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Although recruitment has always been vital to sustained university admissions, it is true perhaps now more than ever as traditional public university programs face fierce competition for students from digitally-delivered and for-profit programs. Competition is fierce at every level of higher education, including the doctoral level. As competition has increased, so have the number of universities offering doctoral degrees (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2013). In 2011, Texas ranked fourth behind California, Florida, and North Carolina in the number of doctoral degrees granted in the United States. Furthermore, the number of doctoral degrees conferred in Texas grew from 8,959 in 2008 to 9,705 in 2011(DOE, 2013) – a similar trend to most states across the nation that year. Of those, Texas has 26 public and private institutions – not including online universities - granting doctoral degrees in Educational Leadership (DOE, 2013). With the increase in traditional, online, and for-profit doctoral programs in Texas, existing programs may need to reevaluate efforts to stay competitive to survive in the current climate.

Doctoral Program Design: A Marketing Factor

The doctoral degree serves as the apex of the educational system. Recruiting components and factors vary with this degree. Just as institutions transform to meet learner needs, program planning and recruitment can be designed based on students' preferences (Stevens-Huffman, 2006) and possibly improve recruiting efforts as a result. A multitude of factors drive program selection including personal factors relative to the balance of family, work, and study; logistical factors of cost, financial aid, location, admission requirements, learning environment; and program design factors like focus, length, and

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delivery (Kanyi, 2009). Nevertheless, research has found the major factor contributing to program selection to be the reason a student chose to pursue a doctorate. Studies have found the reasons students pursue the doctorate to include a key life goal, a tool for career advancement, or a natural step in students' intellectual and educational journey. Interestingly, education professionals have been more likely than other professionals to view the doctorate as an opportunity to expand their career beyond their current profession.

Another factor that has been found to drive program selection is program design and quality. The National Research Council (NRC, 2009) attributed program quality to the scholarly activity of doctoral faculty. On the other hand, the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS, n.d.) found that PhD students and alumni associated graduate program quality with program dimensions such as time-to-degree. One program design feature found to decrease to time-to-degree included a cohort design. When surveyed, Texas public school administrators indicated that cohort-based programs had shorter time-to-degrees than traditional doctoral program designs (Tierce, 2008). Other factors that have been shown to impact time-to-degree are degree type and dissertation research format. Qualitative research formats have resulted in shorter time-to-degree for EdD students but not for PhD students, while the opposite was true for quantitative research formats (Tierce, 2008). Other studies have shown a decrease in time-to-degree when some of the challenges faced by doctoral students are alleviated (West, Gokalp, Edlyn, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011; Boyle Single, 2010). Mullen & Fish (2010) noted mentoring as a possible tool to foster relationships between faculty and students, to increase engagement in scholarship and research, and to facilitate peer support. The mentorship can be extended at the peer level partnering new doctoral students with veteran students to create Personal Learning Network (PLN), which could also increase the quality of doctoral program design (Crosslin, Wakefield, Bennette, & Black, 2013).

Cited studies have investigated influential factors for doctoral programs in particular fields or generally across fields. The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that had the greatest influence on students' selections of Educational Leadership doctoral programs in particular. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions: What factors influenced doctoral-level students' decisions to attend particular Educational Leadership programs? And, did the factors differ by students' age, ethnicity, and gender?

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of current doctoral-level students from Educational Leadership programs at three public regional universities in the southwest United States were recruited for participation in the study ($N=41$, $M_{age}=39.34$, $SD_{age}=8.70$, age range:

59

26-54 years, 68% female); participants volunteered to participate or not. Participants self-identified with the following ethnicities: Hispanic/Latino/Chicano (2%), Native American/Pacific Islander (2%), African American/Black (24%), Asian (2%), and Caucasian/White (68%).

Procedure

Study recruits were provided information about the study - including the potential risks and benefits of participating - before being asked to complete an online survey. By completing the survey, the recruits indicated their informed consent to participate in the study. In the survey, participants were asked to retrospectively identify factors that influenced their decision to attend their current Educational Leadership doctoral program. The online survey used branching logic to seek additional information from participants concerning factors that they identified as impactful of their program choice. For the sake of brevity, we did not include a copy of the survey in this article, but a copy is available from the authors upon request.

Analyses

Participants' responses were analyzed descriptively in aggregate as well as disaggregated by gender and age. Because the sample was largely comprised of Caucasian respondents, there was not enough variability to disaggregate the results by ethnicity. Data from the open-ended responses were analyzed thematically.

Results

Participants were asked to identify factors that influenced their choice to attend their current Educational Leadership doctoral program from a prepopulated list. The list also included an open-ended comments box for the participant to indicate a factor(s) that was not included in the prepopulated list, if needed. Figure 1 presents the factors that were identified by participants (*N*=41). The top three factors were convenience, delivery of coursework, and tuition cost. Convenience was cited by the greatest number of participants (72%) as influential of their program selection. Delivery of coursework and tuition cost ranked a close second with 63% of participants selecting each. Interestingly, while tuition cost was identified by almost two-thirds of the participants as influential, the availability of financial aid and scholarships was identified by only 14% of participants as influential, pointing to the notion that students may want to pay less overall but perhaps not by seeking financial aid or scholarships.

60

Figure 1. Factors identified by participants as influential in the selection of their current Educational Leadership doctoral program (*N*=41). Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will add to greater than 100%.
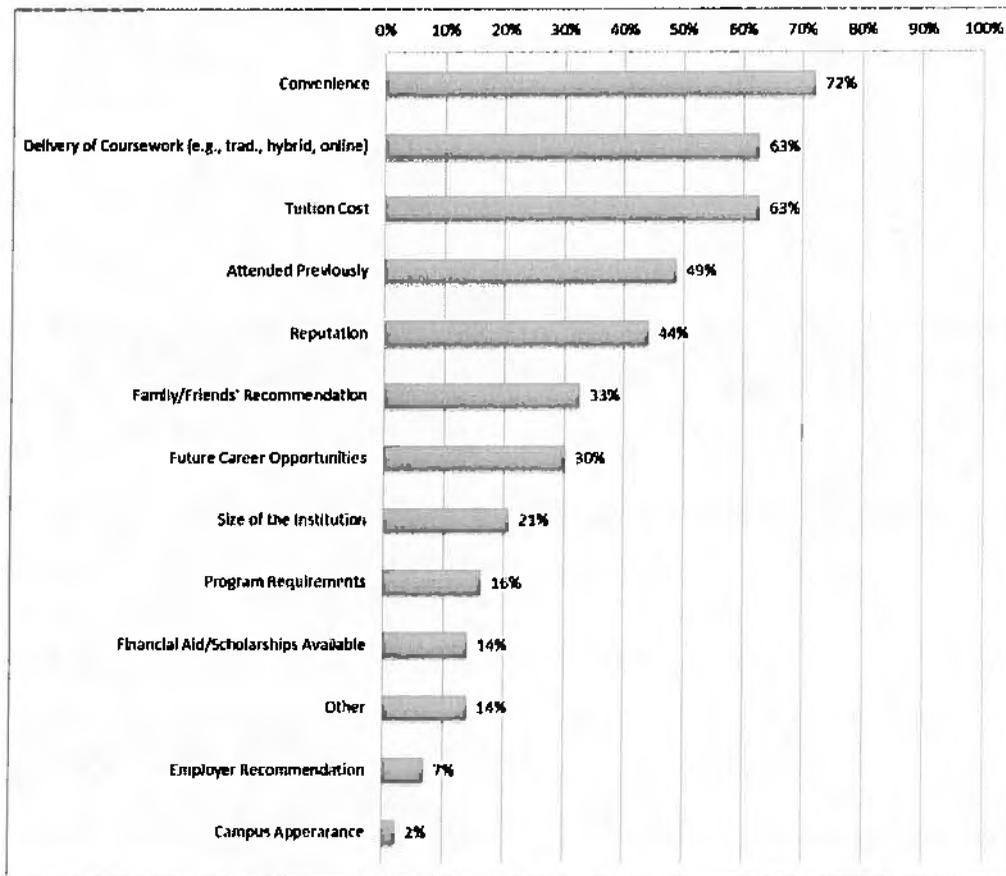

Figure 2 presents the factors that participants identified as influential of their program choice by gender. Note that there were approximately twice as many female respondents as male respondents, which could bias the results. Percentages for females were calculated as the number of female respondents who selected a particular factor divided by the total number of female respondents; percentages for males were calculated using the same method, but for the male respondents. The results are interesting regardless, but perhaps limited in their generalizability because of the lack of diversity of the sample. Top factors for females were convenience (86%), delivery of coursework (75%), and tuition cost (68%). In contrast, just 46% and 38% of males identified convenience and delivery of coursework as influential factors, respectively. Males' selections tended to be more disparate than females'. For example, the top two factors identified by male respondents were tuition cost and reputation, but they were each identified by only approximately half of male respondents (54% each). Fifty-four percent of females also ranked tuition cost as influential, but only 39% ranked reputation as an influential factor. Ranking third and fourth for males were convenience and the fact that they had attended

61

the university previously (46% for each). Many females (86%) were likewise influenced by the convenience of a program, and 46% of females also identified previous attendance as an influential factor. The results indicate that males tended to be more varied in the factors that influenced their decision to attend a particular Educational Leadership doctoral program while females were more congruent on particular factors. Furthermore, the results suggest that females and males were influenced by different factors, with the exception of convenience, tuition cost, and previous attendance that were shared as top factors among females and males.

The top factors shared by females and males – convenience, tuition cost, and previous attendance – will be further explored in the following sections. Because delivery of coursework was identified by 63% of respondents as influential, the majority of those being female, it too will be explored further.

Figure 2. Factors identified by participants as influential in the selection of their current Educational Leadership doctoral program by gender (*N*=41). Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will add to greater than 100%.
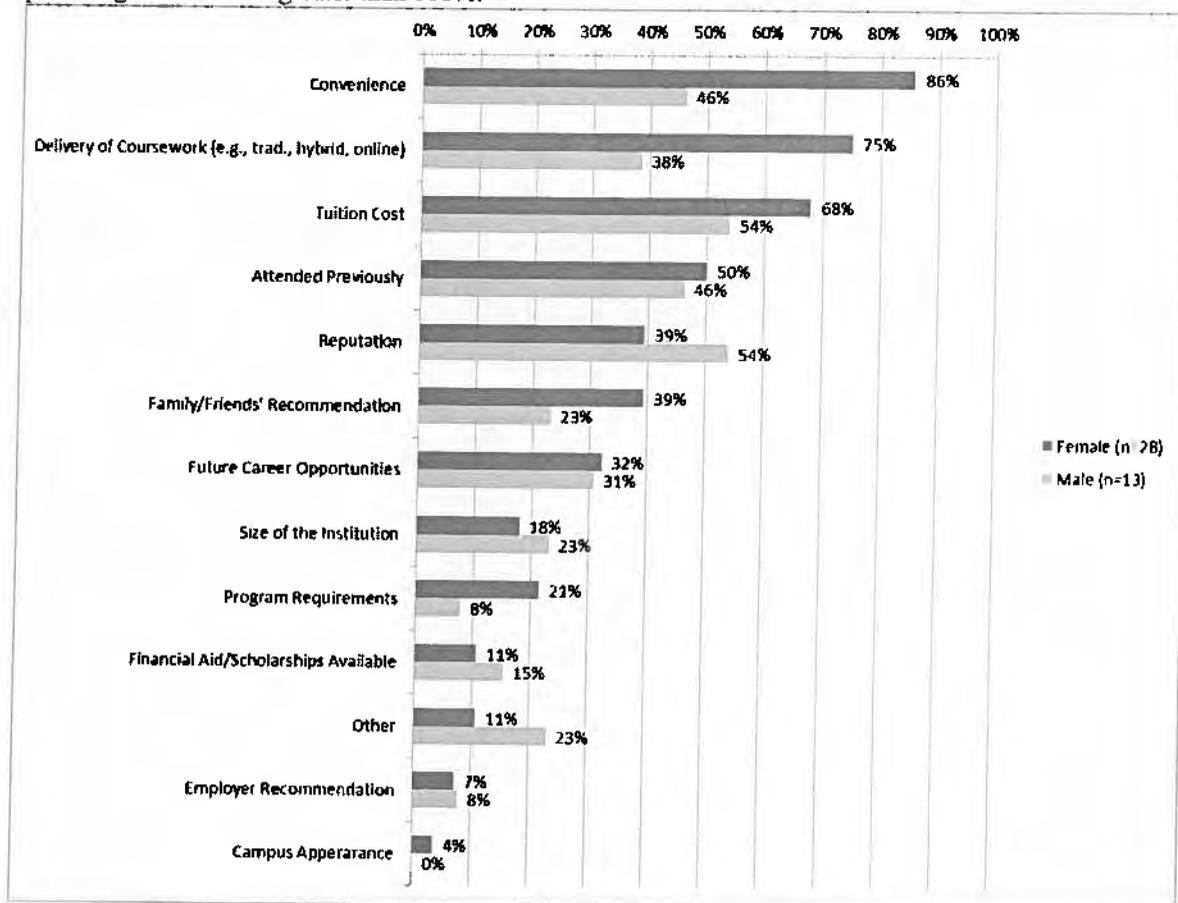
Convenience

Respondents who selected convenience as a factor were asked to further explicate what aspects of convenience affected their decision to attend their current Educational Leadership doctoral program. Figure 3 presents the results. The majority of respondents cited proximity to work and home as influential in their decision to attend (53% and 74%, respectively). Forty-four percent of respondents indicated that the convenience of course scheduling was influential in their decision to attend a particular program.

Figure 3. Aspects of convenience that participants (*n*=31) identified as affecting their decision to attend their current program. Participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will sum to greater than 100%.
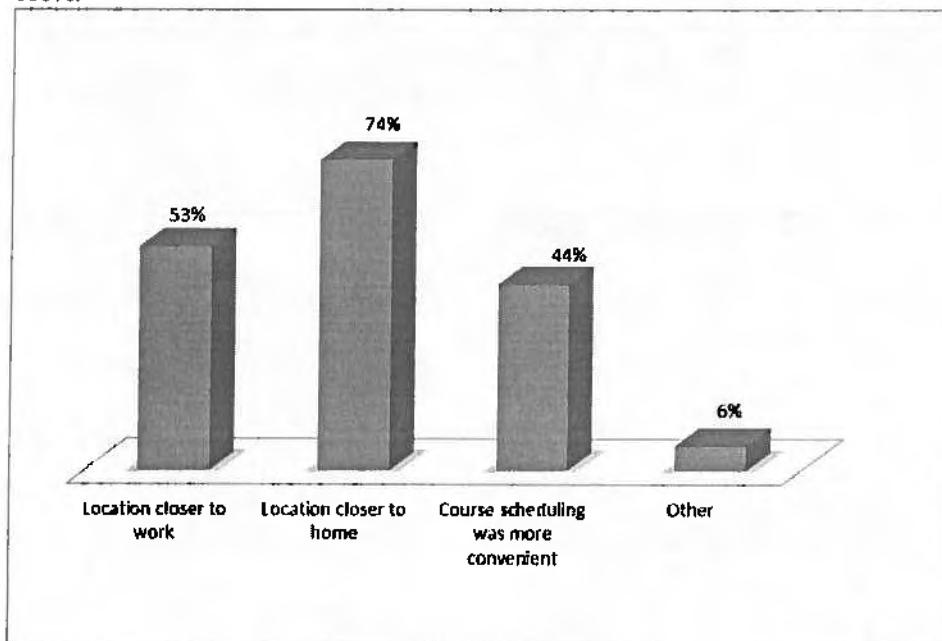
When disaggregated by gender (see Figure 4 for results), results indicated that females and males differed in the particular type of convenience that was influential in their choice of program. The majority of females indicated that proximity to work and/or home were important factors (50% and 68%, respectively). In contrast, only 31 % and 38% of males, respectively, cited physical proximity to work and/or home as influential. The convenience of course scheduling was identified by 43% of females as influential, but by only 23% of males. Overall, more females appeared to be influenced by the convenience offered by a particular program whether based on physical proximity or course scheduling, which is not surprising given the fact that 86% of females initially identified convenience as influential.

Figure 4. Aspects of convenience that participants identified as affecting their decision to attend their current program by gender. Percentages for females were calculated as the number of female respondents who selected a particular aspect of convenience divided by the total number of female respondents; percentages for males were calculated using the same method, but for the male respondents. Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will sum to greater than 100%.
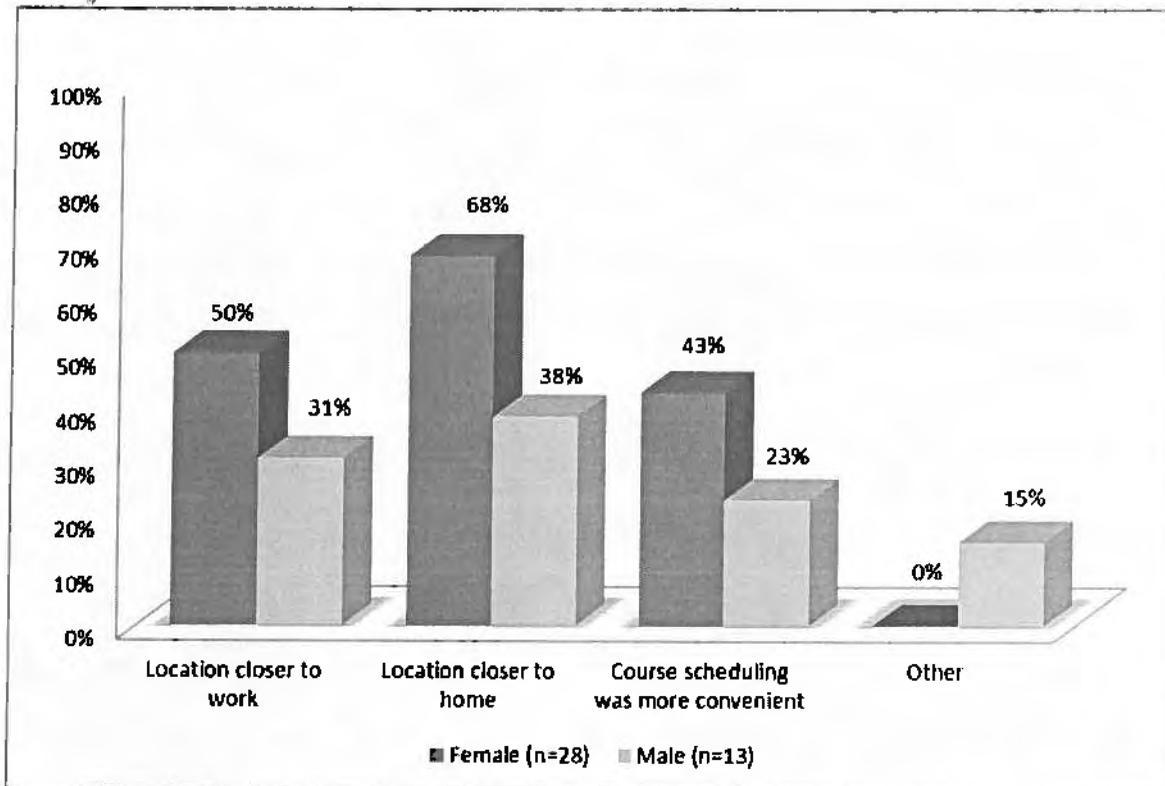
Majorities of respondents in the 20-29 age range indicated that the physical proximity to work and home (67% and 67%, respectively) was influential in their choice of program. In fact, the physical proximity to work and home influenced a larger percentage of 20-29 year olds' choices than it did for any of the other age groups (age 30-39: 47% and 47%, respectively; age 40-49: 40% and 60%, respectively; age 50-59: 29% and 57%, respectively). For those aged 40-49 and 50-59, physical proximity to home (60% and 57%, respectively) was influential to a higher percentage of respondents than physical proximity to work (40% and 29%, respectively).

Fewer (50%) respondents in the 20-29 age group indicated that the convenience of course scheduling was impactful of their program choice. As with the physical proximity, even fewer respondents in the 30-39, 40-49, and 50-59 age groups indicated that the convenience related to course scheduling was impactful of their decision to attend their current program (33%, 20%, and 29%, respectively). Overall, the physical proximity to home overshadowed the convenience of course scheduling in the percentage of respondents that it impacted for all age groups.

64

Figure 5. Aspects of convenience that participants identified as affecting their decision to attend their current program by age category. Percentages for each age group were calculated as the number of respondents in the age group who selected a particular aspect of convenience divided by the total number of respondents in that age group. Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will sum to greater than 100%.
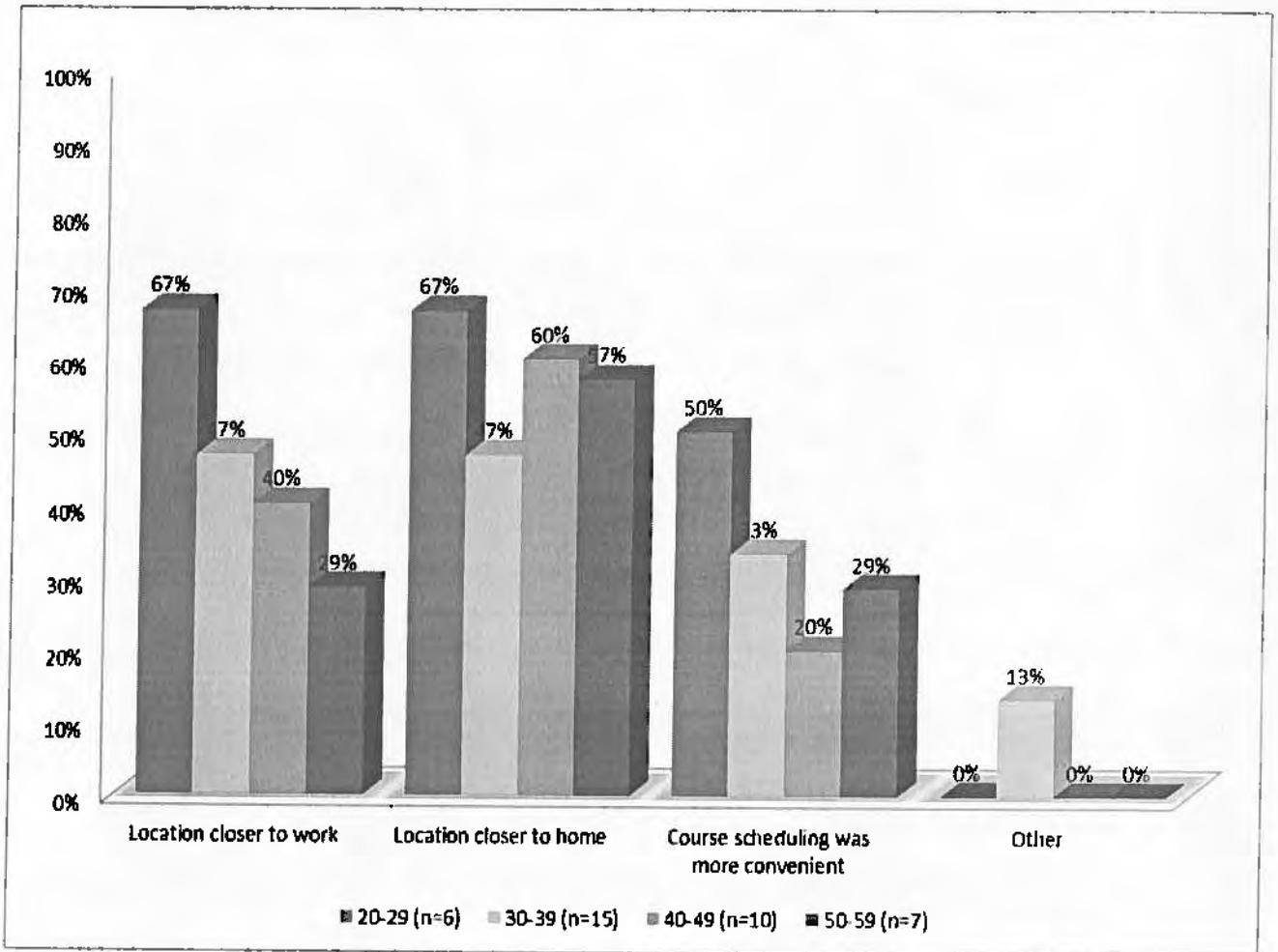
Tuition Cost

Participants who selected tuition cost as a factor were asked to explain further the aspects of tuition cost that affected their decision to attend their particular Educational Leadership program via open-ended responses. Of the 25 total open-ended responses, 19 (76%) explicitly mentioned that the program they chose was more affordable, several (16%) citing their program as having the same credibility and quality as programs with higher tuition costs. Note that simply by choosing tuition cost as a factor, however, participants likely were intimating that they desired a more affordable program rather than more costly. Of the 25 respondents, one (4%) respondent indicated that he or she

65

had received a full scholarship that influenced his or her decision to attend a particular program. The variability of responses was not great enough to warrant disaggregation by gender or age.

Previous Attendance

Participants who indicated that their previous attendance influenced their decision to attend a particular program were asked to indicate the institutional unit that they had attended previously (university, college, or department) and what degree they had completed. Responses were not varied enough to warrant disaggregation by gender or age. Of the 20 participants who indicated which unit he or she had attended previously, just six participants (30%) had attended the same department within the same university; the remaining 70% had previously attended a different department within the university.

The majority of participants (75% of n=21) who perceived previous attendance as influential of their doctoral program choice indicated that they had completed their Master's degree in their previous attendance. Forty-three percent had completed a certification, and only 10% had attended the university previously to complete a Bachelor's degree. Some participants completed multiple certifications or degrees at the same institution.

Delivery of Coursework

Participants who selected delivery of coursework as influential in their program selection (n=27) were asked to identify specific aspects of course delivery that were influential. Figure 6 presents the results. Over half of the participants (56%) who selected delivery of coursework as influential said that they wanted a mixture of online and face-to-face coursework. Fewer (37%) said that they wanted more face-to-face coursework, but that percentage was still greater than the percentage that wanted more online coursework (15%). From the results, it appears that, in general, more doctoral students leaned toward wanting a mixture of face-to-face and online course delivery rather than just additional online coursework.

Figure 6. Aspects of delivery of coursework that participants (*n*=27) identified as influential in their decision to attend a particular doctoral program in Educational Leadership. Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will sum to greater than 100%.
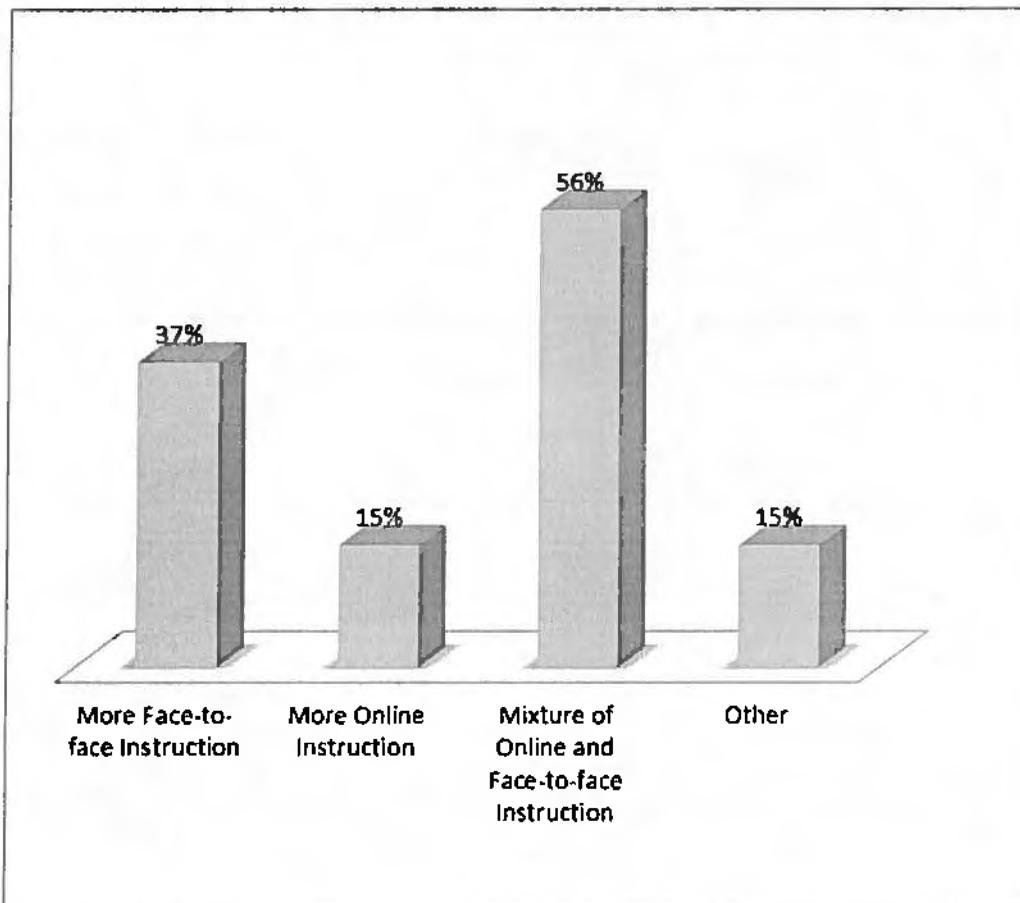
The data were also analyzed by gender; Figure 7 presents the results. The majority of males selected more face-to-face instruction as desirable (83%), with fewer selecting a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction (33%) and even fewer selecting completely online instruction (17%). The majority of females (67%), on the other hand, chose a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction as desirable, with more face-to-face instruction noted by much fewer female participants (29%). While the majorities of males and females selected different course delivery types as desirable, participants of both genders seemed to agree that more online instruction was not as desirable as either a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction or simply more face-to-face, as low percentages of both genders selected more online instruction (14% of females, 17% of males).

67

Figure 7. Aspects of delivery of coursework that participants (*n*=27) identified as influential in their decision to attend a particular doctoral program in Educational Leadership by gender. Percentages for females were calculated as the number of female respondents who selected a particular aspect of convenience divided by the total number of female respondents; percentages for males were calculated using the same method, but for the male respondents. Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will sum to greater than 100%.
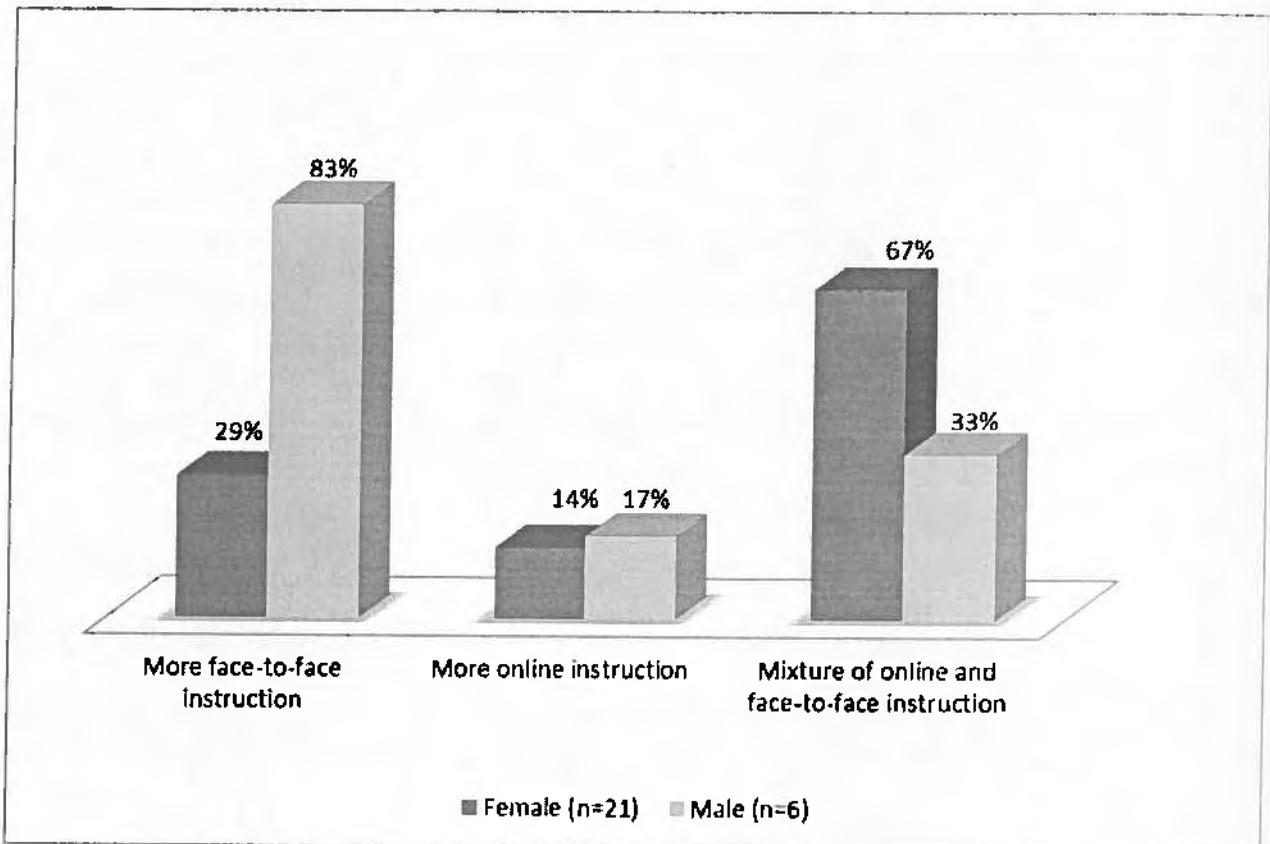

The course delivery data were disaggregated by age; Figure 8 presents the results. The majority of participants in the 20-29 age category (83%) selected a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction as desirable followed second by more online instruction (50%), and fewer noting more face-to-face instruction (33%) as desirable. Roughly similar percentages of participants in the 30-39 category selected each type – more face-to-face instruction (56%), more online instruction (44%), and mixture of online and face-to-face instruction (44%). Interestingly, no participants in the 30-39 category selected more online instruction as desirable; the same was true for participants in the 40-49 and 50-59 age groups. Fifty percent of participants in the 40-49 age group chose more face-to-face instruction, and 50% chose a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction. The majority of participants in the 50-59 age group chose a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction (67%) as desirable followed by more face-to-face instruction (33%). Overall, across the age groups, most participants seemed to desire at least some face-to-face

68

instruction, with a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction as a desirable option in most cases. Participants in the 20-29 age group proved to be the only exception, with most indicating the desire for more online instruction.

Discussion

Doctoral students are particular when it comes to choosing an academic program in Educational Leadership. The results of the current study suggest that the majority of students weigh the following factors above others when choosing a doctoral program: (a) convenience, (b) tuition cost, (c) whether they attended previously, and (d) delivery of coursework although the results varied somewhat when disaggregated by age and gender.

Figure 8. Aspects of delivery of coursework that participants (*n*=27) identified as influential in their decision to attend a particular doctoral program in Educational Leadership by age. Percentages for each age category were calculated as the number in the particular category who selected a particular aspect of convenience divided by the total number of female respondents; percentages for males were calculated using the same method, but for the male respondents. Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will sum to greater than 100%.
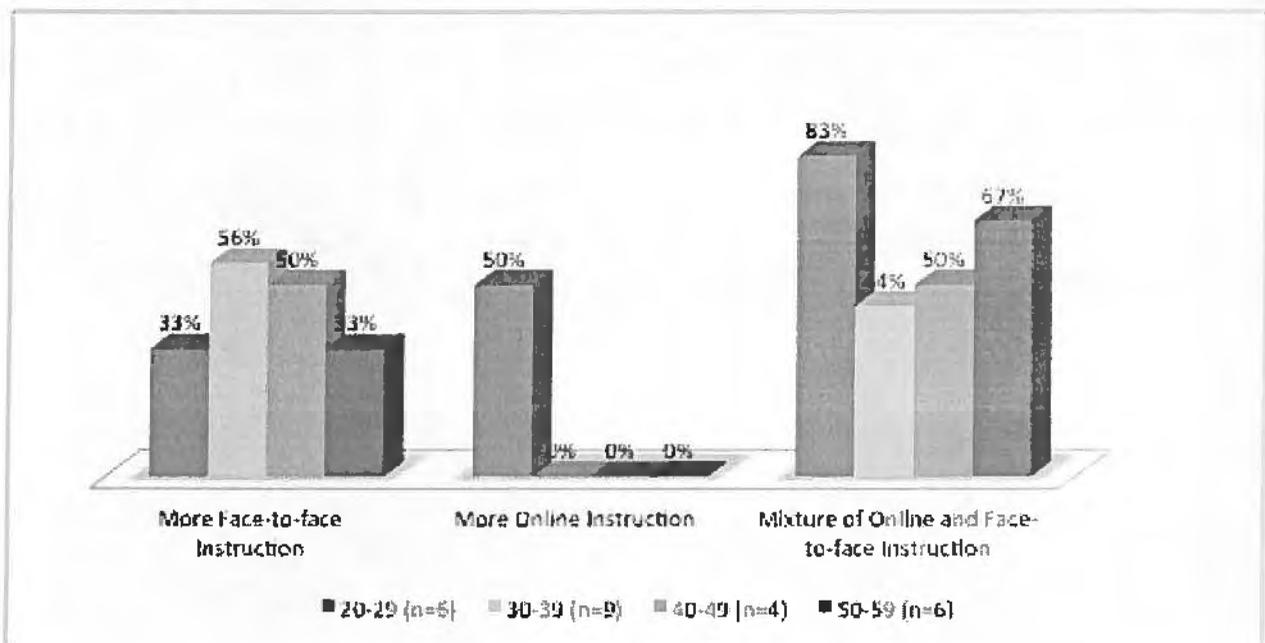
Convenience

The majority of doctoral students indicated that they chose Educational Leadership programs that were close to their homes, with some looking for programs that were close to their places of work. The majority of females were particularly concerned about the location of their doctoral program being closer to home. Physical proximity to work was important to some students, but was still second to proximity of the program to home.

69

The convenience of course scheduling was less of a concern for all gender and age groups.

Tuition Cost

As might be expected, many students looked for a more affordable doctoral program that maintained strong credibility and reputation. Few reported that they had earned a scholarship to cover their expenses, leading to the conclusion that most Educational Leadership doctoral students likely covered the costs of their doctoral education out of pocket or via financial aid opportunities other than scholarships.

Previous Attendance

Previous attendance at a university appeared to influence the choices of some doctoral students. Most that indicated that they had previously attended a university had received their Master's degree or completed a certification. From the results, it appears as if, in many cases, students' familiarity with particular universities factored into their decisions to return for their doctoral degree.

Delivery of Coursework

The results indicated that most students desired a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction with an emphasis on more face-to-face instruction rather than more online. The one exception fell with the 20-29 year old participants; the majority indicated a desire for more online coursework. Because doctoral programs typically target students with work and life experiences, the targeted students are more likely to be older in age. When the results of the 30+ year-old participants were considered, the overwhelming choice was a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction.

Implications for Practice

Results of this study may be used by Educational Leadership program faculty and administrative staff to determine how best to market their programs and recruit students. Program coordinators would be wise to recruit students within close proximity to the university area as the convenience of physical proximity appears to matter to Educational Leadership doctoral students. While many programs lack direct control over tuition costs, administrators at the university or college-level would also be wise to consider the costs of program tuition. Students indicated that they are looking for strong, credible programs, but ones that are affordable as well.

Given the results, it appears that students who have previously attended a university may be apt to return given the right circumstances. If they are so inclined, doctoral-level coordinators should act on that knowledge and seek strong students that previously completed Master's degrees or certifications at their university.

70

Finally, the results suggest that students are concerned about the delivery of coursework. The majority of students over the age of 30 desire a mixture of online and face-to-face learning opportunities. This is an interesting point given the fact that many doctoral programs – and programs in general – have moved coursework entirely online. Results of this study indicated that doctoral students may instead want an experience with more face-to-face coursework. It should be noted, however, that participants in this study were all current doctoral students in programs for which coursework was not delivered entirely online. The results could be somewhat biased as a result. Coordinators should take that fact into consideration when making decisions regarding the delivery of coursework in Educational Leadership doctoral programs.

As always, doctoral program coordinators and faculty admissions committees must carefully balance the need to recruit students with standards for retaining quality students. If effective marketing and recruiting strategies are put into place, a more qualified pool of applicants may result from which a stronger set of doctoral students can be selected for admission. In the process, more effective recruiting practices could either grow the enrollments of programs and/or strengthen their reputations by increasing the quality of doctoral candidates that are admitted.

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