Exploring the Meaning Doctoral Candidates Ascribed to Their Persistence, and the Challenges and Barriers They Experienced

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the meaning doctoral candidates ascribed to their persistence in doctoral programs, and the challenges and barriers they experienced impeding a timely completion of their dissertations. Participants included six doctoral candidates in the field of Education who had been in the dissertation phase of their programs for at least one academic year (up to four academic years) and had yet to complete a dissertation research proposal. The themes that emerged as a result of this study were: (a) a lack of a sense of community; (b) ineffective advisor-advisee relations; and (c) momentum loss.

Introduction

Historically, doctoral programs were considered a private club reserved only for the sons of the elite (Fuhrmann & Grasha, 1983), primarily white males. However, within the last couple decades, doctoral programs have emerged as a more diverse enterprise with 19.6% of doctorate degrees conferred to persons of color in all academic fields by the year 2004 (Hoffer, Welch, Williams, Hess, Webber, Lisek, et al., 2006). Despite the more inclusive makeup of doctoral programs in the United States, a limited amount of national and comprehensive research has been conducted to examine doctoral students' experiences, especially in comparison to undergraduate student attrition (Smallwood, 2006).

Even with the small amount of comprehensive research regarding doctoral education,

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much of the existing research points to the myriad of perennial conundrums plaguing doctoral programs. These problems include: (a) the alarming national attrition rate of 50% (Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004); (b) time-to-degree completion rates (Di Pierro, 2007); (c) a lack of diversity (Cohen, 2006); (d) a lack of equity in mentoring practices among programs (Cohen, 2006); (e) irrelevant curricula regarding contemporary public issues (Smallwood, 2005); (f) a scarcity of American citizens pursuing doctoral degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Di Pierro, 2007); (g) the lack of training provided to prepare doctoral students for professoriate roles (Hite, Fletcher, Bruening, Durr, Yontz, Zatezalo et al., in press); (h) a lack of knowledge regarding positions outside of the academic realm (Smallwood, 2005); (i) as well as a lack of technical and psychosocial structures utilized to support doctoral students (Allan & Dory, 2001).

The dissertation phase, the final stage of the doctoral degree, of a doctoral student's progression to graduation is probably the most challenging, most unique, and one of the most important stages of the doctoral program (Katz, 1995). At this phase, doctoral candidates are no longer required to engage in coursework and are expected to conduct their research in solitude (Miller, 1995). According to Tinto (1993), "persistence at this stage may be highly idiosyncratic in that it may hinge largely if not entirely upon the behavior of a specific faculty member" (p. 237). Sigafus (1998) stated,

> Researchers have studied this predicament and concluded that doctoral candidates fail to complete doctoral programs for a variety of reasons: some become too busy with other endeavors; some find the financial situation too burdening; and some decide the demands on themselves and their families too great. (p. 3)

Of concern, it is estimated that 20% of doctoral candidates drop out at the All-But-Dissertation (ABD) phase of their programs (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992).

Whatever the reason for doctoral student dropout at the ABD stage, the impact of separation at this phase may be damaging to the student psychologically as well as to the institution and the department. Green (1995) argued that, "Failure at this point is expensive and painful for the student, discouraging for the faculty involved, and injurious to the reputation of the institution" (p. 17). Lovitts (2001) described the frustrations and feelings of noncompleters as,

> They are people who have been successful their entire lives and view themselves as superior students, as people who can surmount any academic obstacle, and as people who finish things they start. Yet, when they find themselves unable to get through their programs, they confront failure for the first time in their lives. This 'failure' can be devastating. (p. 6)

Theoretical Framework

The process of indoctrination into and through doctoral education may be represented by the theoretical framework of legitimate peripheral participation (Herzig, 2002). This model has a foundation in two important factors: student involvement and integration within an academic department community. In particular, the relationship between the doctoral student and his or her advisor is critical and consequently affects doctoral student persistence. Doctoral students in the induction of their programs are engaged in their coursework (a peripheral activity), instead of being immersed in the scholarly culture of research, publishing, and presenting. However, as their participation within their academic community increases, typically subsequent to their first year, they become integrated into the scholarly community of practice and perform scholarly

duties - being deemed legitimate. This stage of doctoral education is considered to be the central

participation phase in the legitimate peripheral participation model.

Tinto (1993) proposed a doctoral student model of persistence. He discussed the social

and intellectual communities inherent in colleges and universities. These communities influence

the willingness of students to persist in the educational process. Therefore, student persistence is

predicated on some degree of integration to the college environment, implying that an

institution's responsibility in retaining students is dependent on programmatic initiatives that

facilitate the integration of students to the social and intellectual fabric of college life.

Methods

Research Design & Purpose

A phenomenological approach was utilized in this research study. The objective of the

research was to explore the unique lived experiences and frames of references of doctoral

candidates regarding their perceptions that may influence persistence to degree completion.

Participants and Sampling

Participants in this study included six ABD doctoral candidates in the field of Education

at a very high research university who had been in the dissertation phase of their programs for at

least one academic year and had yet to complete a dissertation research proposal. The

participants in this study were diverse with two males and four females. The age range was 26

with 29 years of age as the youngest participant and 55 years as the oldest. The ethnicities of the

participants included three White American students (*Jonathon, Darlene, and Nancy*), one

African-American student (*James*), one Korean student (*Ji Hyun*), and one Korean American

student (*Diane*). Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. The participants in this

study were in the process of developing their dissertation research proposals and had been

working on their dissertation research proposals from one to four academic years. In addition, the

participants of this study represented four distinct academic programs within the field of

Education. The sampling method utilized for this study was purposive sampling and used the

logic of snowballing to identify a key informant; and in-turn, this informant identified contact

information of other ABD doctoral candidates as potential participants for this study (Patton,

1990).

Procedures

Data were collected with a demographic questionnaire and focused interviews. For

conducting the interviews, the researchers utilized a three-phase semi-structured interview

protocol. This process included: (a) an initial face-to-face interview with each participant; (b) a

second one-on-one interview with each participant; and (c) a final focus group interview

including all research participants. The one-on-one interviews were approximately 60 to 120-

minutes in duration. The focus group interview lasted 120 minutes. Utilizing a pre-written script,

participants were asked open-ended questions to elicit in-depth and rich discussions. The

sessions were audio-taped. The researchers transcribed the audio-taped sessions verbatim.

Data Analysis

The interview data were prepared for analysis by transcribing the audio-taped interviews.

The process of gleaning text led to categorizing and thematizing the data by connecting patterns

within categories, resulting in the emergence of recurring themes (Merriam, 1998). The

following strategies were utilized to reduce the impact of subjective bias, while establishing

trustworthiness: (a) collaborating, (b) triangulation of the data and investigators by searching for

agreement and consistency; and (c) using member checking to ensure credibility and

confirmability (Brantlinger, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

Results

The recurring themes that emerged, in order of importance to the participants, from analyses of the transcripts were as follows: (a) a lack of a sense of community; (b) ineffective advisor-advisee relations; and (c) momentum loss. These themes are presented in narrative form with direct quotes from the participants to capture the essence of their perspectives and experiences as doctoral candidates.

A Lack of a Sense of Community. This theme captures the participants' sense that there was a lack of community within their academic programs. All six participants expressed a lack of connection with their cohorts and faculty in their doctoral programs. This perception was most momentous for the non-traditional participants. For example, Nancy, a non-traditional participant who described herself as an *outsider* in the context of her academic program, stated "I never really felt like a graduate student…It was something I kind of did after work." Likewise, the other participants all described the limited nature in which they experienced social or intellectual activities within their academic programs.

Ineffective Advisor-Advisee Relations. Participants in this study seemed to have experienced difficulties in establishing varied types of relationships with their advisors as well. This topic seemed to be extremely sensitive and profound to the participants which were apparent in their non-verbal communications. To illustrate, when asked about their relationships with their advisors in the focus group interview, there was a pause, the participants began to glance at each other, and several participants sighed heavily. Darlene described the immense power her advisor had over her, and the other participants concurred with her assertion. In fact, Darlene stated:

I've never been in a position before where one person had so much power over me and I think that's frustrating. If it works, it works well, but when it doesn't, because you really can't complain…because it can come back and bite you, so it is very frustrating. (Darlene, focus group interview)

The *ineffective advisor-advisee relations* thematic phenomenon may be categorized into four interrelated sub-themes. These sub-themes included a: (a) lack of advising, (b) lack of feedback, (c) lack of mentorship, and (d) disconnect between the advisor and advisee's research interests. Five of the six participants believed that their advisors were extremely busy and had little time to interact, advise, provide feedback, and/or mentor them. All of these issues were considered by the participants as having an adverse impact on their academic progress. In addition, some participants described a stark difference between their advisor's scholarly research pursuits and the interests they had. All participants believed, to some extent, that parallel research interests with their advisors would have been a vital determinant in sustaining a positive relationship as well as leading to a greater investment in them as students.

Momentum loss. All six participants experienced a loss of momentum; this loss of momentum happened during the post-candidacy phase for them all. In that regard, the participants articulated that they had momentum in the process of completing their coursework, but their momentum sharply decreased after finishing their candidacy examinations. The contributing factors of this momentum loss, articulated by the participants, may be conceptualized as a loss of motivation, competing priorities, and difficulty in overcoming roadblocks. These three contributing factors emerged as sub-themes underlying a loss of momentum. First, all participants acknowledged their own involvement in not making reasonable academic progress and were articulated by the participants as a lack of self-motivation. Second,

the participants discussed competing priorities that did not promote the needed concentration on

their doctoral studies. These priorities were communicated as a need to focus on family or

employment issues. Third, Jonathon, who had encountered a roadblock by-way-of engaging in

his candidacy exams, explained his experience as:

> …my candidacy exam experience was disastrous. It was horrifying and completely
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> demoralizing…and this was after literally years of saying I don't understand the
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> candidacy process, explain it to me, explain what the expectations are…I just felt so
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> betrayed by the process and my advisor. I couldn't even talk to them for several months. I
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> couldn't even be in the same room with them because I would just get so angry at how I
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> thought I had been treated. (Jonathon, focus group interview)

As indicated previously, the advisor was also viewed by many of the participants as critical to

assisting them with the development of their dissertation proposals. Darlene and Diane, during

the interview process, were working on the third or fourth iteration of their dissertation research

proposals. In regard to the multiple iterations of the dissertation proposals that were deemed

necessary by many of the participants' advisors, Diane described her advisor as "a gatekeeper".

To illustrate, Diane explained,

> I had it all going and it …seemed like my advisor's role turned into a gatekeeper and it
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> was like no, that's not good enough … no, I don't think you can collect data this [term],
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> maybe next [term] and next [term] comes and no, this [term] doesn't seem right, maybe
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> next year…it was just roadblock after roadblock. (Diane, second individual interview)

Related to the loss of momentum were the repeated, fruitless attempts on the part of the

participants to gain approval of their dissertation research proposals. Darlene and Diane

indicated that they were extremely frustrated in the process of having to complete multiple proposals and described it as a roadblock that was difficult to overcome.

Discussion

Consistent with Tinto's (1993) model of doctoral persistence, all participants in this research study communicated a lack of a perceived sense of community within their academic programs. Tinto discussed the need for doctoral students to be immersed in an intellectual and social community that is likely to serve as a prerequisite for persistence in an academic program. Thus, this study reinforces the need for doctoral candidates' to have a perceived sense of community within their academic programs.

The essentiality of a positive relationship between a doctoral student and his or her advisor is well-documented in the literature regarding doctoral persistence (Ehrenburg, Jakubson, Groen, So, & Price, 2007; Golde, 2005). Further, the legitimate peripheral participation theory supports the ideology that advisors are instrumental in contributing to the academic community as well as assisting in the persistence of their doctoral students. Thus, the importance of the advisor-advisee relationship is confirmed in this study as participants described a lack of a close relationship with their advisors as being a barrier to progress.

Despite the emergence of momentum loss as a prevalent theme in this study, its presence in the literature is limited. This suggests that a closer examination may be warranted in investigating structures that are perceived as roadblocks to doctoral candidates in completing their research proposals.

Implications

The findings in this study highlight the need for programmatic initiatives that enhance future doctoral preparation as well as leads to a better understanding of the factors that contribute

to doctoral persistence. Based on the findings, the researcher recommends programmatic initiatives for doctoral programs that might contribute to facilitating doctoral students' persistence and doctoral candidates' efforts for completing their program requirements in a more timely fashion.

First, faculty and administrators might consider integrating more social and intellectual activities within their programs. To illustrate, social activities might include initiating a student organization that would hold extracurricular events for their students. In addition, programs might consider offering research groups and seminars for students to discuss their related research interests and offer opportunities to collaborate on scholarly research activities. Further, scholarly luncheons could assist in promoting and establishing a community of learners.

Second, it is essential that faculty advisors understand their roles, responsibilities, and influence that they have in their advising and mentoring relationships. Thus, faculty might consider allocating time to discuss with their advisees their advisees' progress and expectations, as well as frequently monitoring their performance. Moreover, faculty and admissions committees may want to carefully consider the fit, in terms of research interests, between faculty advisors and prospective doctoral students. This may assist in reducing the likelihood of doctoral students having incongruent interests with their advisors.

Third, doctoral programs could implement more structure in the dissertation phase. As a result, doctoral candidates may need to develop dissertation timelines. In addition, Graduate Schools might consider lessening the mandatory time to complete a dissertation. Consequently, this may increase doctoral candidates' motivation for completing their requirements in a more judicious manner.

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