well as finding balance between responsibilities are essential to the success of students. One program coordinator talked at length about the importance of finding balance. P2 expressed, "I try to tell the students over and over again about the importance of getting a balance between their class work and their assistantship and personal life". For some students, the assistantship proved to be detrimental to their success in the program. S3 stated:

I think mainly it was the assistantship. I think the job part of it was, I went into it knowing it was going to be important but I didn't realize that it, I was actually expected to put in 40 hours a week. You find something that says 20 and then they say no, you are actually supposed to be here all the damn time.

For another student, it was the additional requirements for a second certification that may have led to difficulties in completion of the thesis. S1 reflected,

I think if I wasn't involved in the (program) and getting my teaching degree, I definitely would have had the time to do it. I think that's ultimately what was probably the main cause for me not getting my thesis finished.

Issues with topics also proved to be detrimental to the success of the thesis completion. S2 was strongly encouraged to change the topic due to the subject matter. “My original thesis topic ended up changing due to the fact that it was kind of a controversial one. It seemed like it would be pretty hard to push through IRB for a master’s level thesis”. For another student, it was losing their work and subsequently deciding to change topics.

At some point in the process my computer died and I lost everything that I had worked on and about the same time I started questioning whether or not my topic would have a positive outcome, although that probably wasn’t the right question to ask (S3).

In addition, they also shared how things in their personal life may have added to the tension they were feeling about the thesis and the program.

One of my grandparents passed away during the program. I think that definitely left me in a bad place because I couldn’t go to the funeral because of academic requirements and things like that and that may have played a role in that too (S3).

For S4, it was finding out that their research problem was no longer a viable topic for exploration.

After I started my research into my original topic, I got fairly far into the research and realized that I had missed a cut off with the age of the women who I would need to talk to. It was just right at the cusp where the women would have known or who would have been there through the changes that were going on in the organization were too old or gone. It was really tough for me to have put so much hard work into my thesis only to realize that, at nearly halfway done, I couldn’t do anything with the research that I had. So that also threw me off a bit. I have to admit I was mad about it and didn’t want to

choose a new topic or anything. So I'm sure that also had something to do with my non-completion.

The thesis process is long and several things can come up in just the writing and research that will slow the progress of the project. When students then have additional outside factors to deal with, they have an even more difficult time working towards completion. The requirements of their assistantship may also compel them to feel more obligations to their work in that area than on their thesis work.

Research Question 5: What are the participants' perceptions in relation to other factors associated with non-completion of the thesis?

Perceived thesis value

The value of the thesis is an important theme that emerged through this research. The view from the program side is that there is tremendous value in the thesis component. For one department in particular, it determines the success one will have within the field, as it leads to their certification. P5 shared:

They cannot graduate unless they defend their thesis (department identifiers through timelines and program requirements). Those deadlines are there. And the reason is, if they don't graduate, they don't get certification. If they don't have certification, they don't have a job.

P3 shared why they feel the thesis is so important is due to the research component:

When you get in the field, as some point, somebody's going to ask you to run up some numbers to justify your existence. So if you know how to out the numbers together or

conduct the research then you're much better off than somebody that has to ask one of their colleagues how to do it.

P2 didn't understand the true value of the thesis until fully immersed into the department.

When I first came to this department to teach here, one of my goals was to eliminate the thesis or to make it voluntary. And then, all of the sudden I realized the value that the thesis had. The fact is, it proves to people that you can do research, and that's the whole purpose. We want to be sure that somebody can do research, because in this field, it is extremely important to go on and get a Ph.D. if you want to move up in the ranks....you're going to need a Ph.D. and this research that you're able to do really helps you immensely with a Ph.D. program.

Additionally, this coordinator added, "When you get out in your first job, there's going to be some difficult things you want to do. We don't want you to give up, we want you to think back and think, 'I did a thesis'". P2 continued stating the vast importance of the thesis for their program, "I changed my mind about it and saw the value of the thesis. I really do now see the value of it. I know sometimes the students don't really see it but I think eventually they will see it."

P1 also discussed how students might not see the value in a thesis, which may lead to their non-completion.

For the students who get as far as going through the entire program and finish all of their coursework, the major reason why they don't finish because now its sitting there writing the thesis and its hard lonely work and if they really feel like its not going to benefit them much from then they don't do it.

For some students, they don't place an importance on writing a thesis. One in particular discussed their frustration with the thesis requirement. S3 stated very honestly:

I think I was a little bit bitter and jaded towards the process for quite some time, even in my second year of grad school. It was something that I looked at as being able to write a research paper doesn't make me any better of a professional.

They then reflected that now,

I realized it was something that I just needed to get done. Regardless of how I felt about it, I had a change of heart and said you know, regardless of whether or not this makes me a better professional; it does make me more qualified to have the degree. And it will impact my career. And I realized that you know, really all I have to do is write a stupid paper and be done with it.

S4 added:

Knowing that its one of the only thesis programs through this type of degree program put a damper on it too. I felt like, I don't need to do this, I'm not going to go get a doctorate; I don't have to do this in order to be a successful professional.

What is most interesting is that there is a clear discrepancy between the perceived valued of the thesis by the departments and the students. While S2 did add, "I think it's a good requirement; it's just hard to get done", that is not the common sentiment among the non-completers interviewed. What emerged in the interview is the discrepancy in value between the programs and the non-completers.

Preparation and training

Previous training or experiences are important when it comes to selecting students for the each degree program, as it is important that they will be able to complete the requirements of the program. While the standards set forth for admission and selection into each program are set to select the best students, it is important that there are additional tools and training provided to the students while they are in the program that will aid in the completion of their thesis.

From the student perspective, there wasn't a substantial amount of training through coursework that assisted the process. S1 shared:

Honestly, through coursework, I don't think there was very much. I think I relied a lot on undergraduate experience, as well as people who were currently working on their thesis and their struggles as a way to kind of go through it. I know they always say that Research Methods kind of sets you up for it, but it wasn't in any way, shape, or form.

The ability to write well is also seen as a challenge from the perspective of thesis chairs. P5 noted that even though they are extremely selective and take only what they consider to be the best students, they still have difficulties.

Writing is a challenge unless people come from certain schools. We sort of know which schools produce good writing. We don't make decisions based on that, but once they are here we can see the difference. There are some we don't have to worry about and there are some that we have to work real hard to bring up to par, but writing is sort of a challenge.

Unless students are adequately prepared for both the graduate school experience and for writing a thesis, their level of success can be significantly diminished. If students don't know how to write well, it is likely that a project as intensive as a thesis is not a good fit for them. Additionally, if they are not trained in how to research, they cannot be adequately prepared to go through the thesis process.

Summary

In an attempt to answer research questions related to the thesis as a requirement for a master's degree, several themes emerged. They are as follows: admittance, choice, program observations, peer support, academic support, assistantship factors, contact consistency, program consistency, influencing factors, perceived thesis value, and preparation and training.

Chapter V

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study is to explore phenomena associated with non-completers enrolled in master's level graduate programs with a thesis requirement at medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university. Research questions were designed to understand the climate of each degree department, as well as to discover perceptions and experiences by non-completers within the thesis process. In the present chapter the results of the study are discussed and recommendations for future researchers are provided.

The beginning to a successful graduate educational experience starts with a proper "fit" between graduate program and student expectations. Determining that fit is sometimes a difficult process and can result in what Smallwood (2004) called "that hard-to-define 'bad fit'". Degree programs with thesis requirements makes the selection process even more precarious as it introduces elements to successful matriculation not found in non-thesis programs. One way "best fit" is determined is through a competitive admission process. Although there is little research to support limiting provisional status, one study by Malone, Nelson & Nelson (2000) indicated low GPA is a strong predictor of future problems in attaining the degree. The program coordinators were unanimous in their conviction that provisional status should only be granted in very rare cases. They felt the best way to enhance the probability of future degree completion is to make the admission process rigorous. As P5 stated: "So we try to be very selective from the beginning".

As already stated, the thesis component introduces a level of complexity to successful completion of the degree. Determining "best fit" in this case requires clear communication and

some level of agreement during the admission process between the program and student about the thesis project. For example, several students in this research project indicated a “bad fit” between what they wanted and what the program required, namely, a thesis project. For example, S4 stated “honestly it was a problem for me whenever I started the program; I knew that I didn’t want to write a thesis.”

The need for choice was an important topic of conversation for the students in this project. They stated it was important to have some ownership in choosing the project and advisor and lack of choice impeded the thesis component. This is supported by previous research by Rossman (1995) who found that students must understand the inherent difference between undergraduate and graduate study and the need to be in control of the process of graduate school. Students in this study who found they had no choice in the selection of their graduate advisor perceived the process in a negative manner, unlike the participants who had a choice. Likewise, those student participants who had a choice of advisor expressed indebted to finish for the sake of the advisor rather than for themselves. S1 shared, “I feel bad that I didn’t finish my thesis, not necessarily for me but for my advisor because he supported me a lot. I would rather get it done for him than for me.”

One factor that impacts the thesis process is peer support. Previous research by Hellwig and Churchman (1979) indicated that graduate school associations and professional membership is an essential aspect of a program, as it provides peer support and a mechanism for faculty and student interchange. The current research supported the notion that student organizations are seen as a needed benefit from the perspective of program coordinators. P2 shared that they are able to join student organizations and that they often do. Additionally, P4 stated, “we want it to be a liaison between the students and the faculty”.

Previous research also suggested that peer support can be achieved through cohort education. According to Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter (2011), benefits of cohort education include: positive peer relationships, strong familial and emotional ties among many students, increased delegation of tasks, increased open and honest discussions in class based on familiarity, better relationships with instructors, greater utilization of study groups, increased opportunity for professional growth and development due to academic and professional networks, and higher retention, graduation, and success rates of students. Students in this research project who participated in a cohort had developed strong unity and found it an added benefit in that the group helped with support and guidance. S3 stated “more than anything, it was a good place to vent. We were all going through the same thing”. Additionally, the student in the research study who was not a part of a cohort system reflected feelings of isolation. S1 shared “I think that for the most part there was pretty much just me”.

Academic support is also critical to the success of graduate students, especially within a thesis-required program. While the thesis is in many ways a self-led process for most students, without academic support there will be many challenges a student will face in order to complete the project. Previous research by Gardner (2010) highlighted support, self-direction, and ambiguity as three of the four themes that surfaced in a study of graduate students and their perception of graduate school success. Heiss’s (1970) research found that dissatisfaction with a faculty advisor can lead to lack of progress and completion. Research in this study showed students desired consistency between the support that was shown by all thesis advisors. This support was viewed as needing to be genuine and consistent throughout the department. For example, S2 spoke passionately about genuine support when they didn’t feel their advisor was reading their work by saying “where’s the part of feeling value as a student that someone is

actually trying to get you through the process”. Additionally, the research in this study supported Gardner’s (2010) research that ambiguity between thesis advisor and the student can negatively impact progress. S4 stated “the meetings were not structured by any means. My advisor was often doing other things at the same time they were talking to me”. While students who took part in this study have no real way of knowing how their progress would have changed with a different advisor, the discussion of discrepancies between their needs and what was offered to them should be recognized.

A commonality among the student participants in this study was the addition of an assistantship in their graduate program. While no previous research was obtained in regards to assistantship as having a positive or negative aspect to a student’s graduate or thesis progress, there were mixed feelings among the students in this study. For some it led to topics for their thesis and flexible work schedules, but for others, it was seen as a negative source of support and possible a reason for their non-completion. S3 found value in the assistantship for their thesis, as “it helped me in the area of my research”. S4 however, “found no support whatsoever from my boss. It was always more important that I do work in the office”.

Outside factors can also hinder a student’s ability to finish, as was shown in the research of this study. Research conducted by Tucker, Gottlieb and Pearce (1964) found that health or family problems can derail students who until that time were maintaining satisfactory academic progress. For one of the participants in this project, a death in the family led to negative feelings toward the department because of having to choose between family and academic expectations. This in turn shaded their overall attitude toward the entire graduate school process. S4: “It left me in a bad place because I couldn’t get to the funeral because for the academic requirements”.

The value of the thesis component to the degree program can be personal for both the department and the individual. Previous research indicated that one's attitude toward the thesis project is impacted by prior experience and the learning approach (Sachs 2002). Additionally, previous research also indicated that an additional contributor to non-completion is the difference in expectations between the student and program concerning what constitutes a finished thesis project (McCormack 2005). It was evident from this research that the faculty and departments found a much higher value for the thesis than did the students going through the process. P2 stated "We want to be sure that somebody can do research, because in this field, it is extremely important to go on and get a Ph.D. if you want to move up in the ranks". For students who see it as just another requirement, the effort and drive to finish may not be as high as it would be from a student who places a higher value on the thesis. The sentiments of S4, a non-completer, although perhaps not representative of all graduate students, clearly indicated that attitude impacts progress: "I don't need to do this, I'm not going to go get a doctorate; I don't have to do this in order to be a successful professional". Students need to be oriented early in the admission process about the value of the thesis. Program faculty cannot assume the value is inherent with everyone.

Lastly, students must understand what research is and what that means to the specific department. According a study by Reis-Jorge (2007), the development of an understanding of research takes place through three modes: reading, formal tuition, and immersion. Several of the degree programs do have this process involved in the production of thesis quality research, but perhaps it should be reexamined as to what extent. Several students expressed how they didn't feel that there was any actual preparation for the thesis through their education. As S1 stated:

Honestly, through coursework, I don't think there was very much. I think I relied a lot on undergraduate experience, as well as people who were currently working on their thesis and their struggles as a way to kind of go through it. I know they always say that Research Methods kind of sets you up for it, but it wasn't in any way, shape, or form.

In a study by Moulding and Hadley (2010), approximately 75% of students did not understand that research was a means of producing knowledge. If students do not feel as though they are being adequately prepared, programs should focus more on both the value of research and concrete practice in carrying it out. This is especially true for those students who do not have undergraduate experience in research. In other words, Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, and Hansen (2002) found that the student's perception of their own preparedness has some significance towards their progress. Program coordinators are aware of this issue.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

The purpose of this study is to explore phenomena associated with non-completers enrolled in master's level graduate programs with a thesis requirement at medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university. As the thesis requirement for a student affairs or student personnel degree is not a practice adopted across the board, several recommendations can be made.

1. Programs with a thesis requirement should seek continued research as to the purpose and value of the thesis within their own program.
2. As the perceptions concerning the value of the thesis were widespread between student and faculty participants, it should also be recommended that programs fully

educate students on the value of the thesis not only during the admissions stage of the program, but also throughout the whole master's degree program.

3. Programs should continue to examine “better fit” within their programs by emphasizing the thesis process and the student's prior academic research experience. This may help lower the percentage of non-completers.
4. As the student nears their intended graduation date without completing the thesis, it may be necessary for the student and advisor to formulate a concrete plan for completion before the student leaves the institution. Ongoing support is necessary and will communicate to the student that completion is both expected and possible.
5. If a student chooses to maintain an assistantship while working on their degree program and thesis, additional measures may need to be implemented such as ongoing communication between assistantship director, student and thesis advisor. Clear communication about the value of the thesis goes beyond the student and should also include the directors of assistantships.

Recommendations for Future Research

As previous research on the topic of master's degree thesis completion was sparse, it may be necessary for future research to be completed in order to fully determine best practices to assist students and departments through the thesis process.

1. Future research is necessary in order to gain more insight on non-completion at thesis level. This is a controversial subject and not all participants in this study were eager to assist the researcher. Perhaps this was due to the implied embarrassment students feel

until they ultimately complete the project. Likewise, coordinators are not eager to talk about students who have not finished in the prescribed timeline

2. A larger student participation pool in the future would enhance the quality of the research and the inclusion of students who have completed in a traditional time frame, as well as those deemed long-term completers should be included as well for comparison purposes.
3. Future research may need to focus as to the value of the thesis component or to discovering how to minimize “bad fit” in thesis required programs.

Conclusion

The intent of this study is to explore phenomena associated with non-completers enrolled in master’s level graduate programs with a thesis requirement at medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university. The qualitative nature of this study was designed to discover themes that emerged from interviews with program coordinators and non-completers. Results from coordinators supported a high academic value on the thesis itself, as well as several coordinators identifying a level of choice within the process. Additionally, the majority of coordinators voiced peer support as an important means of support for the students within their programs. Results from students suggested there is a disconnect in the perceived value of the thesis between student and program coordinators. The majority of the student participants perceived little value to the thesis and its ability to enhance their ability to perform job functions in their current professions. Additionally, three of the four students found some discontent in the advisement of their thesis by their thesis chair and cited the relationship or advising style to have played a role in their lack of progress. Outside influences, such as time constraints for other requirements also were listed as contributing factors from two of the participants.

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Appendix A
Research Questions

Research Questions

Research Question 1: To what extent are participants' non-completers?

Research Question 2: What are participants' perceptions related to the overall structure of the program?

Research Question 3: What are the participants' perceptions related to support systems?

Research Question 4: What are the participants' perceptions regarding factors leading to non-completion including personal (e.g. family, medical, etc), financial (loss of aid, loss of graduate assistantship, etc) and/or institutional (lack of support systems, etc)?

Research Question 5: What are the participants' perceptions in relation to other factors associated with non-completion of the thesis?

Appendix B
Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to explore phenomena associated with non-completers enrolled in master's level graduate programs with a thesis requirement at medium-sized mid-western comprehensive university. As the principle researcher, I hope to gain a better understanding of what limitations students experience in completing their graduate degrees, as well as indentifying measures of success. You were selected as a possible participants in this study, as you fit into the general criteria of either a) a graduate coordinator or assigned representative of a thesis based master's degree program at Eastern Illinois University, or b) a non-completer as identified by the graduate coordinator or assigned representative in a thesis based master's program.

Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to interview with the primary investigator of the study for approximately one hour on the topic of master's degree programs and thesis completions, as well as factors that attribute to success or non-completion. There are no foreseeable risks or ill effects form participating in this study. Benefits from participation may include gaining a greater understanding of the limitations in the completion of their thesis-based masters program requirements. In addition, graduate coordinators may gain a greater understanding of the perspectives of non-completers within their programs.

The interview will be video recorded and any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be viewed only by the principal researcher and thesis advisor for this study.

Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to discontinue participation at any time. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you have any additional questions later, please contact Emily Ritter at ejritter@eiu.edu.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and agree to your participation in this study. You may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may be entitled to after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write: Institutional Review Board, Eastern Illinois University, 600 Lincoln Ave., Charleston, IL 61920, Telephone: (217) 581-8576, E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu

Signature

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date