The Persistence and Attrition of Online Learners

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Student retention is a growing concern as more university programs move toward online learning. With a continual increase in online program choices, it is important to recognize course elements that affect the success of online learners (Kane, Shaw, Pang, Salley, & Snider, 2015). University professors need strategies to provide assistance for students and to decrease the number of students who fail to progress in online programs. It is important that faculty support students, but just as important that universities provide time, opportunities, and resources for such support to occur.

Classes taught using online delivery methods can lead to challenges for both teachers and learners (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). As many colleges have described high attrition rates for students in distance education programs (Nash, 2005), universities are seeking ways to reduce attrition. According to Angelino, Williams, and Natvig (2007), it is paramount to engage students early and to sustain their engagement.

Study participants were students enrolled in a university's newly developed online doctoral program in Educational Leadership. The study was developed in response to approximately a dozen students who exited the program during their first year of coursework and who alluded to time and family situations as reasons for their departure. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore doctoral students' perceptions of work, university, and patterns of familial support that contributed to students' choice to remain continuously enrolled in the online degree program. Also examined were other supports not received that the students believed would have helped them achieve additional success. The research questions included: a) Why did the students seek to pursue an online doctoral degree program? b) What university and personal (non-university) supports did the students experience during the pursuit of their doctoral degree? c) What was the students' perceived impact of the supports? d) What challenges did the students experience during the pursuit of their degree?

Literature Review

Students often balance demanding jobs, family commitments, and financial obligations. A search for convenience and flexibility can lead students to online learning. Radda (2012) posited, "Demands of the modern workforce, coupled with rapid advances in educational technology, have created a new paradigm of doctoral learning" (p. 50). Personal and university-based supports can contribute to student success. Angelino et al. (2007) described the need for educators to create a "framework for engaging the distance learner with the goal

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of increasing persistence" (p. 8) by encouraging collaboration and the development of relationships and working together to increase the knowledge base.

Effective instruction must be at the crux of instructional endeavors (Crews, Wilkinson, & Neill, 2015). It is important that faculty of online programs exhibit effective teaching and organizational skills and be willing to cooperate with and receive support from other university units that assist online learners (Kumar, Dawson, Black, Cavanaugh, & Sessums, 2011). Communication is critical in online learning. Knowledge is acquired through a "synthesis of social experiences that occur in the learning environment" (Rausch & Crawford, 2012, p. 176).

Another issue exists in terms of faculty load. According to Singleton and Session (2011), "a common barrier to delivering instruction for nontraditional courses is that there seems to be a blurred line in regard to what is actually considered a reasonable teaching load, especially as it pertains to nontraditional doctoral instruction delivered online" (p. 37). Online doctoral programs are often larger in size; programs of such size frequently depend on part-time faculty members who also are employed at other universities. An overreliance on part-time faculty can lead to challenges with timeliness of responses to students and issues with directing student research (Jones, Kupczynski, & Marshall, 2011).

Technology is a prevalent part of course delivery (Crews et al., 2015), but students must be aware that technology is only a tool. Parkes, Stein, and Reading (2014) found that many students are prepared for the technology of online environments, but are not as prepared to read and write critically.

Accessibility to doctoral programs has increased. Archbald (2011) stated, "Students can enter doctoral study without residency requirements, without facing hundreds of hours of annual commuting, and without quitting their jobs or relocating. The barriers, costs, and risks associated with the decision to pursue doctoral study have substantially diminished" (p. 13). Although many students stay enrolled in online courses, others experience attrition (Bowden, 2008). Gomez (2013) wrote that many administrators worry about being able to predict early students' risk of dropping out.

Many researchers have examined the impact of online instruction. Few researchers, however, have explored how online education has affected doctoral programs (Jones et al., 2011) and specifically the direct impact on students.

Theoretical Framework

Andragogy provides a theoretical framework for adult learning. Students are offered choice and flexibility (Knowles, 1984); experiences of the learner are a fundamental element of andragogy as "students learn what is worthwhile in their own, real-life application" (Baird & Fisher, 2005/2006, p. 7). The students in this study were expected to take active roles in their learning. The program faculty offered students forums to express their needs as well as flexibility in scheduling.

Andragogy can help to "recognize and articulate the needs of adult learners in an online learning environment" (Boyette, 2008, p. 5). The program allowed for some student choice in the pace of the course sequence. Students were allowed choices in scheduling, could take fewer courses at a time than were recommended, were allowed to change between dissertation advisors, and were able to take certification courses as electives.

Methods

The qualitative tradition of non-transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) was utilized to examine participants' perceptions of their experiences of online learning. The purpose of this study was to examine online doctoral students' perceptions of support that contributed to their choice to remain continuously enrolled in the degree program. I worked to recall my experiences with online learning during the epoche process in order to set aside judgments and perceptions before interacting with the participants.

Responses to open-ended questions were collected in an effort to help account for the reasons for student persistence and attrition in an attempt to find ways to help decrease the number of students who fail to progress in the program and to determine what interventions might assist other learners in their pursuit of program success. Research questions centered on students' reasons to purse an online doctoral degree program, the supports they experienced during the pursuit of their degree, their perceived impact of the supports, and the challenges they experienced during the pursuit of their degree.

An interview protocol was created; three individuals who each had at least five years of online learning experience assisted in ensuring that the questions were appropriate. The individuals examined the questions for clarity and verified that the questions did not appear to lead the participants to respond in certain ways. Ten open-ended interview questions and a short demographic questionnaire were used to collect data from 75 doctoral students enrolled in an online doctoral program at one university. The students represented two cohorts of doctoral students. All students in the two cohorts were invited to respond.

The open-ended questions included prompts pertaining to whether the participants had considered leaving the program (and, if so, why), university-based supports, reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree, and why the participants pursued an online degree specifically. The participants were asked to share about assistance they had received from others in their personal lives and about areas in which additional help was needed. Demographic data collected pertained to participants' educational background and past and current employment.

Value was assigned to participants' statements and significant statements were identified. The statements were clustered into units and themes. A description of the individuals' experiences was built; the textual-structural description that emerged exemplified the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Results

Participants contemplate multiple issues as they make decisions regarding their options for doctoral programs and universities, but officials may not know what led the participants to choose their universities over another (Jorissen, Keen, & Riedel, 2015). Three-fourths of participants in this study shared that they chose to apply for the online program because they believed the program would fit into their work and family schedules and require less travel than traditional programs. Themes that emerged from the data included: a) professor support was vital to student success, but students perceived a lack of professor empathy; b) support of family and co-workers was helpful, but students exhibited guilt when they could not fulfill the responsibilities with which their supporters assisted; and c) students sought an online, concentrated program, but missed the traditional elements of face-to-face programs.

Of the 75 participants, 37 were current or retired school administrators. More respondents had experience in the campus principalship than in any other profession represented. Almost half of the participants had earned an education-related bachelor's degree; just over half had earned a master's degree in Educational Leadership. The majority of participants sought the doctoral degree for school administration promotion opportunities or to support their goal of entering the professoriate.

When asked to select as many reasons as applied to why they sought admission to an online program specifically, 63 participants responded that flexibility was a factor in selecting an online program; 56 cited work schedule as a factor. Additionally, 43 participants responded that they favored an online program because it required less travel compared to a traditional program. Alignment with family schedules was also a factor in selecting an online program for 43 of the participants.

Faculty Members: The Best University-Based Support

Participants were asked about the best university-based supports they were provided. The support most often mentioned by students who held a master's degree in Educational Leadership was help from instructors and advisors. Two-thirds of the participants who did not hold the leadership degree shared that instructors and advisors were their biggest university-based support.

A specialist with a non-Educational Leadership degree shared that he considered dropping out during his first term, but his professors convinced him to stay. A principal participant with a master's degree in a non-education field discussed her professors' effective organization skills: "each has a way of doing things, but everyone is easy to follow regarding organizational skills." A participant who was a teacher with a degree in a non-Educational Leadership field shared that the best supports of the doctoral program were the positive encouragement of professors and professors' prompt responses.

Five of the 75 participants who had Educational Leadership degrees stated that they were assisted by no university-based supports, compared with one non-Educational Leadership master's degree participant who felt similarly. Even though these numbers are low, they are disconcerting. Three participants who had earned an Educational Leadership degree shared that course colleagues were supportive; three non-Educational Leadership degree recipients felt likewise. "My cohort has created a Facebook group and we communicate through that," shared a teacher participant with a degree in Educational Leadership.

Five participants who had earned an Educational Leadership degree shared that communication from university office personnel was helpful. A principal participant with a degree in Educational Leadership stated, "The university support for the program has been wonderful. I have only needed assistance once, and the time spent resolving the issue was standard. The issue was resolved and the outcome positive."

Although almost all of the participants were complimentary of their professors overall, several shared areas in need of improvement. A school district director participant with a degree in Educational Leadership noted that the program helped him grow, but said that he experienced frustration with inconsistencies in information. A teacher participant with a non-Educational Leadership master's degree shared that many professors acted like that their class was the only one that participants were taking, "thereby making the workload cumbersome."

Personal Supports

Participants shared that they were grateful to have family members and co-workers who provided supports that resulted in time for them to pursue doctoral studies, however many shared that they were conflicted by guilt for not fulfilling their perceived responsibilities. Participants shared that they were supported most by spouses or significant others, followed by children, parents, co-workers, and friends. They cited home responsibilities as the area in which they received the most assistance, followed by childcare, errands, and financial obligations.

Challenges shared by a specialist with a degree in Educational Leadership included finding time to complete assignments and struggles with family illness. An administrator participant with a non-Educational Leadership degree said that she felt overwhelmed by the combination of work, two small children, a husband who worked out of town, and the doctoral program requirements.

Challenges

Participants shared that they sought an online, concentrated program but that when their program began they missed the face-to-face interactions of a traditional program. A school district director participant with a non-Educational Leadership degree expressed frustration over the inability to speak with instructors. He stated that emails were not as helpful as face-to-face communication. A principal participant with a master's degree in Educational Leadership reported that he had contemplated changing to a traditional program and taking one class at a time because he did not feel like he was learning the material at the mastery level that his grades reflected. A principal participant with a degree in Educational Leadership said that she considered leaving the program weekly, due to course workload.

Struggles shared by a school district director participant with a degree in a non-Educational Leadership field centered on availability. The participant stated that it was difficult to get questions answered at a time when he was working on classes because it was after business hours and the university was closed. A principal participant with a degree in Educational Leadership said she struggled with not having enough time to read assignments as thoroughly as she would like. Another principal participant with the same degree expressed difficulty with working full-time and pursing the doctoral program.

Five participants with degrees in Educational Leadership said that they wanted more face-to-face time with instructors. Several participants with master's degrees in other fields discussed a need for additional information about professor expectations and requested face-to-face time with instructors. An assistant principal participant who had earned a master's degree in Educational Leadership shared,

> A few professors have been extremely supportive and helpful. Others have been nit-picky, demanding, and unforgiving of the working professionals they are teaching. I wonder if they forget some of their students run entire districts and may not be able to post a discussion board response to a hypothetical situation they have already actually dealt with during a hectic week.

A principal participant with a degree in Educational Leadership requested more guidance from her advisor. She stated, "He is always available when I ask questions, but I don't feel like the staff knows me individually, as I did during my undergraduate and master's work."

Attrition Contemplations

Participants were asked about their thoughts on staying in or exiting their doctoral program. Twenty of the participants with a degree in Educational Leadership shared that they never had contemplated exiting the program. Of those 25 participants who had considered exiting, 14 cited lack of time and workload as issues. Four shared problems with professor communication and assistance.

Similarly, half of the participants with degrees in non-Educational Leadership fields shared that they had never considered exiting the program. Six participants who considered leaving the program cited issues with time and workload; another 5 shared issues with professor communication and assistance. A teacher participant with a master's degree in education stated,

> I have not considered leaving the doctoral program; however, it has been extremely challenging journey (sic). The amount of reading, researching, and time committed to completing my assignments always seem to overwhelm me on a weekly basis. This stress added to my home responsibilities of raising [children], cooking, cleaning, sports/cub scouts, and work. . .all add to the stress I battle everyday.

Family and work obligations were cited as factors that led to participants' consideration of dropping out of the program. A specialist with a non-Educational Leadership degree shared that dropping out was contemplated, "Only during the first 7 weeks. The pace and workload was intense and I was not sure I could do it. Thank goodness I had professors that said, 'Hang in there!'"

Those who stated that they had not considered dropping out were adamant in their declarations. "I am doing this for me and I am worth it," stated a teacher participant with a non-Educational Leadership degree. "I've not considered leaving because I can't stand the thought of quitting. I have wondered if the stress is worth it," shared a principal participant with a degree in Educational Leadership.

Eighteen of the 37 administrator participants shared that they had never considering leaving the doctoral program prior to graduation. Of the 19 who had contemplated quitting, 14 shared that time and workload issues came into play. Four shared issues with professor communication and assistance and one noted general stress issues. Of the 25 participants who did not serve in school administration positions, 17 had never considered quitting. Just like the group of administrators, the group of individuals not serving in administrative roles who considered quitting cited problems with time and workload (6) and professor communication and assistance (4). Two members of the group shared challenges they had faced with registration.

Discussion

The participants shared that they chose to pursue an online program due to the program's flexibility. The students were expected to take actives roles in their learning such as communicating needs to professors, planning their time appropriately, choosing a dissertation advisor, and deciding on the pace at which to take courses; such active roles are characteristic of the theory of andragogy (Baird & Fisher, 2005/2006).

Participants in the study were expected to enter their doctoral program with background knowledge from their previous employment and education experiences. During recruitment, the experience and degree in the field requirements were lifted for some student cohort groups, therefore several individuals did not have such past experiences. Therefore, due to a possible lack of prior content knowledge and in order to fill the gaps in the experience that they lacked, students with fewer life and educational experiences may have had to take a more active role in their learning than other students who had life and educational experiences that related to the learning.

The essence of the participants' experiences centered on support from others. While most of the participants indicated that they were pleased with the support that they received, others craved additional support. Participants' most prevalent perceived university support centered on assistance from instructors and advisors. They requested additional communication with faculty and increased familial and work support; ironically, multiple students mentioned the lack of face-to-face instruction in the online program.

Most of the students pursuing online doctoral degrees in the Educational Leadership Program sought the degree in order to move up in school administration or to pursue higher education teaching. Participants shared that the program's online format fit their work and family schedules and required less travel than traditional programs. Singleton and Session (2011) posited that students "pursuing nontraditional doctoral degrees are older working professionals looking for flexible education options. These students are actively engaged in their family and work life, so they seek nontraditional doctoral programs that are tailored to meet their individual education needs" (p. 37). Jones et al. (2011) wrote, "The asynchronous nature of many online courses enables students to attend and participate in their courses at their convenience subject to the needs of their individual schedule" (p. 14).

The needs of working learners impact the workload of the faculty. Singleton and Session (2011) posited, "Unlike traditional doctoral students, nontraditional students are balancing several responsibilities besides education that challenge faculty to adapt to the changing demands of this emerging student body and require authentic interaction" (p. 37).

The most prevalent theme of university support discussed by all of the participants was support from instructors and advisors. The participants perceived that spouses and significant others provided the most personal support, followed by children, parents, and friends. According to Hart (2012), the presence of family support can increase persistence while lack of it can decrease student persistence.

Five of the participants who held an Educational Leadership degree were assisted by no university-based supports; one student without the leadership degree felt like none of the supports offered to them were helpful. Cohort colleagues also were cited as helpful. Five

participants who had earned Educational Leadership degrees shared that they received assistance from communications with university office personnel.

A lack of time was the greatest challenge for the participants, followed by face-to-face time with instructors. Participants who had not earned an Educational Leadership degree needed additional information pertaining to professor expectations. Faculty members need to share expectations pertaining to the extent that the learning will require self-regulation (Gomez, 2013).

Approximately half of the participants in each degree group never considered leaving the doctoral program. Of those who did, time, workload, and professor communication and assistance were driving forces. Almost half of the school administrator participants had not considered quitting; those who did cited issues with time and workload, professor communication and assistance, and general stress.

Just over two-thirds of the participants not working in school leadership positions had never considered quitting the program; those who had contemplated exiting cited time and workload, professor communication and assistance, general stress issues, and registration struggles as factors. According to Jones et al. (2011),

> doctoral programs are designed to produce competent future members of the academic community. Students are viewed as both future colleagues and as skilled professionals. Therefore, there is a need to develop a strong sense of community that facilitates communications, higher order thinking and strong levels of interaction between faculty and students. (p. 15)

> It was surprising that, proportionally, more participants serving in school administration roles considered leaving the program than did participants not serving as school leaders, but the difference was only slightly more. The work time required of the individuals in school administration positions may have affected this number.

Lack of empathy in relation to professors not taking participants' work and family schedules into account also emerged as a theme. In traditional courses, professors regularly see students in-person and can check the climate of the class and make adjustments, something that may have to be done in a non-traditional manner when courses are online. In doing so, professors may check the climate of the class and make adjustments, something that may be more difficult to do in online courses. The concerns about work and personal life were described by a central office administration with an Educational Leadership background who shared challenges with professors: "Teaching to the multiple learning styles and understanding that we have jobs while we are taking these courses."

A teacher participant with a non-Educational Leadership background shared concern about whether instructors would show empathy:

> I would love to finish the program in a reasonable amount of time, but I must confess that I've considered leaving the doctoral program when my books did not arrive in time for my first few assignments, when my internet is not working properly or not working at all, which hinders me from meeting my responsibilities in a timely manner and uncertainties flare as to whether the professor will understand or not.

Another teacher participant with a non-Educational Leadership master's degree shared, "professors may believe their class is the only one, thereby making the workload cumbersome."

An administrator participant with a non-Educational Leadership degree stated that the combination of "Working 40-50 hours a week, two small children. . .a husband who works out of town 40% of the week, and a doctoral program is overwhelming at times."

Implications for Practice

University professors need strategies to provide assistance to students in order to help to decrease the number of students who fail to progress in online programs. Faculty members need to be encouraged to communicate often with online students and to be provided with the technological tools necessary to facilitate the communication (Vai & Sosulski, 2015). It is important that faculty support students, but just as important that universities provide time, opportunities, and resources for such support to occur (Radda, 2012).

Communication should be encouraged among students and between students and faculty to develop relationships and increase students' sense of belonging. In their study of an online program, Aversa and MacCall (2013) found that cohorts of students were "encouraged to develop identities through activities such as developing their group's preferred method of networking and engaging in activities that set them apart from other cohorts" (p. 151).

A face-to-face orientation held before students begin a program can provide a forum in which faculty can advise new students to prepare their families, places of work, and finances for the time commitment of doctoral studies. Regardless of presentation format, students need information about program expectations and timelines. Students should be encouraged to follow benchmarks toward program completion and consider issues that may occur if they change employment positions during their program.

Writing requirements and assignment expectations should be discussed and writing style expectations should be shared. Students who are identified as lacking writing skills need intense intervention (if allowed to proceed). Follow-up discussion sessions need to be scheduled in advance, with additional optional sessions scheduled for students who need more assistance.

Special communication may be necessary for students such as the two participants who indicated that no individuals in their personal lives had provided support and no university-based supports had been assistive. Perhaps the two students were not in need of supports, but opportunities for communication should be offered in case the students have needs they wish to share with which the university may be able to assist.

University administrators should recognize the time required for instruction of doctoral students in online programs. Faculty should not be overloaded with service, courses, and advisees, thus freeing up time for more frequent interactions with online students. A staff member should be assigned to respond to student questions regarding registration and other non-advisement inquiries.

Recommendations for Further Research

Additional reasons for student persistence and attrition need to be examined. Students need to be asked about the demands of their jobs, whether they changed jobs during their degree programs, and whether family commitments or financial obligations were altered during the pursuit of their degree. Several participants mentioned professors not believing that they were ill or hospitalized. It is recommended that an exploration of the responses for late and missing

assignments of online students be explored to determine if the validity of students' excuses changes when students in online courses are unable to look professors in the eyes and their explain reasons for absence or tardiness.

Another question that needs exploration is whether professors of online students feel free to share with students their opinions about the students' abilities. A specialist with a degree in Educational Leadership shared,

> This semester. . . .The professor was very harsh in her response and she actually suggested that I quit the class. This email response took a toll on me for some time but now I am not considering this as a solution.

Shared a teacher participant with an Educational Leadership background,

> I work full time and sometimes my school duties such as grades being due, night programs, and meetings all seem to happen when there is too much work due for the courses. . . .I am tired of all of the reflection papers that I have to write. I write so much that I don't have time to keep working on my literature review.

This begs the question of whether or not professors feel comfortable sharing with a student that perhaps it is not a good time for the student to be enrolled in a doctoral program.

Conclusion

Although many participants cited time and workload challenges, the program in which the participants were enrolled initially was marketed as a 2.5-year doctoral program during which time students would take up to four courses per semester. The workload requirements should not have been surprising to students; however, some students reported that they feel overwhelmed. As many participants expressed concern about assignments required for courses, an area of discussion among professors of online programs might be techniques for assisting prospective students determine whether their current career stage is conducive to the addition of doctoral study.

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