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ABSTRACT

LATE COMPLETERS: HOW AND WHY NON-TRADITIONAL  
GRADUATE STUDENTS WHO EXCEED PROGRAM  
TIMELINES OF 10 YEARS ULTIMATELY  
COMPLETE THE DOCTORAL PROCESS

by

Lisa Ann Margerum

Chair: Shirley A. Freed

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

School of Education

Title: LATE COMPLETERS: HOW AND WHY NON-TRADITIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS WHO EXCEED PROGRAM TIMELINES OF 10 YEARS ULTIMATELY COMPLETE THE DOCTORAL PROCESS

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Date completed: June 2014

### Problem

Doctoral completion rates within the U.S. have historically been shown to be within the 50-60% range; in 2008, the completion rate was 56%. Although most who complete their doctorates do so within 10 years or less, there is a small percentage of students who continue their studies beyond the 10-year mark and ultimately graduate. As more non-traditional students enter the PhD pursuit, particularly older students with full-time jobs, family, and other commitments and who enroll in non-traditional programs, it is important to understand what enables some to continue beyond the 10-year mark and still graduate, what influences the elongation of their journey, and to explore potential ways to decrease their timelines to completion.

## Method

This qualitative case study discusses the experiences of non-traditional students within a non-traditional leadership program who completed their PhDs after the 10-years. The sample was comprised of 12 graduates interviewed about their journeys and perceptions throughout their years of doctoral study. These interviews focused on progressions, reasons for delay, and how they ultimately were able to complete their doctorates. Combined with personal university records and publically accessible university documents, the information was analyzed and combined into themes used to formulate the discussions and conclusions of the study.

## Results

The journeys and experiences of the students were varied within the program, their personal lives and their jobs, but revealed seven themes which were common among their elongated progressions to completion.

The theme of 'personal intentions' revealed that unlike many doctoral students who have external motivations for entering programs, such as career opportunities and economic gains, these graduates had no external reason to pursue the PhD. Instead, they did it for personal growth, using their training to improve their performance on the job or for personal validation at work.

'Flexibility and structure' was a theme that resonated for these non-traditional students. Being fully employed with many other responsibilities, the flexibility of a non-traditional program appealed to them. However, at times, flexibility became ambiguity, which caused difficulties and delays. The blend of structure and flexibility was identified as a need for better progression through the doctoral journey.

The theme of ‘doctorate, job, and life’ showed that for these graduates, unlike many students, the doctorate was not the primary focus for them. Many went into the program knowing the PhD would be secondary to their families, churches, and jobs.

The themes of ‘right advice’, ‘right experience’ and ‘right time’ indicated that, for each graduate, there was a moment when someone or something provided some ‘words of wisdom’ that enabled them to move forward during a difficult phase. Most experienced an event that prompted them to decide it was truly time to complete. The right time was forged through the combination of advice and experiences that enabled them to shift their mind-set from ‘being in a PhD program’ to one of ‘finishing a PhD program’. Most set an artificial deadline in order to finish their doctoral journey.

Lastly, the theme of ‘conviction’ stood out for these graduates. These were individuals who were highly successful in terms of education, job, and in their lives. Based upon their own personal self-efficacy, previous academic and professional successes, and for some a belief that God would also see them through to completion, no one thought that they couldn’t complete the PhD. Despite the elongated time to completion they would not fail.

### Conclusions

Four conclusions emerged as part of the analysis of the study, providing insight into the experiences of these late completers.

The ‘non-traditional paradox’ is an issue for these completers. The people who require a non-traditional program in order to participate in the PhD process can also be the people who are most in need of direction, oversight, and help. Successful people with fully integrated lives who do not ‘need’ the doctorate can easily spend significant

amounts of time not working on their doctorate. Their part-time and non-residency statuses, seeking support from peers who have similar time constraints and external commitments, and limited contact with faculty can make it easier for these students to 'fall off the grid', particularly as their time in the program elongates. Faculty proactively reaching out to these students during periods of non-contact may assist in faster progression.

Having a completion mind-set is vital in the overall completion of the PhD. Once the students changed their focus they maintained the motivation and work effort to complete the PhD. Finding triggers and structure for the individual to move to a completion mind-set more quickly assists in faster progression.

The student's conviction, be it through belief in God's will or personal self-efficacy, was a key component of completion. When needed, they sought support, leaned on the past successes, or mimicked the path of other completers in order to buoy their beliefs in success. Failure was not an option.

Although there were academic issues and external experiences encountered by the students which led to delays, they did not experience barriers the way barriers are largely depicted within the literature. As the PhD was not the primary focus of the students but part of their overall lives, the students chose to focus on the more-important facets of their lives in certain times, whether it was the PhD or other events. Although they experienced long periods of inactivity within the program, none were disenfranchised from the program. When it was the right time to make the PhD the focal point of their lives, they got it done. Finding ways to mitigate the academic issues encountered as well

as maintaining touchpoints with the students during those times when the student is 'off-grid' may help with progression and overall completion.



Andrews University

School of Education

LATE COMPLETERS: HOW AND WHY NON-TRADITIONAL  
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TIMELINES OF 10 YEARS ULTIMATELY  
COMPLETE THE DOCTORAL PROCESS

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Lisa Ann Margerum

June 2014

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABD	All But Dissertation
AU	Andrews University
BLS	Bureau of Labor Statistics
CGS	Council of Graduate Schools
DRU	Doctorate Research University (Carnegie Foundation Classification)
EdD	Doctor of Education
EdS	Education Specialist
ETD	Elapsed Time-to-Degree
GPA	Grade Point Average
GRE	Graduate Record Examination
IDP	Individual Development Plan
LEAD	Leadership Program at Andrews University
MA	Master of Arts
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
RTTD	Registered Time-to-Degree
SSH	Social Sciences and Humanities programs
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics programs
S4/HR	Small, Highly Residential (Carnegie Foundation Classification)
TTD	Total Time-to-Degree



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background to the Problem**

For the thousands of students within the United States who enter doctoral programs, it is logical to assume that most believe they will complete the program and receive their doctoral degrees. There may be many reasons why they enter their chosen program: the desire to teach future students within that field of study; the wish to do research and advance knowledge and innovation within the field; the plan to gain entry to professions in the private or public sector that require PhD credentials; or perhaps the aspiration to provide higher earning potential and ultimately a higher quality of life for themselves and their families.

Students entrust their dreams to the college and universities offering the programs and projects the student desires. The university has a heavy responsibility by accepting that student—they must provide the student an opportunity to participate and succeed in the doctoral education program. Its purpose

is to educate and prepare those to whom we can entrust the vigor, quality, and integrity of the field. This person is a scholar first and foremost, in the fullest sense of the term—someone who will creatively conserve valuable and useful ideas, and responsibly transform those understandings through writing, teaching, and application. We call such a person as a ‘steward of the discipline’. (Golde, 2006, p. 5)

Yet, for approximately half of these future stewards and academic achievers, the path to the PhD is not as smooth as they may have hoped. The 51,008 doctorates conferred in the 2012 academic year (National Science Foundation, 2014) do not represent all who could have graduated with doctorates. Almost 50% of those who start graduate programs either drop out or do not complete them within 10 years—a phenomenon that has persisted for decades (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; King, 2008; Golde, 2006; Gravois, 2007; Smallwood, 2004; Tinto, 1993).

Many university deans and program heads do not actually know what their graduation rates are or how to address them (Damrosch, 2006; Elgar & Klein, 2004). This can be attributed to the minimal number of studies of the reasons for such low graduation rates and how these reasons could be mitigated. Since Berelson conducted the first comprehensive study in graduate education in 1960, contributions to the literature have been modest (Ploskonka, 1993).

Interest in the state of graduate education, especially graduation rates and time frames, has increased within the past decade as evidenced by several initiatives, including the PhD Completion Project, a 7-year program studying attrition and completion within doctoral programs; the Andrew W. Mellon Graduate Education Initiative (GEI) grants to improve PhD programs; and the myriad of conferences and research studies performed throughout the United States. This is for several reasons, such as recent developments in the United States in terms of governmental expenditures and investment in education, the number of unfilled graduate teaching positions in fields such as nursing and pharmacy, the increasing—but still small—numbers of women and ethnic/racial minorities entering the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), the view of

some which questions the United States' ability to remain competitive technologically and economically.

The structural and programmatic components of university PhD programs face enhanced scrutiny. The situations and experiences of graduate students pursuing the PhD, relating to those who successfully complete their doctoral studies within a 'normal' time frame—usually within 5 to 7 years—as well as those who drop out of their programs are under examination (Wao, 2010).

Normal or appropriate times to complete a doctorate, as indicated by surveys and in the literature, are fuzzy at best. Studies show that, on average, most students who receive their PhDs do achieve them between -year 5 and 7 (King, 2008; Wao, 2010). More STEM students graduate within the 5-to-7-year interval than do Social Science and Humanities programs (SSH) as well as Education graduates—regardless of gender. But is the fact that the greatest number of students receives them in that time frame indicative of the time frames in which all students *should* complete?

Both Wao and the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) indicate that completions rise again at 10 years and found that, overall, 20% of all graduates complete in years 8 through 10. Twenty-five percent of all women and 18% of men fall into this category.

Part-time status for doctoral students, which is difficult to quantify (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012), raises a similar question: Should part-time students be expected to graduate within the same time frames as full-time students? Most universities, however, establish completion deadlines either at 7 or 10 years. Many also allow extensions beyond that deadline based upon need, implying that anything after that deadline is undesirable.

Studies of on-time completers have documented many factors and experience components that can aid in a timely completion of the PhD, such as a positive relationship with the doctoral advisor (Geranion, 2010), funding assistance (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988), high research self-efficacy (Bard, Bieschke, Herbert, & Eberz, 2000; Faghihi, Rakow, & Ethington, 1999), social relationships within the cohort and faculty, ability to work full-time on study and research, family support (Kluever, 1997), and access to university support services (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Ivankova & Stick, 2007), speak to an atmosphere which may enable greater numbers of graduates. Of these factors, PhD graduates in engineering, life sciences, mathematics and physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities indicated that financial aid, mentoring/advising, and family support were the most influential in enabling doctoral completion (Sowell, Zhang, Bell, Kirb, & Naftel, 2009).

Non-completers, or dropouts, have been shown to have experiences in their academic and personal lives that may not occur within the journeys of on-time completers. Their stories express encountering barriers such as poor relationships with a doctoral advisor, a lack of funding, the inability to select or hone in on dissertation topic, a lack of socialization (Gardner, 2009c), lack of academic integration (Tinto, 1993), and external pressures such as working full-time and lack of family support; these are a few of the factors that may aid attrition (Baird, 1997; Katz, 1997; Lenz, 1997).

But between the on-time completers and the dropouts, there is another small but distinctive group that does not graduate within their program deadlines, yet have not officially dropped out. They are students who ultimately complete their doctoral journey, albeit months or years after what the program and society considers acceptable time

frames. As much of the research studies on doctoral completion tend to revolve around either graduate rates or attrition rates (dropouts), this group finds themselves somewhere in between—they are not completers (at least not within the allotted time frames), nor have they left their programs without graduating. They are often invisible or excluded in research and data collection for several reasons. They have, historically, been a small group in relation to the overall percentages of graduate students. They have been identified, but may not be addressed because they either fall outside of the study parameters (Wao, 2010) or are too difficult to quantify. Nerad and Cerny (1993) indicated that approximately 8% of their study subjects were still active within the program after 10 years; however, it was not known whether they would ultimately drop out or complete their PhDs. Continuing a study for an indeterminate amount of years to determine the true graduation rate is not an attractive option for most researchers. Nettles and Millett (2006) chose to end their study after 6 years despite the fact that out of the people who remained in a doctoral program after the first year, 38% had not graduated at that time (p. 131). Their studies, as most studies are, were bound by time, not bound by discovery of the ultimate completion status of all subjects initially identified.

So within the examination of doctoral completion and doctoral programs as a whole, they have largely remained off the radar screens, missing from problem statements, or excluded from the samples used within the studies around the experience of graduates or dropouts. For purposes of this study, I looked at a group of such students, called the 10+ Completers, who graduated 10 years or more after starting their doctoral programs.

As the demographic makeup of the graduate student population and the continuing growth of non-traditional degree options change the landscape within the graduate study, the stories and experiences of 10+ Completers may soon gather greater focus. As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, more opportunities for higher education become available to U.S. citizens and non-citizens, the conditions under which graduate studies are undertaken may change (Gardner, 2009b), providing opportunities for universities to reach a broader base of people.

While the majority of doctoral students today still engage in traditional program types, non-traditional programs offer another choice. The non-traditional student can choose to adapt her life to the demands and requirements of a traditional program, or to seek a non-traditional program that may allow for greater flexibility in accommodating the student's life situation. The needs of the non-traditional student and the flexibility of non-traditional programs may result in an increase in 10+ Completers, which will ultimately force greater focus on them as a population worthy of examination. This study examined the experiences and feelings of several non-traditional students in a non-traditional PhD program who graduated after 10 years in an effort to bring such focus.

### **Traditional Versus Non-Traditional Doctoral Programs**

Although the concept of traditional and non-traditional degree programs is often discussed, what differentiates the two can sometimes be difficult to assess. For purposes of this study, I chose Archibald's definition of a traditional program. The archetypical traditional doctoral degree program is "a full-time, residential, four-five year, research-focused graduate program in the sciences or humanities culminating in a dissertation and a PhD" (Archibald, 2011, p. 16). Such programs tend to attract younger students just



beginning a career and often provide the student some level of funding (especially in science fields) in exchange for full-time commitment to study and research. These students, upon graduation, often teach and continue to do research at the graduate level (Archbald, 2011).

The term non-traditional as it relates to a doctoral degree is multi-faceted and may include the program design, limited residency at the university, pedagogical underpinnings, as well as what the attainment of the degree can provide the student and her working environment. All of these dynamics and their differing permutations combine to create a flexible description of non-traditional programs. Pappas and Jerman (2011) define a non-traditional degree as having one or more of four characteristics: (a) the students participating are usually not full-time students, nor full-time residents of the university and may have family and social responsibilities that prohibit the full-time engagement expected in traditional programs; (b) the program itself is provided in a compressed, online, hybrid, or other format; (c) the degree itself may not be a PhD, but may serve the needs of the practitioner, employee, or practitioner with particular applied needs—also known as a professional degree; and (d) the degree does not necessarily lead to a life in academe but serves the needs of the practitioner (Pappas & Jerman, 2011, p. 2). For purposes of this study, I examined non-traditional students whose journey (and need) ultimately culminates in a PhD, and may not be related to a specific career goal. Interestingly, although most people think that most PhD candidates seek a degree in order to teach or do academic research, that is not the case. As early as 1999, only 52% of PhD graduates actually went into higher education upon completion (Thurgood, Golladay, &

Hill, 2006). Non-traditional degrees and traditional degree programs are filling needs within the public and non-profit sectors.

### **Traditional Versus Non-Traditional Students**

What some may refer to as a non-traditional degree program is becoming the norm for doctoral graduate experiences (Archbald, 2011), due largely in part in the changing dynamics of who is entering and why they enter doctoral programs. As the world changes, the characteristics of the overall population shift, ultimately changing the picture of those students seeking graduate degrees. Whereas doctoral degrees through the 20th century were largely achieved by White, single males under 30, today's statistics reflect an entirely different picture (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2009b). Students seeking graduate degrees today are ethnically diverse, increasingly female, study part-time, are usually married, have children or dependent parents, are more than 30 years old, are employed outside the program either full-time or part-time, study in addition to career and family, and are largely self-funded or subsidized by work (Gardner, 2009b; Offerman, 2011). As of 2010, N. E. Bell reports 45% of those seeking advanced degrees now do so part-time. The number of students aged 40 and over enrolling in graduate programs increased 87% between 1987–2007 who comprise a significant portion of the overall part-time PhD student population. The attributes and the reality of the lives led by these non-traditional students could elongate the amount of time they need to complete the requirements to achieve their PhDs, as it is currently defined today.

Regardless of whether or not a program is considered traditional or non-traditional, a person's progression towards a doctorate has some generally defined

components: entering the program; acclimating to the program and beginning to work as a graduate student; completing the necessary coursework; showing competence in the field of study either through comprehensive exams or some sort of ‘proof’ display, such as a portfolio; and completing a research project, culminating in a completed and successfully defended dissertation (Nettles & Millett, 2006). These components are generally completed in a more or less linear fashion, although not exclusively. Lovitts identified these components as three stages: Stage I: Entry and adjustment, which is generally considered the first year; Stage II: Development of competence (all requirements except the research and dissertation completion); and Stage III: The research stage, or completing the dissertation (Lovitts, 2001). Each of these stages brings its own set of unique challenges to be faced and requirements to be met in order to be successful. Each stage loses its share of doctoral candidates as well, not always consistent between studies. Nettles and Millett (2006) found that 48% of all who drop out, do so in Stage I, 22% leave in Stage II, and the remainder become ABD students—all but dissertation.

In Bowen and Rudenstine’s (1992) study, 13% of their original pool of PhD candidates dropped out prior to the second year of the program (Phase I), an additional 20% left before advancing to the dissertation phase (Phase II), and an additional 13% had not completed their dissertations at the 10-year mark.

Gravois (2007) found that almost all of the students who drop out of STEM programs do so prior to starting their dissertation, but 50% of humanities and social science students do not drop out until the dissertation phase.

## **Impacts of Late or Non-Completion of the Doctoral Program**

A student's attrition at any stage or elongating the time to complete the doctorate may have effects that extend far beyond the student. For the individual, failure to graduate in a timely manner or to graduate at all may impact the student's future earning power, the ability to gain meaningful employment in the student's area of choice, his or her personal sense of accomplishment, and professional successes (Lovitts, 2001). For academe, the student's lack of success could negatively impact the reputation of the university where she studied (Lovitts, 2001). Significant delay or attrition may mean that society may never have the opportunity to benefit through her contributions to her field, nor to receive the potential economic gains through such creation and discovery. There may be impacts to the United States in its efforts to remain globally competitive. Opportunities to improve the world and its future may be lost in the failure or delay of just one student. Just as in the Frank Capra movie classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, the absence of one within a community can have forever unknown and perhaps far-reaching consequences.

While it is unfortunate for those who drop out in the first few years of a program, someone who becomes a late-completer or late-stage dropout is more costly in terms of time, energy, and resources expended by and for the student. Such students place stresses on the overall system by placing additional burdens on the faculty, dissertation advisor, and support resources. Statistically as well, the longer that one takes to complete the program, the lower the chance that they will graduate, so ultimately, much of the effort invested by those involved may be unfulfilled.

For those who continue work toward graduation, even after 10 or more years, why do they do so? What kind of barriers do they encounter and how are they able to overcome them? Is there a moment of realization that occurs that enables them to complete? What wisdom did they glean from their experiences that may aid in helping other such individuals complete their doctorate within a more reasonable time frame?

### **Problem Statement**

Although most doctoral students who do graduate manage to do so within a time frame of 5 to 7 years from the start of the program (Wao, 2010), almost all doctoral programs have an official or unofficial time limit—usually between 7 to 10 years—during which all students are expected to complete the doctoral process. After exhausting that element of time, the student who has not finished may be dropped from the program or may be given a completion extension by the graduate school. In 2008, the CGS noted that almost 43% of all students who started a PhD program had not completed their PhD after 10 years. There was no indication as to the ‘final status’ of these students. Were they dropouts? Did they leave the program temporarily (stop-outs), intending to return at a later time? Did they give up at some future date? Or did they remain in the hunt for the PhD through to completion?

For those in STEM doctoral programs, the percentage of completions for a cohort generally remains static after 10 years, indicating that the majority of those students who do not have their PhDs within 10 years ultimately leave the program without their PhD. However, cohorts within SSH and education programs continue to hover or surpass the 10-year mark for program completion (King, 2008), indicating that some who reach 10 years within their program will ultimately graduate. The CGS also observed that with

higher distributions of non-traditional students, the graduation timelines for graduates may be significantly longer. There is some evidence that more women and minority groups complete after year 10 than do White men (King, 2008). In 2012, women accounted for 68.7 % of the PhDs conferred in education. The elapsed time-to-degree averages 11.8 years (Foundation, 2014) but that is actually a decrease from a high of almost 16 years in 1994.

For those who do complete later than the expected and accepted time-to-completion, little literature exists on what influences why they needed additional time to do so and what their experiences are within the program. Is there a point in their doctoral pursuits when they seriously considered dropping out? How and why do they ultimately succeed and complete their doctorates rather than become an attrition statistic?

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of Andrews University Leadership (LEAD) program PhD doctoral graduates who required longer than the 10-year doctoral program time frame to achieve their degrees. Through examination of their thoughts and life experiences throughout the progression to PhD completion, we may better understand the situations that caused elongation of their timelines, spurred on periods of productivity, and ultimately enabled their completion. These findings may provide insights for faculty, programs, and students to assist 10+ Completers in shortening their overall elapsed time-to-degree (ETD).

## **Research Question**

The question that this study addresses is: How do the non-traditional doctoral students who took longer than 10 years to complete the Andrews Leadership doctoral program describe their journeys to completion?

## **Research Design**

This research project is a qualitative case study that examines the events and experiences of non-traditional graduate students who took more than 10 years to achieve their doctorates. In the pursuit of a PhD, each individual interprets and constructs a specific reality. This research will discuss these realities and how and why they are ultimately acted upon by the research subjects. By examining the intricacies of the subject's stories, themes and generalizations may be discovered. As the study is limited to a specific Andrews University PhD program, a bounded case study structure was used. Primary data collection was accomplished through semi-structured interviews that were done in person, telephone, or in written form.

## **Context of Study**

This study is centered on the experiences of 10+ Completers within the LEAD PhD program at Andrews University, located within southwest Michigan. Andrews University is a small, highly residential (S4/HR) Doctoral/Research University (DRU), as defined by the Carnegie Foundation Classification system (Carnegie Foundation, 2011). The LEAD program is offered by the Department of Leadership and Education Administration and also offers MA, EdS, EdD, and PhD degrees. In many ways, the Andrews University LEAD program shows an evolution of a program meant to meet the needs of the non-traditional student. Although Andrews University is an institution that

has a high percentage of residency programs, the LEAD program is designed and facilitated as a non-traditional program.

Using the Pappas and Jerman (2011) criteria, the Andrews University LEAD program is a non-traditional program as it fits several of their identified criteria. Meeting any of the criteria allows for the label 'non-traditional'. The program does not focus on full-time students, and the students are not full-time residents of the University. The program also uses hybrid teaching methods, including attendance at required classes at the University, online (distance learning), and individual studies. The LEAD program is focused on scholarly research, culminating in a PhD. Although this leadership program offers an EdD option as well, the vast majority of participants do not seek this professional degree. Students achieving this degree will not be included in this study. The majority of Andrews LEAD graduates do not ultimately seek to become university professors.

Similar to the Fielding Model for scholar-practitioners (Sewell, 2005), the LEAD program integrates research-based and practice-based knowledge within the learning process, constructs new knowledge binding theory and job-embedded competencies, and facilitates collaborative learning opportunities between faculty and students. This learning is done within “a distributed or distance free view of learning, distributed learning in which faculty and learners . . . are freed from the traditional norms often defined by the physical and temporal boundary parameters of institutions” (Sewell, 2005, p. 6).

Those seeking the PhD as part of the LEAD program must adhere to several admittance and participation requirements, such as: a baccalaureate degree—a master's



degree is strongly recommended for pursuit of the PhD; a minimum of 5 years of employment within a leadership capacity; continued employment throughout the program to grow as a scholar-practitioner; attendance at a 2-week orientation program and yearly attendance at the school's leadership conference, also known as Roundtable; participation in co-located or virtual regional teams minimally seven times per year (Andrews University, 2011).

The LEAD program at Andrews University (AU) encompasses the three major components of a doctoral program; however, the completion of these components is not necessarily linear. The first phase at AU usually consists of the orientation and acclimation to the academic program, taking the basic classes required by all LEAD students and construction of an Individual Development Plan (IDP). The IDP is the framework and 'contract' between the student and Andrews outlining how the individual will gain and give evidence for the knowledge and skills in both theory and application. The second component is building the theoretical base and learning and assembling proof of practical job-embedded learning on these competencies. There are no comprehensive exams; instead, the development of each competency, its theoretical base and personal reflection on the learning, is documented within a portfolio and formally presented and defended; the final component is the completion and defense of a dissertation (Andrews University, 2011). The order of portfolio and dissertation defense is idiosyncratic and the time frames between each may be a matter of months or years, depending on the path and progression of the individual student.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This research is based on two primary constructs: Constructivism and Bandura's self-efficacy model. Constructivism is the basis by which individuals develop knowledge through the combination of experiences and ideas. Through direct experience and subsequent consequences, the individual gives personal meaning to what has occurred and forms knowledge (Merriam, 1998). Knowledge can only be known through human interpretation and interaction. Once garnered, this knowledge can be used to mold future knowledge and performance to better fit a desired outcome. Researchers, through qualitative study, can collect, study, and use their own perceptions to interpret and assemble these experiences into a story to advance understanding of the phenomenon (Tavallaei & Abu Talib, 2010).

Using constructivism as his foundation, Bandura believed that despite whatever skills and knowledge that an individual 'knows' she has, or what her experiences of success or failures might have been, it is what the person believes about her capabilities regarding a particular task within a particular time frame that is a truer indicator of subsequent success (Bandura, 1983). What one believes about her capabilities, in effect, creates a filter for action, and therefore adjusts one's reality. So although an individual may have the knowledge and aptitude to tackle a particular goal or situation, a person may still not be able to perform successfully. Self-efficacy can support or hinder based upon the activity and its context. Bandura defined self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage perspective situations" (Bandura, 1997b, p. 7). Task-based and contextual in nature, it can be impacted both internally and externally. Outcomes that are perceived as successful can

raise self-efficacy; those believed to be failures lessen it (Pajares, 1997). Aside from personal experiences, a person's self-efficacy can also be influenced by internal emotional reactions, observations, visceral experiences and verbal persuasion. By impacting one's beliefs, they can potentiate one's capabilities or mitigate one's shortcomings, thereby affecting potential for success (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

It is the impacts of self-efficacy that may play an important part in the progression of students through the doctoral process at Andrews. Because the student constructs the reality, the experience and learning gathered within the doctoral process for the student, when coupled by the level of belief in the capabilities to achieve the myriad of tasks within the doctoral pursuit. These create a doctoral journey that is either completed in a timely fashion, one that is prolonged, or one that remains forever unfinished.

Bandura's model of self-efficacy may be an effective framework to analyze the interviews of the Andrews' 10+ Completers, I knew that depending on what I might discover, other frameworks could prove to be more appropriate.

### **Significance of Study**

There is a growing body of knowledge on why doctoral students complete or drop out of doctoral programs. Researchers have been examining why the average total time to complete a PhD—total time-to-degree (TTD) (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992)—is increasing across all doctoral programs, especially in the areas of education, humanities, and the social sciences (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Grasso, Barry, & Valentine, 2009; Gravois, 2007). Most of these studies, however, reflect the experiences of the traditional graduate student within a traditional graduate program, and most of the recommendations to improve the journey of doctoral students (and perhaps shorten the duration of study)

are specific to such students. However, for non-traditional students who seek a PhD within a non-traditional doctoral program, their experiences may be different due to their specific personal characteristics and the reasons the student chose such a program. Non-traditional programs themselves come with their own set of characteristics that lend to the overall educational experiences. For those non-traditional program completers who take more than 10 years to complete the PhD, little information is available on how or why these students were ultimately able to complete their doctorates.

### **Assumptions**

The study was predicated on the following assumptions:

1. For each person who persists and completes the doctoral quest after 10 years, there are circumstances that contribute to the duration of their PhD journey. Generally, the barriers experienced by those who decide to leave their degree program without completing and the positive experiences that contribute to on-time completion are applicable to 10+ Completers.

2. The student ultimately makes the decision to complete the dissertation and takes the steps necessary to achieve the doctoral degree.

3. The conditions and processes that surround the decision to complete the dissertation and the steps taken to achieve the doctoral degree can be studied.

### **Definitions**

*10+ Completers*: Graduates of the Andrews University Leadership doctoral program who graduated 10 or more years after starting the program.

*All But Dissertation (ABD)*: Doctoral candidate who has completed all requirements for a degree except the submission of a completed dissertation (Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly, 1983).

*Attrition*: The cessation of individual student membership in an institution of higher education (Bean, 1979).

*Constructivism*: The view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds (Merriam, 1998).

*Doctoral Completion*: Finishing all of the educational and research requirements successfully in order to receive a PhD.

*Doctoral Completion Mind-set*: The change of focus from progressing through the doctoral program to one of completing the doctoral program (Green & Bowden, 2012).

*Doctoral Persistence or Persistence*: The pursuit of the doctorate with the goal to complete it in a timely manner despite obstacles encountered (Wao, Dedrick, & Ferron, 2011).

*Dropout*: A student who is enrolled one semester at an institution but does not enroll the next semester and has not completed the formally declared program of study (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

*Elapsed Time to Degree (ETD)*: The time that elapses between entering graduate school and earning the doctorate (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

*LEAD*: Short title of the Leadership program at Andrews University.

*Non-traditional Doctoral Program*: A doctoral program that diverges from the traditional program structure by offering options such as part-time study, no residency

requirements, distance learning, individualized learning opportunities, professional degrees (Archbald, 2011).

*Non-traditional Student:* A student who has one or more of the following characteristics: delays enrollment into postsecondary education, attends part-time, is financially independent of parents, works full-time while enrolled, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, lacks a standard high-school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

*(Academic) Portfolio:* A purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress or achievement. It requires student input in selection of contents, guidelines for selection, criteria for judging its merit, and evidence of student self-reflection. It functions as evidence representing performance on prescribed tasks or competencies (Arter & Spandel, 1995).

*Registered Time-to-Degree (RTD):* The amount of time between registration in graduate school and achieving the PhD, minus reported periods of non-enrollment (Hoffer & Welch, 2006).

*Self-efficacy:* The belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments (Bandura, 1997b).

*Stop-outs:* Students who take a leave sometime throughout their doctoral journey who return at a later date with the intent to finish the program (Lovitts, 2001).

*STEM Programs:* Academic programs within the science, technology, engineering, and mathematical subject areas.

*Time-to-Degree (TTD):* The total elapsed calendar time between receipt of the baccalaureate and receipt of the doctorate, including time not enrolled in school.

*Traditional Program:* A program which is designed for full-time students who reside on or near the university campus. This type of program usually provides some level of financial assistance, often in the forms of a research assistantship, teaching assistantship, scholarship, or fellowships (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

*Traditional Student:* A student, generally considered to be a single, White male, under 30 years of age, studying full-time, supported financially through a combination of program or parents, who plans to become a research faculty member (Offerman, 2011).

### **Delimitations**

This study examined the experiences of non-traditional doctoral students at Andrews University who have completed the PhD program after 10 years in the program. The participants were enrolled in a LEAD program offered by the University's School of Education and completed the PhD. All graduates who meet the criteria for participation were invited to participate and all those who chose to participate were included within the study.

### **Limitations**

The nature of this study lends itself to several notable limitations. The study is retrospective and therefore depends on participant recall. Additionally, the participants were asked to describe experiences and feelings for events that took place over an extended period of time spanning at least 10 years. It is through their abilities to reflect and articulate these past experiences and feelings that provided the context in which to capture the information connected to how they were able to complete the doctoral program. Lastly, although the students interviewed as part of this study have agreed to

participate freely and fully, the accuracy of interpretation of the data is contingent on an accurate detailing of the doctoral journey.

### **Summary**

As a qualitative case study, this document describes the experiences of 10+ Completers in a non-traditional PhD program and how their experiences in the program as well as their interactions with students, faculty, and University personnel shaped and molded their thoughts and actions. The study examined how their interpretations of these situations and events ultimately led them to doctoral completion.



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **The Doctoral Path**

On the first day of graduate school, everyone is still a success. All of the students gunning for PhD's have lived an academic life of achievement: honor roll, summa cum laude, certificates, scholarships, and parents who praise their intellectual prowess. Yet as many as half of those bright students—many of whom have never tasted failure—will drop out before they can claim their prize. (Smallwood, 2004, p. 1)

Since its inclusion as part of the American educational process in 1861, the PhD, or Doctor of Philosophy, is considered by many to be the highest level of academic achievement in the United States. According to the United States Census Bureau, 3.470 million Americans living in 2013 had achieved PhDs, accounting for 1.7% of the United States population over 25 years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Yet, as indicated by the quote above, that number is tempered by the fact that for every two people who enter into a doctoral program, one person will fail to complete the program.

As so much of the literature is based on traditional programs, or a combination of both traditional and non-traditional programs, the following pages first discuss the overall literature for doctoral attrition in general and then discuss the differences found among the non-traditional student and non-traditional program populations.

## **Progression Through Stages of Doctoral PhD**

Most research doctoral programs are comprised of three major components: coursework, the assessment of competence and skills, and an independent research project, usually called a dissertation (Gardner, 2009b). However, the process, experiences and time frames under which these components may occur can vary widely from student to student. Gardner (2009a), in her monograph “The Development of Doctoral Students: Phases of Challenge and Support,” defines the overall experiences into loosely defined phases, which describe not only the activities completed, but the challenges and growth of the student as well (p. 9). Like Lovitts’s phases, she describes an Entry phase, the ‘breaking-in’ phase where the student is familiarized with being both a graduate student as well as the insider experiences specific to the program, personalities, and culture of the department and university. During this period of time the graduate student seeks to integrate into the academic communities through interactions with the students, faculty, and mores of the departmental and program in which one is a member. The student becomes not only oriented to the overall process, such as class structures and semester routines, but is immersed in the designated program of study, its social structure and the written and unwritten rules of the university, department, program, and cohort (Gardner, 2009b; Lovitts, 2001).

For undergraduates, Tinto (1993) recognized that the social and academic integration is generally more at the institutional level; however, for graduate students academic integration at the department or program level is more important (p. 232). More than the university, the department directly impacts the graduate student’s academic life and activities. For students who cannot integrate successfully into the department and

program, isolation or ‘lack of fit’ can negatively impact timely completion. While the literature mostly indicates that to the degree the student becomes socialized within the academic and social community sub-cultures, the student becomes more closely tied to its community and therefore has a greater chance of completing the PhD (Gardner, 2009c; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Tinto, 1993), although others found no correlation between socialization and completion (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988).

The second phase—Gardner’s Integration phase (2009a, p.10)—is the continuing of social and academic integration, growing in knowledge within the specific field of focus, gaining competence within the field and ultimately proving that knowledge through some sort of demonstration, usually in the form of a comprehensive exam or portfolio defense. This phase correlates nicely with Lovitts’s phases. In this phase, academic competence is influenced and enhanced through relationships with faculty and peers (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration with faculty and peers, often enhanced through social interaction, becomes an important factor in achieving PhD status (Gardner, 2009b; Golde, 2000; Grasso et al., 2009; Lovitts, 2001). Completion of this phase is a major step in the progress of the student journey towards the PhD. The unofficial, although widely known title of ABD, or All-But-Dissertation, is meant to indicate a level of achievement, with only the research project and dissertation standing between the student and a successful completion (Nettles & Millett, 2006). However, this moniker may also be construed as a level of failure if the student does not progress from that level (Blum, 2010; Jacks et al., 1983).

Finally, the last phase is the successful completion of a dissertation. During this Candidacy phase (Gardner, 2009b, p. 10), the student completes independent research, and presents and defends the findings usually in the form of a dissertation, referred to as the Research phase by Lovitts (2001). During this time, the relationship with the dissertation advisor and the dissertation committee has great influence on the student's abilities to successfully complete the dissertation, and ultimately, the doctorate (Grasso et al., 2009). The ability to have quality interactions with a caring, supportive, and accessible advisor is a key component of PhD completion (Gardner, 2009b; Golde, 2000; Katz, 1997; Kluever, 1997). Lovitts (2001) states, "Choosing an advisor is probably the single most important decision a graduate student makes during his or her graduate career" (p. 65). Isolation from such connections during this time can have devastating effects to the student's advancement (Gardner, 2009b; Holmes, Seay, & Wilson, 2009; Katz, 1997).

### **PhD Completion**

Although PhD completion rates have been generally around the 50% attainment level for decades, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that the graduate community began to look inward as the overall costs continued to rise and yet still yielded sub-optimal results for such investments (Bell, 2009b). The College of Graduate Studies (CGS), in addition to many other scholars, began to tackle two key indicators of the performance of the system: student completion and attrition rates (Bell, 2009b). Leaving too many scholars behind has many impacts that reach far beyond the student.

## **Impacts of PhD Attrition**

Not all attrition is bad. For many students, changes in goals and life situations that result in withdrawal from a doctoral program may be construed as positive outcomes (Tinto, 1993; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). However, in the majority of circumstances, the impacts of attrition within PhD programs have significant and far-reaching consequences. These often ‘impossible-to-quantify’ effects can nevertheless change the global and temporal landscape of humanity. Madsen (1992) identifies four distinct parties that have a vested interest within the doctoral process: society, the university, the doctoral advisor, and the student. Each of these parties experiences the effects of doctoral incompleteness, albeit on different levels.

### **Society**

Each time a graduate student discovers the answer to a problem, advances the search for a cure or the improvement of a worldly condition, or finds an enlightening re-interpretation of long-held truths, society is impacted. Each time a student leaves a program without bringing such an opportunity to completion, society is also impacted.

Within the United States, much of the financial aid given to graduate students comes through research funding provided to our universities (Golde, 2006). The investment in such funding loses its value when the student leaves a program and the research project behind. High attrition rates also impact the United States’ ability to remain competitive in both economic and innovation through scientific and humanistic advancements. As stated on the Council of Graduate Schools’ (2012) website:

Increasing demand for workers with advanced training at the graduate level, an inadequate domestic talent pool, and a small representation of women and minority graduates at all education levels are among some growing concerns over workforce issues that relate to the vitality and competitiveness of the U.S.

economy. Improving completion rates for all doctoral students, and particularly for those from underrepresented groups, is vital to meeting our nation's present and future workforce needs. (para. 2)

In the STEM fields, the United States projects a significant shortfall in our ability to graduate sufficient numbers of science-oriented PhDs (Carnevale, Smith, & Melton, 2011). Outside of scientific fields, the majority of those who achieve doctoral status find employment outside of academe. The winter 2002-2003 *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) noted that over 70% of all employed doctoral graduates held positions outside of colleges and universities (Jones, 2003). For profit, not-for-profit, and governmental enterprises all make use of graduate expertise (Golde, 2006).

With the changing ethnic demographics of the working population in the United States, it is estimated that minorities—particularly Hispanics—will occupy greater percentages of the workforce, groups that generally have higher levels of doctoral attrition than does the White male population (Holmes et al., 2009; Lacefield, 1985). The Council on Graduate Schools 2008 report focuses on improving the doctoral completion rates of women and underrepresented minorities as a key component to meet United States' current and future workforce needs (King, 2008).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) 2008 job projections indicate that through 2018 almost half of the top 30 occupations with the largest growth rates will require a bachelor's degree or higher. Replacing baby-boomer retirees or others who change jobs will account for over 31 million jobs within that 10-year span, many of whom occupied professional positions (Bartsch, 2009). By 2020, over 65% of all jobs in the United States will require a college degree as a requirement for employment. Current college graduate rates project a shortfall of approximately 5 million eligible employees to maintain a

skilled workforce (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Those who will educate these undergraduates will come largely from university faculty with PhDs.

### **University Impacts**

Universities that lose graduate students have the expense of recruiting new students to ensure sufficient student enrollment; the costs of marketing and recruiting materials are also impacted by such practices (Gardner, 2009b). High attrition numbers can impact the numbers of needed faculty. Research grants for institutional research are often based on the amount of research actually produced; decreased amounts of students can impact staffing of projects (Kwiram, 2006) and expenses incurred through financial aid, stipends, and assistantships. The University of Notre Dame calculated savings of \$1 million a year by decreasing attrition by 10% (Smallwood, 2004). The ability to sufficiently staff open positions in niche areas can be severely challenged through student attrition. For example, Farley, Wang, and Blalock's (2010) analysis of the top 80 pharmacy PhD programs in the United States reported over 425 open faculty positions in 2008. Archer (2011) has made similar predictions for social worker educators as well.

The reputation of universities, often known for their research, can be damaged through attrition as well. As government funding programs for education and research decrease, higher focus is given to the university's responsibility to address low graduation rates and ineffective programs. Even STEM programs, defined as a national need, are not immune to such pressure (Lovitts, 2001). Both current (Hartnett & Katz, 1977) and future (Pauley, Cunningham, & Powell, 1999) students may see high attrition as an indicator of the lack of quality within a program or university.

## **Doctoral Advisor**

Likewise, the cost to faculty and doctoral advisors can be high in terms of emotional investment, time, and volume of work for incomplete or elongated doctoral journeys. Departures from programs may impact the number of teaching and research assistants available to faculty, which may impact time available for research and other endeavors. The later in the program that the student leaves, the greater amount of faculty investment in dissertation advising is lost (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Damrosch, 2006).

## **Students**

For students, the overall impacts can be devastating. Lovitts (2001) discusses how several people whom she interviewed cried, decades later, still impacted by not just the inability to achieve their PhDs, but also by the incomplete journey. The guilt of disappointing others, including family, advisors or mentors (Willis & Carmichael, 2011) was also part of the overall departure experience. Higher earning potential not realized through degree completion, earning potential lost while in school (Stock, Finegan, & Siegfried, 2009), and the opportunity to enter or continue in a chosen professional field (Grasso et al., 2009) may also be faced by the non-completing student. Lastly, for those who had dreams of teaching and doing research at a university in a chosen field of study, this capability may be impacted or lost. Being forced to reassess the image of the future, at a time when failure and disappointment is intimately felt, can exact a high cost on the professional, emotional, and personal identity of one who does not complete (Lovitts, 2001).

So why do people ultimately drop out, graduate on schedule, or become 10+ Completers? We recognize that as part of the doctoral experience, all students face trials



and difficulties within their lives. In her research, Lovitts (2001) posed the question to her sample of completers as to whether or not they had seriously considered leaving graduate school without completing their degree. Forty-two percent seriously considered dropping out. Regardless of completion status, many students encounter enough challenges throughout to consider not meeting their doctoral goals and facing the impacts highlighted above. Many completers, non-completers, and 10+ Completers ultimately reach some point where they fall to either side of the fence—towards completion, or non-completion.

### **Causes for Attrition and Elongation of Time-to-Degree**

Just as there are many components of a doctoral program, many distractions or barriers exist that can make timely completion (or completion at all) difficult. There are many influences affecting why students drop out of a doctoral program or find themselves struggling to complete the dissertation; these influences impact different fields and persons in different ways. Various researchers have combined such influences into manageable categories. In Tinto's (1993) longitudinal model of doctoral persistence, he classifies them as such: personal attributes, entry orientations, institutional experiences, academic and social integration, and research experiences (p. 240). Nettles and Millet's model of student experiences includes: personal background characteristics, admissions, finances, field of study, graduate school experiences, student socialization, research productivity, student satisfaction, and immediate post-graduate expectations (Nettles & Millett, 2006, p. 28). Lovitts (2001) delineates such influences as academic, personal, and financial (p. 177). In an effort to streamline and combine these categories

into a framework for this study, such influences are discussed topically as university/programmatic, academic, and personal characteristics.

### University/Programmatic Characteristics

Programmatic issues can be found at institutional, departmental, and program levels. Systemic in nature, these issues may be the most difficult to overcome. Institutionally, problems can be exacerbated by the fact that often university deans and other institutional leaders are unaware of the overall well-being (e.g., attrition rates, student dissatisfaction) of students in their graduate programs. In Lovitts's (2001) study, graduate deans largely placed the responsibility of departure on the shoulders of the students. Although they did believe that financial aid was a major determinant of departure and not within the control of the student, they also believed it was the student's lack of intellectual capability, motivation, or physical and/or emotion stamina that were key causes for departure; in relatively similar numbers, so did the students and faculty. However, within Lovitts's study, in only one instance did a dean indicate that the program and the student's experiences within it could have been a cause of attrition. In 12 instances the faculty identified the program as a potential cause, and students identified the program 21 times (p. 26). Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) believe that institutions often do not change their present university policies to meet the needs and circumstances of non-traditional students, but instead maintain a system designed for full-time, on-campus students which can impact attrition rates as well.

Tinto (1993) felt that student attrition was best understood by the relationship between the student and the institution. Students dissatisfied with their programs have a greater chance of leaving prior to completion (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

The decision to drop out or to delay completion may be influenced by faculty turnover (Lovitts, 2001), poor orientation (de Valero, 2001; Kluever, 1997; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2010), faulty recruiting or poor admission selection (Gardner, 2009b; Grasso et al., 2009), faculty-student ratios (Goenner & Snaith, 2004), expiration or non-existence of assistantships (Baird, 1997; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2009b; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Smallwood, 2004), other financial support (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Gardner, 2009c; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Golde, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Pauley et al., 1999), and lack of office space (Lovitts, 2001; Stock et al., 2009). Lastly, the politics and culture of the university (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2009c; Golde, 1994; Holmes et al., 2009; Lovitts, 2001) which may cause negative or dismissive attitudes of faculty towards students (de Valero, 2001; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011) may influence attrition or delay rates of the students.

In discussions about one's personal experiences concerning a student's leaving a program without the PhD, in many cases the students lay the blame on the doorstep of the institution, its processes, and its faculty—largely for the reasons expressed above (Gardner, 2009c). However, when discussing with faculty and administrators the reasons for attrition, their focus tends to be on the actions (or lack thereof) of the student (Lovitts, 2001). As she states, "Two-thirds of the reasons [the faculty identified] held the students responsible for their attrition . . . while only a handful focused on situations internal to the university" (pp. 25-26). Conversely, when attributing the causes and events of a successful doctoral experience, the faculty and administration believed that the university was largely responsible, particularly due to supportive advisors taking responsibility to

“push and pull students over the obstacles of getting the dissertation done” (p. 27). Such disconnects between the opinions of students, faculty, and the university are indicative of a lack of understanding the roles each plays in both the successes and failures of the student.

### Programmatic Differences in Fields of Study

Although all doctoral programs have attrition and 10+ Completers, research shows that STEM doctoral programs have less overall attrition and shorter ETD than do non-STEM programs, including social-science and humanities (SSH). In 2008, non-completion rates 10 years past ETD were 41% overall for STEM programs, and 47% for SSH programs. Broken out by broad fields, the non-completion ranked from lower to higher were: engineering (36%), life sciences (37%), social sciences (44%), mathematics and physical sciences (45%), and humanities (51%) (Council of Graduate Schools, 2012).

Education rates were not available within the CGS study. Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) measured non-completion/completion rates in the fields of English, history, political science, economics, mathematics, and physics, so again, no education statistics are available. Nettles and Millet (2006) included education within their study, but aggregated completion rates rather than breaking them out by field.

Lovitts (2001) believes that there are three main reasons why completion/non-completion levels fluctuate so much between disciplines:

1. *Vertical vs. horizontal integration to knowledge.* Most science doctoral programs tend to focus expertise on a few contemporary theories within a field of study. This vertical view allows for mastery within a narrow band and creation of solid knowledge connections within that slice of the overall discipline. Humanities and social

sciences tend to follow a horizontal approach to knowledge. Students acquire a deep understanding of the broader range of both classical and contemporary theories, which can inhibit their ability to see the discipline as a coherent whole (Lovitts, 2001, p. 47). Such students may also look for more inter-disciplinary learning opportunities and use of more non-traditional sources of information (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992).

2. *Structured vs. less-structured programs.* Structured class order, timed in a way that is in line with the overall student progress, shortens ETD. Laboratory-based sciences generally have a more structured research schema than humanities and applied science. STEM doctoral students are often paired with an advisor shortly after starting the program allowing them to identify and work on projects that may serve as a foundation for the dissertation. As this research is often done as a team, these students may maintain frequent social and academic contact throughout their total graduate experience (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Students in non-STEM programs tend to not select doctoral chairs until they start their doctoral work and their study is often done as a solo effort (Nerad & Cerny, 1993), generally conducted in the field, libraries, or archives.

3. *Financial aid and assistantships.* STEM programs tend to offer more research and teaching assistantships, scholarships, grants, and loans to ease the financial strains of doctoral study than do non-STEM programs (Lovitts, 2001). Doctoral achievement is positively correlated with more financial aid (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Pauley et al., 1999).

However, in response to the popular belief that many students have a ‘free ride’ in doctoral programs, Nettles and Millett (2006) surveyed students on the amounts of aid received. Only 14% of the doctoral students indicated that they paid none of the cost for

their studies. When looking at overall amounts paid by the students, students in STEM programs spent less than others in SSH and particularly education, where education students paid twice the amount of money out of their pockets than did their STEM counterparts (p. 86).

Although CGS did not state a correlation between employment outside the university and impact on completion/non-completion, within the population of their 2008 study, 21-32% of STEM program graduates vs. 57-63% of SSH students worked outside the university during their doctoral programs (Bell, 2009b, p. 44). Those who need to 'self-fund' may have to work outside of the institution and thus decrease time for research and coursework (Nerad & Miller, 1997), lengthening time-to-completion as well influencing attrition.

#### Academic Issues

Academic issues can take different shapes at different stages within the doctoral program. For those who leave in the early stages of the program, attrition may be due to a mismatch between career goals and academic path chosen (Gardner, 2009c) or an inability to integrate into the academic community (Tinto, 1993). As time within the program progresses and dissertation completion becomes the main focus of student activities, the academic impediments can change. These may include the lack of a manageable, original, or interesting dissertation topic (Faghihi et al., 1999; Geranion, 2010), underestimating the amount of work or ability to work independently (Nerad & Miller, 1997), poor research or writing skills (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Di Pierro, 2007; Faghihi et al., 1999; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Kluever, 1997) or feelings of isolation in the research

stage (Bandura & Barbaranelli, 1996; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Geranion, 2010; Holmes et al., 2009; Katz, 1997; Lovitts, 2001).

By far, the most prevalent academic issue and the most reported reason for attrition or delayed completion revolves around the relationship between the student and the dissertation advisor (Barnes & Austin, 2009; D'Andrea, 2002; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Jacks et al.'s (1983) study with ABD non-completers showed that 44% of them cited poor working relationships with their advisors as a primary motivator for departure. Because the dissertation advisor ultimately controls the direction and character of the overall dissertation product (Nerad & Miller, 1997), problems between student and advisor can become seemingly insurmountable. Golde (2000) discovered in her work with departing students that advisor indifference and lack of support and caring about the student as a person were strong influencers on attrition. Minimal contact with chair and sporadic evaluation of work can lead to elongation completion or dropping out (Baird, 1993; Gardner, 2009b). Those who find themselves in environments that they believe are non-supportive will seek other alternatives especially if they believe their circumstances will not improve (Bandura, 1982).

Disconnects between the amount of structure and support a student needs when first beginning doctoral research and what the chair believes should be required can cause overall dissatisfaction in the research process and affect completion rates (Sigafus, 1998). Many students did not have enough trust in their chairs to discuss personal issues, issues with the chair, issues with the research project, or to ask for help in participating within the research 'culture' at the university (Manathunga, 2005). For some students, the

relationship with their advisor could be considered one of ‘cheap labor’, in which the student believes her role is to perform the advisor’s personal research objectives, with little regard for working with the student to advance her own objectives (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2005).

In her research with exemplary advisors, Barnes and Austin (2009) determined that good advisors consider it their duty to help students succeed, become good researchers and deal with failure. Additionally, they should act in the capacity of collaborator, mentor, advocate, and chastiser. Award-winning chairs used modeling techniques, had regular one-on-one meetings with the students, provided a safe environment in which the students could be creative and ask questions—even ones to which they ‘should know’ the answer (Manathunga, 2005). Yet for most universities, faculty receives little or no training for such roles (Di Pierro, 2011). Lack of mentoring by dissertation advisor or another faculty member was considered a crucial element missing from many graduate journeys (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Grasso et al., 2009; K. E. Green, 1997; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011; Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2001; Varney, 2010; Zhao et al., 2005). Dissertation committee issues and politics can cause undue stresses for students’ progress to doctoral completion (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Jacks et al., 1983; Kluever, 1997; Nerad & Miller, 1997)

### Personal Experiences

Each student brings a unique set of personal experiences into the context of doctoral studies which may positively or negatively affect the progress of the student towards doctoral completion. Many of these items, singularly or in combination, may contribute to an individual’s difficulty or success in completion of the doctorate.



## **Personal Characteristics**

Although the list of personal characteristics that negatively impact PhD completion is long and varied, several are mentioned here, such as perfectionism (Lenz, 1997); procrastination (D'Andrea, 2002; K. E. Green, 1997; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011); task aversion (Musyznski & Akamatsu, 1991); plural ignorance—the belief that the individual is the only one who is having problems (Lovitts, 2001); and childhood loss of parent (K. E. Green, 1997) have all been shown to contribute to attrition. Lack of self-esteem and/or self-efficacy—the belief one has in her ability to produce a specific effect—has also been shown to be a factor in research/doctoral success or failure (Faghihi et al., 1999).

‘Lack of fit’ or dissatisfaction with a program, its structure or atmosphere can be a primary cause for a student’s attrition (Gardner, 2009c; Golde, 2005; Grasso et al., 2009). The broader attributes of a university and its programs are generally reflected in the types of people who enroll at and attend that university (Tinto, 1993). The program needs to match the student’s goals and expectations. For the student who doesn’t feel the ‘right’ connection to a program’s structure, her peers, or its faculty, the reason to stay in that program is lessened. Many of these students drop out altogether or switch to another program or university.

Many studies attempt to find student characteristics that can predict completion, elongation, or addition of doctoral completion; often the study results are contradictory. For example, high Graduate Record Examination (GRE) verbal ability scores can indicate potential attrition, whereas high GRE analytical ability can predict completion (Lott, Gardner, & Powers, 2010; Nettles & Millett, 2006). However, Malone, Nelson, and

Nelson (2004) found that high GRE verbal scores, the Carnegie Classification of High Research or Very High Research of the undergraduate school, undergraduate Grade Point Average (GPA), and master's GPA are predictors of graduate success, while others found that GRE other scores, undergraduate GPA, or master's GPA had no influence on persistence or attrition overall (Lovitts, 2001; Most, 2008; Pauley et al., 1999).

### **Personal Circumstances**

Personal circumstances also impact the student's ETD or attrition from a program. Having children under the age of 18 is shown to extend ETD in some studies while being married lends itself to shorter ETD (de Valero, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Others report that neither children nor marriage has an impact on ETD or attrition (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). Baird (1997) notes that both marriage and children tend to create delays or end progress towards the degree, especially for women (p. 100).

Attending school part-time is one of the strongest influences on ETD and attrition.

As stated by Tinto (1993, p. 234):

The difference between full-time and part-time attendance is not merely a difference in time commitment. It is also a difference in the degree to which one is able to become involved in the intellectual and social life of the student and faculty communities that undergird graduate education. Whereas the former may serve to extend time to degree completion, and only indirectly constrain persistence, the latter acts directly to undermine persistence by isolating the person from the intellectual and social life of the department.

Attending school part-time diminishes the amount of overall socialization and interaction with peers and faculty, both in and out of academic situations (Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Lovitts, 2001; Onwuegbuzie & Wao, 2011; Terrell, Snyder, Dringus, & Maddrey, 2012). Residential living can provide "involvement of students beyond the classroom as most part-time students need to attend school part-time because of other

situations, such a financial need to work, family, or other areas, they have less time in general to focus on academic pursuits” (Malone et al., 2004, p. 52).

Financial issues are most frequently mentioned as reasons for elongated ETD, stopping-out, and dropping out (Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Kluever, 1997). Those with some sort of financial support from the university, such as a research assistant, teaching assistant, or fellow positions have a greater chance of persisting through to completion than those who have to take out loans, or work part-time or full-time in order to remain in school (Baird, 1997; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2009b; Grasso et al., 2009; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Smallwood, 2004). Full-time or part-time employment while in school also can increase ETD or ultimately attrition. “When they get a job, it is more difficult for them to finish their dissertation” (Onwuegbuzie & Wao, 2011, p. 127). Obviously, time spent working takes away from study; however, if the work environment is not supportive of the PhD pursuit, it may further complicate the student’s efforts to complete his or her doctorate in a timely manner. Inflexibility in accommodating requests for time off or not allowing the student to benefit from job-embedded learning may elongate students’ completion timeframe. This can impact students who work outside of the university, as well as those who work within its walls.

Each of these characteristics and circumstances—and their opposites (e.g., job or no job, high- or low-search efficacy)—can impact a person’s journey through the doctorate: It is not usually a single factor but rather a combination of factors that ultimately leads to whether a person completes, attrits, or delays. And just as there is a combination of factors which are part of the process, likewise, all players in the doctoral

journey—the university, the dean, the faculty, the chair/advisor and the student—are ultimately responsible for the success or the failure to achieve the PhD.

## **Non-Traditional Students**

### Non-Traditional by the Numbers

Non-traditional representation within doctoral school programs continues to grow. There are many characteristics which identify non-traditional students: ethnically diverse, female, studies part-time, usually married, have children or dependent parents, are more than 30 years old, employed outside the program either full-time or part-time, study in addition to career and family, and are largely self-funded or subsidized by work. For purposes of this discussion, I will focus on gender, ethnicity, age, and part-time status.

### **Gender**

In 2012, the report *Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 2002 to 2012* (Gonzales, Allum, & Sowell, 2013) showed that in 2012, 51.2% of all doctorates awarded within the U.S. were achieved by women. From 2002–2012, women received more doctorates in 7 of the 10 broad study areas, such as education, public administration, business, and health sciences, while lagging in science and mathematics, engineering, and physical and earth sciences. Women accounted for most of the overall increase in overall numbers of PhDs showing an overall increase of 7.1% versus 4.4% in men. Within this 10-year span, women enrolling in graduate programs increased by an average of 2.1% per year versus 1.5% of men. These percentages indicate both master's and doctoral students.

## **Race/Ethnicity**

In 2012, 63.2% of the PhDs conferred to U.S. citizens or permanent residents went to Whites and 29.8% went to non-White students (7% were of unknown ethnicity). Enrollment into graduate programs by ethnic minorities has increased within the past decade. The report (Gonzales et al., 2013) states:

Racial/ethnic minorities have driven much of the growth in first-time graduate enrollment among U.S. citizens and permanent residents over the past decade, with year-to-year gains for minorities generally outpacing those of White students. In fall 2012, all minority groups experienced increases in first-time graduate enrollment, while Whites experienced declines. (p. 53)

Between 2007 and 2012, first-time graduate enrollments for Hispanics/Latinos increased an average of 5.0% per year. Blacks/African-Americans and Asians/Pacific Islanders increased at a rate of 3.7% in comparison to a 1.1% increase in Whites. American Indians/Alaska Natives showed a 2.5 decline in first-time graduate enrollments (Gonzales et al., 2013, p. 54).

## **Age**

The numbers of older non-traditional students in graduate school (master's and doctoral degrees) have increased since 1987, when 775,000 graduate students were 30 years or older, to 900,000 in 1997, to 1.5 million in 2007, of which 500,000 or one third of the older population were over 40. However, with the numbers of persons seeking graduate degrees, the percentages of students under the age of 30 were 49% of the total, and those over 30 were 50% of the overall graduate student population (Bell, 2009a).

Although older students tend to go to school part-time, the overall percentages of full-time students vs. part-time students did not reflect the expected increases. In 1989, 53% of all graduate students were part-time students, by 1997 that number had dropped

to 50% part-time students. In 2009, the percentage of part-time graduate students had dropped to 44%. In 2009, more men than women went full-time, but the gap is decreasing. Sixty percent of the men and 54% of women attended full-time. The field of Education was the only one in which most students still went part-time, 59% vs. 41% full-time (Bell, 2010). The author of the report, however, indicates some potential inconsistencies in the ways that full-time and part-time status were defined and reported. Regardless of the percentages, Bell notes that part-time students were almost 570,000 strong in 2009 (p. 2).

### **Part-Time Status**

The non-traditional state of part-time enrollment is difficult to quantify, particularly in doctoral programs. The research on such students is sparse as most studies still focus on full-time students or do not make a distinction between full-time and part-time status. As late as 2005, the CGS implied that part-time study was a less-than-desirable way to approach doctoral studies. As cited by Gardner and Gopaul (2012) the CGS policy statement on “The Doctor of Philosophy” stated that “full-time study allows students to concentrate exclusively on course work or research; to acquire the habits, attitudes, skills and insights necessary for attaining the PhD” (p. 64). The National Science Foundation’s 2014 report *Doctoral Recipients From U.S. Universities: 2012* does not include whether the degree was achieved through part-time or full-time study.

Part-time studies are difficult to quantify because there is no standard definition of what qualifies as part-time. Students may switch between full-time and part-time status, may pursue coursework full-time and transition to part-time during the dissertation stage or go full-time during the fall, but part-time during the summer. Institutions may measure

by credit hours per semester as a determination of status, but the total number of credits varies from institution to institution. Best estimates are that part-time students comprise between 6% to 12% of all doctoral students (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, pp. 63-64).

#### Non-Traditional Differences

Tinto (1993) discussed academic integration as an important ingredient in graduate persistence. For doctoral students, the academic integration important to doctoral completion is not with the university and overall student population, but instead falls with the students, faculty, and mores of the department and program in which one is a member (p. 232). The department is responsible for the policies and structures that direct the student's academic life and activities. For students who cannot integrate successfully into the department and program, isolation or 'lack of fit' can negatively impact completion (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Lovitts, 2001). There are several distinct pathways to become integrated academically within the program: (a) interacting with the rules and structures of the programs within the educational setting, (b), interacting with faculty, and (c) the interaction between students within the same program (Bragg, 1976).

Limited time on campus can limit the access to the university culture and integration into its overall services. Non-traditional students generally have less accessibility to other students and faculty because of part-time status, full-time employment, and other responsibilities. Much of their doctoral work may be done off-hours, time when they cannot easily access faculty, peers, or university resources. Part-time and older students who do not have access to a cohort or some equivalent, such as a regionally based organized peer group, do not consider peers to be part of their overall

support system (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012), effectively removing one pathway to academic integration. Ineffective peer interaction can also impact the overall student experience. Employed non-traditional students are also vulnerable to the concept that the journey to doctoral completion is one that they can do alone (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

While balance is a common theme among all doctoral students, non-traditional students, with greater external responsibilities, face a more intense level of pressure in maintaining that balance (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). For those who work full-time or part-time, the number of hours for academic activity is decreased.

The concept of ‘wearing different hats’ between familial responsibilities, work, and study can be even more pronounced when working as a professional in a role that does not match with the student’s program focus (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 69). Employers may have little interest in developing an employee in a field or topic from which they will see no benefit, particularly for part-time or temporary employees. Without that support, the flexibility in schedule that the student may occasionally need for academic responsibilities may not be afforded to them (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

### **Mitigating the Obstacles**

Regardless of whether or not a student experiences any of the factors that can influence attrition, ultimately, a student graduates or does not graduate. To assist in overcoming such obstacles, many efforts have been put forth by the various parties. Universities or the programs institute doctoral writing programs (Nerad & Miller, 1997), dissertation support groups (Inman & Silverstein, 2003), stress management programs



(Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006), cognitive and emotional skills development programs (Hearn, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008), provide more financial aid (Grasso et al., 2009), improve student-to-faculty ratios, increase full-time faculty (Goenner & Snaith, 2004), provide online workbooks and program descriptions to set student expectations of the doctoral pursuit (Grasso et al., 2009), and recruit students who better fit the overall atmosphere and culture of the program, all in an effort to ameliorate conditions that appear to increase attrition rates.

Some universities have restructured programs to enable the student to gain more research experience prior to beginning the actual dissertation process. Increasing the number of mentors, teaching and research assistant positions can increase student research productivity, potentially improving completion rates (Di Pierro, 2011). Presenting a paper at a conference or publishing a research article prior to doctoral completion is a strong predictor of doctoral success (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Improving the faculty advisor-student relationship as well as the connection to the program itself continues to be an area of focus for many institutions. Efforts to facilitate experiences and interactions between faculty and student in both formal and informal settings can mitigate isolationism (Grasso et al., 2009), and bring the student into a nurturing community of scholars (Golde, 1994; Katz, 1997; Lovitts, 2001). To foster collaborative faculty-student relationships, faculty training programs on how to be a good advisor, debriefings with students after dissertation completion, and checklists and tools for faculty members on dissertation committees or acting as advisors are all items that can decrease impediments to doctoral completion (Di Pierro, 2007, 2011). Faculty members should be student advocates (Barnes & Austin, 2009), and should ensure that

they reach out to students on a consistent basis. The students have an expectation that contact should not be one-sided. Proactive communication by the faculty can foster a more positive relationship and also help indicate when a student may be experiencing issues that may lead to an ETD or dropping-out (Manathunga, 2005).

Students can increase their chances for graduating by being prepared for the effort doctoral pursuit requires. A high level of personal commitment (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011), responsibility (Kluever, 1997), and motivation (Geranion, 2010; K. E. Green, 1997; Liechty et al., 2009; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2010) are necessary attributes for doctoral success. Students need to be self-advocates (Golde & Dore, 2001) and need to work in conjunction with faculty to ensure their success. If they are not receiving the productive support they need, they should seek help elsewhere (Brus, 2006). Ultimately, it is their doctoral completion or attrition that is at stake.

Whatever skills and attributes one brings into the pursuit of the PhD, it is what one believes about his or her ability to use those talents and attributes to success-fully complete the doctoral or academic process that ultimately enables completion (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990; Faghihi et al., 1999; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2010; Schunk, 1984b; Varney, 2010).

### **Bandura's Self-efficacy**

Bandura's construct of perceived self-efficacy describes a person's belief that one has the capabilities to influence and execute courses of action to attain a particular goal (Bandura, 1997a). It is these beliefs that affect individual functions through cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes (p. 3). Self-efficacy enables an individual to decide upon the level of effort to expend or how long one will persist when

faced with obstacles that impinge upon completion of the intended task (Bandura, 1982). To that end, people will avoid activities they believe to exceed their capabilities and undertake those they believe they can manage (Bandura, 1977; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Contingent on the situation, environment, and actions required, an individual's level of self-efficacy can fluctuate greatly (Bandura, 1982, 1997a, 1997b; Bandura & Barbaranelli, 1996; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Schunk, 1984a, 1984b). Belief in one's own capabilities can be tempered if an environment is considered negatively biased, unresponsive, or punitive (Bandura, 1982). Events and situations perceived to be beyond the abilities of the individual can undermine self-efficacy and future performance (Bandura & Cervone, 1983). Negative feedback can negatively impact performance levels for students with sufficient skills, regardless of whether the feedback provided is accurate (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990). Bouffard-Bouchard (1990) showed that positive feedback on capabilities of college students yielded higher performance than did negative feedback, despite equal levels of abilities of the students. Positive past performance, in such cases, may not maintain a person's self-efficacy enough to override the negatives of a particular situation and environment (Bandura, 1997b).

Varney showed a direct linear relationship between a student's perception of the doctoral experience and the level of doctoral self-efficacy (Varney, 2010). Within dissertation efforts, a research environment perceived negatively by students decreases dissertation self-efficacy, which in turn negatively impacts productivity and doctoral progress, through procrastination (K. E. Green, 1997; Kluever, 1997) or other task behaviors (Faghihi et al., 1999; Geranion, 2010; Varney, 2010). Negative research

environments have attributes such as isolation while completing the dissertation (Gardner, 2009b; Geranion, 2010; Holmes et al., 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Madsen, 1992), particularly in arts and humanities fields (Geranion, 2010). Lack of direction and guidance, experienced as poor advising or problematic relationships with advisor or dissertation committee (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Barnes, Chard, Wolfe, & Stassen, 2011; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; de Valero, 2001; Felder, 2010; Gardner, 2009b, 2009c; Golde, 2000; Jacks et al., 1983; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Smith et al., 2006), lack of previous research experience and/or the inability to choose or narrow the dissertation topic are other examples of contributing elements to a negatively perceived research environment (Grasso et al., 2009; Katz, 1997; Nettles & Millett, 2006).

A positively perceived research environment heightens self-efficacy and contributes to greater advancement of doctoral efforts (Faghihi et al., 1999; Varney, 2010). Environments that include strong advising, are caring and supportive may be positively perceived by students (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Golde, 1994, 2000). Faculty members who effectively model an interest in research may in turn enhance the student's research interest (Bard et al., 2000; Gelso, Mallinckrodt, & Judge, 1996). The Research Training Environment Scale (RTES), which measures a student's research self-efficacy as it relates to the research environment, used faculty modeling and positive reinforcement as two components integral to the environment (Gelso et al., 1996). Faghihi found that research self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of dissertation completion (Faghihi et al., 1999).

In environments that provide many stressors and opportunities for adversity, the individual becomes responsible, in part, for his/her own motivation and subsequent action

(Bandura, 1977). In such cases, the student must find ways in which to maintain strong levels of self-efficacy as they navigate the unknown, through internal or external means. Many look to chairs and advisor to provide the verbal encouragement needed to keep efficacy high. Others look at recent peer graduates as role models in success, allowing the student to mimic the graduate’s journey and in turn raise efficacy. Within his studies of phobic patients, Bandura found that a person’s self-efficacy—and therefore performance—could be positively impacted through distinctive routes (Bandura, 1982). See Table 1.

Table 1

*Self-efficacy Inputs*

Route to higher efficacy	Description
Enactive Mastery	Interpretation of one’s previous successes and the perseverance needed to complete such tasks.
Vicarious Experiences	Observation of another who models success of a specific goal. The model must be similar in capability for success to increase personal self-efficacy.
Verbal Persuasion	Creation of a supportive environment using feedback constructed to highlight capabilities, and opportunities to bridge gaps to achieve goal.
Psychological States	Interpretation of psychological or emotional states as indicators of capability to accomplish a particular goal. Positive or negative sensory assessment impacts self-efficacy.

Through these modes, the student can modify her own personal efficacy through utilizing both internal and external means, as needed. Self-efficacy research has shown

that the higher the level within a specific endeavor, the greater the performance (Bandura, 1982, p. 124).

### **Summary**

Reasons for doctoral attrition, retention, and completion are as varied as the programs, situations, and the students themselves. Although not all attrition is bad, there are many students who did not need to become an attrition statistic. There are certain characteristics endemic within institutions and within the relationships between institution, advisor, and student that can be changed through policies and programmatic improvements to improve the chances of doctoral success.

Students as well have responsibilities to ensure that they are prepared for doctoral pursuit and do what is necessary to foster their own successes. Non-traditional and traditional students alike will inevitably have experiences and situations that challenge them on the way to completion. It is how they are addressed that factors into whether the student completes in a timely manner, completes well after expected time frames, or drops out completely.

An individual's doctoral self-efficacy may be one mechanism that enables the student to use the talents and the PhD resources available to successfully navigate and ultimately graduate.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

A qualitative case study methodology was used to examine the experiences of PhD students in the non-traditional leadership program at Andrews University who graduated more than 10 years after starting the program. Purposive sampling was used to identify potential participants within this study. Data were collected from interviews, program documentation, and university records. Pseudonyms are used when discussing the participants.

This study addressed the following questions: (a) How did the non-traditional doctoral students who took longer than 10 years to complete the Andrews Leadership doctoral program describe their journeys to completion? (b) What experiences affected their time-to-completion?

#### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach (Merriam, 1998). A qualitative approach was chosen because of the latitude it provided and its inductive nature of discovery, making it easier to uncover the core experiences of these ‘10+ Completers’ within the context of their journeys. Yin (2011) identifies five characteristics of a qualitative approach that matched my discovery and analysis intentions. Qualitative research is most appropriate when:

1. Studying the meaning of people's lives, under real-world conditions
2. Representing the views and perspectives of the people ... in a study
3. Covering the contextual conditions within which people live
4. Contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behavior
5. Striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone. (pp. 7, 8)

My study fits this investigative process in several ways. The interviews were centered on the personal experiences and feelings of these graduates as they worked to achieve the PhD. The graduates' own words about the journey were collected and analyzed to look for common themes and emerging concepts. Where possible, multiple sources were used for confirmation or supplemental information, such as University-provided data, for example, demographics, dates, student handbooks. Case study was the method of conducting this research.

Using a case study as the method of study provided me the opportunity to examine a phenomenon within a specific context (Yin, 2011). In this bounded case study, my intent was to examine the phenomenon of completion of the PhD 10 years or more after initiation by a group of students within the non-traditional Leadership doctoral program found within Andrews University School of Education. This study probed for how and why such students were able to finally complete the PhD after a time investment of 10 years or more. Collection of information included interviews, University documents, and my personal notes. I performed a test interview to validate or modify the question set to improve data collection (Stake, 1995). It was also used to validate the overall design and analysis plans, such as coding (Yin, 2011).



## **Self as the Research Instrument**

Much of my interest in this topic was due to my own personal experiences as a graduate student unable to complete my doctorate within the prescribed time frame. Although I completed the first two phases of my doctoral journey easily, I stumbled through several years of frustration and procrastination while working on my dissertation. Like others, I went down several errant paths that were disastrous in terms of dissertation completion. I attempted multiple dissertation topics, each faulty for varying reasons. I started with what I thought were good dissertation topics, but each had its own fatal flaws:

1. Selecting a good topic that was extremely interesting to me, but one that did not tie to my coursework and overall base knowledge—which added months in building sufficient knowledge to begin to write a proposal.

2. Finding each of my topics so interesting that scope creep occurred. Despite her efforts, my advisor was unable to reign in my enthusiasm and my inclination towards divergence, not convergence. What I was proposing was a life's work, not a dissertation, and my advisor/dissertation chair could not help me make my topic(s) more manageable.

3. I also unsuccessfully tied my dissertation's work to my workplace. Despite three separate and documented approvals, ultimately the 'go-ahead' was revoked because of changes in leadership (twice) or a manager deciding that the information gleaned would be 'too provocative'.

It was the accumulation of these actions that influenced my decision to stop dissertation efforts. In hindsight, the effects of these setbacks were perhaps more acutely

felt because they were largely borne in isolation—I was frustrated that I could not do what I wanted at my workplace and my dissertation efforts at work were not valued.

I minimized the positive effects that my friends who had recently graduated from the program could have made in my endeavors if I had truly reached out to them. It was embarrassing to me that I was having such problems. I believed that most were not experiencing similar problems, nor did I want to add additional stress to their lives. Their help and support became more effective once I started being productive and again felt I could reach out.

I could commiserate with one friend who also experienced dissertation challenges, but we were only able to use each other as supports during this difficult time, not as a mechanism to move forward. Questions about the status of my PhD from others in my life were embarrassing.

Lastly, I did not reach out to my advisor. Feeling her disappointment in my lack of progress and a growing detachment as she left for another university, I withdrew from our relationship. I needed a break, and put my energies into a new position, which had a steep learning curve. For almost 2 years, I had virtually no progress on my PhD.

During that ‘hiatus’, I was able to reassess and reflect on the potential causes for my delayed dissertation completion and realized that I did want to refocus in the program and complete my PhD. What had changed so that this would become possible now? This question soon became the impetus to begin this current dissertation, this next more-fruitful journey. It became important to not only know why I continued after so many years trying and not trying to complete, but also what happens to others in their elongated

doctoral time frames and what enabled them to complete their PhDs and ultimately graduate?

I found that from my perspective, Bandura's self-efficacy framework was relevant to my own journey and thought it might have relevance in the stories of others as well. My own internal support systems were no longer sufficient to sustain the belief that I had the talent and capabilities to complete the dissertation. External supports were necessary. The first came in the form of my friend who was also ABD. She chose, as I did, to take an extended period of time away from her studies to refresh a bit before she completed. She completed her dissertation and graduated at the 10-year mark. Once I saw a peer, who struggled at times as I did to complete a meaningful dissertation, I could see myself doing the same. She became a model for me and by vicariously experiencing her success she provided me an opportunity to restore a higher level of internal self-efficacy. I could compare her journey to my own, and use her story as a model for the path to success. I then re-connected with my friends who had graduated and asked for their support, which they gave wholeheartedly.

Lastly, I reconnected with the program director at the University who had an unwavering belief that I could and would complete my dissertation. She shared her beliefs with me and shared stories of others who have also gone through trying times, providing persuasive and supportive words of how I could finish the journey. She has also helped keep me targeted and focused, helping me to keep my motivation and self-efficacy rooted in small successes—without the worry of 'burdening other ABDs with my problems'.

The body of knowledge about PhD completion rates focuses primarily on the causes for graduation delays or dropping out of the program. Discussions center around the problems intrinsic in the doctoral process or on what characteristics or attributes a student must have to overcome such obstacles. But for those students who have been in programs more than 10 years, have experienced external and/or internal setbacks and complications, yet still complete the program, what are their stories of ultimate success? How did they finally complete their PhD's?

### **Purposive Sample**

This study focused on the experiences of multiple graduate students within a non-traditional leadership PhD program who surpassed the 10-year time limit for degree completion but did go on to complete the degree.

Purposive sampling was used to determine potential research participants who fit the conceptual framework established for this study. This non-random sampling through creation of specific selection criteria enabled me to determine what the case study would be and what it would not be—and to better focus on the problem to be studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Such selection criteria may include time and place; time and activity; and definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The selection criteria for subjects within this case study were: (a) LEAD graduates who completed their PhD within the Leadership program at Andrews University between 2008 and 2013 (time, place, activity, and context); (b) LEAD graduates who completed the doctoral process after the 10-year mark (time and definition); (c) LEAD graduates who entered the program fulfilling all of the admission requirements of the University (definition); (d) LEAD graduates with strong American-

English skills (definition). This last criterion was added to minimize potential errors in interpretation of the interviews. Using publicly accessible information made available through the LEAD program, a list was compiled of people who fit the criteria. Once the groups of graduates were identified, an email was sent out to them outlining the research project, the overall question protocol, general IRB requirements, and a request as to whether or not they would be willing to participate. The final sample included 12 of the 16 people identified as completing the LEAD program after 10 years or more. The other four individuals chose not to participate either by their non-response or by indicating that they did not want to be included in the sample.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was done through review of University records, individual interviews, a demographic survey, and program materials. The emerging stories from the participants were examined for commonalities and differences to discover emerging themes and potential interpretations of them.

### **Interview Procedures**

Each participant was offered the opportunity to complete the interview by the phone, email, or Skype, as mutually agreed upon by the participant and researcher. Due to the limitations of distance and travel, the interviews were done remotely. Eleven of the participants were interviewed by phone or through Skype. One participant decided to answer the survey questions via email—clarifications were also received via email. The questions were semi-structured and used to provide a level of consistency within the interview; and the responses were recorded via audio and transcribed. The participants were given the questions prior to the interview so that they would be knowledgeable of

the areas I wanted them to discuss. As a researcher from the Andrews LEAD program, I was sensitive to the situation of the participants (being 10+ Completers), but wanted to maintain enough distance so as to not overwhelm their stories with my own bias. Rather, the goal was to aim for balance, “to ask about multiple sides of a story, questioning each interviewee with intensity and empathy” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 12), and to be open and accepting of different or conflicting points of view. Most of the interviews started with the statement: “Tell me your story”—to allow the participant to engage in the interview as freely as possible. However, specific questions were asked if needed in order to elicit information or further clarification. To establish a level of consistency among the interviews, the interviews attempted to capture information in four areas: the background of how and why they entered the program; the journey through the doctoral process; their thoughts on how they were ultimately able to complete the doctorate; and personally understanding themselves.

## Documentation

### **Program-Related Documentation**

Publicly accessible documents from the University website or other media were used to validate or add context or clarification to the interview data. As program requirements may change over time, information from program handbooks, newsletters, and other University documentation from specific time frames were included within the study as warranted.

A list of individuals who fit the criteria for the study was compiled by the University for the purposes of soliciting participation within the study. For participants of the study, the University provided private information (as permitted by the participant)

regarding achievement timelines and sequencing of academic events, membership and attendance within their regional group(s).

An interview with Shirley Freed, one of the co-founders of the LEAD program, provided information about the beginnings and changes made throughout the program. This transcript was part of the documentation.

### **Participant Communications**

Aside from the original interviews, there were several additional touchpoints with the participants: (a) email exchanges between participants and researcher to validate interview transcripts, (b) emails between participants and researcher for clarification on items in the interviews to correctly build their stories; and (c) emails containing a copy of the stories to be placed into the research paper asking for revisions and/or approval.

### **Research Journal**

I kept a research journal to record and reflect on key items and discoveries throughout the process, as well as recommendations provided by the Chair.

### **Data Analysis**

Using Yin's Five-Phased Cycle for Analyzing Qualitative data, the overall process included the following components:

1. **Compilation:** ordering the amassed data into a database. After recording and transcribing the interviews, all documents were loaded into the software application Dedoose, which I used as my analytical tool.

2. **Disassembling:** breaking down the data into smaller fragments. As part of the overall interview process, the aim was to create some consistency about the data by

focusing on the areas of background of entering program: journey, thoughts and emotions about the process, and self-reflection. However, instead of creating a coding structure based on those areas, I began this stage by initially using an open-ended approach, reviewing the interviews and identifying the feelings, contexts, thoughts, and actions found, irrespective of theme or areas of focus. These codes were provisional and meant to expose similarities and relationships not found within the initial interview structure. This coding process yielded 206 different codes identified within the 12 interviews.

3. Reassembling: reorganizing the data fragments by recombining them into themes. As part of the second coding cycle, I looked for patterns and interrelationships between the various codes. There were enough conceptually similar codes that the set was collapsed into 26 individual codes, found within seven different themes.

4. Interpreting: using the reorganized data to create descriptive or explanatory narratives that enable conclusions. Researchers can reach new meanings through the interpretation of each individual instance and through aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class (Stake, 1995, p. 74). Through analysis of the codes and themes and how they manifested in the words, feelings, and context provided by the individual participant, I was able to assemble the story of each 10+ Completer, one that the participant believed was true to her thoughts and experiences. From within those stories, I could bring the overall 10+ Completer experience to light.

5. Concluding: drawing conclusions across the entire study that summarizes that which can be discerned by this study. This may include learnings, generalizations, recognition of further research needed, or a call-to-action (Yin, 2011). Being able to construct and draw from an interpretive environment of themes and experiences for the



10+ Completer population overall, several key understandings and new insights were gained regarding the 10+ Completers and how they ultimately completed their doctorates. These insights in turn have generated recommendations for the Andrews LEAD program, and brought forth unexplored questions and options for additional research.

### **Validity**

Validity was based on the assumption that the revelations of the participants capture an accurate interpretation of data or events and that the analysis and subsequent conclusions reached by the researcher reasonably reflect what occurred and can be gleaned from the data. Within qualitative studies, the ability to increase surety of the writer's interpretation of the events requires use of additional modes to collect or affirm the data and data analysis of what has been collected (Yin, 2011). Three types of validity checking were done throughout this study: peer evaluation, member checks, and triangulation.

Peer evaluation, the act of asking a qualified colleague to review and comment on items as they emerge (Merriam, 1998), was done in the early portions of the study in two significant ways. First was in framing the semi-structured interview focus areas. I reviewed the initial question set with a peer to ensure they were understandable and relevant to the data I hoped to capture. That resulted in several wording changes to improve clarity. In order to validate consistency and reliability in data coding (second-cycle), one of the interviews was coded by an independent researcher and compared to the researcher's coding. The independent researcher was given the overall research question prior to her coding. The codes created and the excerpts tagged by the

independent researcher were very similar to my codes and coded selections. As a result of this comparison, one code was changed as it better represented the data.

Member checking is the process by which the researcher's interpretations of the data are shared with the participants to provide them the opportunity to discuss and clarify the interpretation and to provide new or additional perspectives on the issue under study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The transcript of the original interview and the participant's story used within the research paper were sent to them for comments. None of the participants requested modifications to the transcript; one did request a minor change to her story, which was accommodated. Additionally, there was correspondence between several of the participants and me to clarify several points of confusion on my part, throughout their stories and my reporting of the findings.

Triangulation is the process which aims to use at least three ways to corroborate that being described or reported within a study. As stated by Miles and Huberman (1994), triangulation "is supposed to support a finding by showing that independent measures of it agree with it, or at least, do not contradict it" (p. 266). Recognizing that recollections may not have been true to the actual time frames and progressions of the participants through the program, I cross-referenced their interviews and demographic survey data with the data provided by the University. The data and their potential usage had been previously identified to the 10+ Completers and their approvals received from the participants through the Informed Consent process. Additionally, the interview of Shirley, one of the founders of the program, provided a rich source of information to compare to the interviews and stories of the participants, particularly for those who were in the first cohorts.

The University provided access to a program review report which validated milestones **in** the program's history and what changes occurred to the program's overall structure and requirements. Yearly handbooks for the program were cross-referenced as well for comparison purposes. Lastly, an article from the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* from 2010 called "Learning While Leading: The Andrews University Leadership Program" (Freed, Covrig, & Baumgartner, 2010) lent another view of the program. This article was written by Shirley and two other faculty members, so it was not just Shirley's ideas and experiences, but rather a combination of three independent points of view and experiences coalesced into one shared meaning. Its discussion of the "Andrews experience" provided yet another avenue for comparison.

### **Generalizability**

Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher, once said, "You could not step twice into the same river for other waters are ever flowing on to you." Taken literally, this quotation indicates that rivers are ever-changing. However, metaphorically, it reflects the pervasive quality of change. Time and environment can never be duplicated, and therefore no two river experiences can ever be identical. Yet, despite the uniqueness of each encounter, each step into the river has similarities with each other step into that river as well as steps into other rivers.

This study is a single case study on a sampling of a particular group of non-traditional PhD graduates within a single program within a single university. As the study is based upon constructivist theory, each participant constructed their own realities as a 10+ Completer at Andrews University. I as a researcher then constructed the realities of their stories, found themes, and discussed topics based upon my own experiences.

Likewise, the differing, yet similar experiences of the participants as interpreted by the researcher provide the emerging themes: These themes identify the recurring message found within the situation (Eisner, 1998) and are generalizable based upon one's interpretation of its meaning. As Merriam eloquently stated: "General resides in the particular" (Merriam, 1998, p. 210).

Although the exact study and findings can never be reproduced, it does not mean that the findings in the study are not generalizable. Eisner (1998) states, "The theme, embedded in the particular situation, extends beyond the situation itself" (p. 103). If the reader finds validity in the study and its findings, and is able to relate those to similar situations she has encountered, the study is capable of enabling naturalistic generalizations. Constructing and interpreting the themes within the emerging stories of the subjects and other data sources enables one to experience what was particular to that case study, and what may be generalizable to other situations we know through previous experience (Stake, 2005). It is the researcher, through thick descriptions and critical assertions of the case, who provides the reader the information to ultimately view the study in the similar light of understanding and to assign validity to conclusions found within the study. Such generalizations can be combined with current knowledge to modify or support existing generalizations (Stake, 2005, p. 86).

### **Ethics and IRB**

An important part of a study was its ethical underpinnings, especially its avoidance of harm to the research participants and research integrity. The graduates who participated in the study did so voluntarily. Although descriptions of the events and interpretations throughout the study were attributed to a single individual, anonymity was

maintained through the use of pseudonyms. This study met all requirements of the Andrews University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), including signed consent forms from the participants.

In regard to research integrity, Yin states that “people must know, through your actions, demeanor, and research methods that you are striving to produce research that is truthful, including clarifying the point of view being represented” (Yin, 2011, p. 41).

This study included a detailed description of me as the research instrument, highlighting biases and the filter in which this study was conducted. The methodology used within the study was reviewed with the dissertation committee to ensure appropriateness of action and execution. The results and interpretations are my own, made as open and transparent as possible to the reader.

### **Summary**

This case study focused on a purposeful sample of PhD students who have successfully completed their doctoral pursuits within the LEAD program at Andrews University after 10 or more years. Although the stories and discoveries were centered on their specific experiences, the themes and knowledge were naturalistically generalizable for the reader within the context of the overall field of study. Semi-structured interviews, completed face-to-face, via phone, and in written format, documentation, and the researcher's research journal as well as papers, articles, and handbooks provided the data for this study. Pseudonyms were used throughout to ensure anonymity.

## CHAPTER 4

### PRESENTATION OF DATA

#### **Introduction**

This section introduces a history and overview of the Leadership program at Andrews University, describes the participants in the study, and identifies and describes the themes that emerged from the stories of these individuals. Andrews University is a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) school, founded in 1874. It is located in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

#### **Leadership Program**

The initial idea of forming a Leadership program within the University's School of Education began in 1993. The vision for this program was to blend the practices and theories of leadership within job-embedded competencies. The audience that they hoped to attract was full-time employed leaders from varying professional communities, such as churches, health care, businesses, and schools, where it would be difficult for these professionals to participate in the traditional full-time PhD campus-based program (Freed et al., 2010). Rather than designing a PhD program based solely on classroom and research experiences, those who enrolled within the program would be practitioners within their specific job settings who could engage in and exhibit the competencies of leadership. These competencies, documented and assessed as part of the program, would be supported by a robust theoretical framework.

Like most PhD programs, appropriate test scores and grades are required for entry into the program. Unlike many PhD programs, however, the Leadership program requires that the student already has a Master's degree that adequately prepares her for her desired area of specialty. The applicant must be currently working within her chosen field, plus have at least 5 years of prior employment experience. These additional requirements, in and of themselves, contribute to the fact that most students entering this program are 30 years of age or older.

As a remote program, there are several additional touch points that are required to ensure that the student is learning not only with faculty, through online classes, or through independent study, but in conjunction with other students in the program. Regional Groups are groups of students who are connected together to share learning among peers. These groups meet several times throughout the year either face-to-face or virtually. This group provides support and knowledge, and becomes an integral part of 'demonstrating competence' for each student. There is also an initial orientation for all who start the program, and all students are required to attend an annual leadership conference, called Roundtable.

It should be noted that several of the following components have been renamed over the years; the nomenclature under which the 10+ Completers entered the program is used in this discussion.

### Program Components

The components of the program as it was rolled out in 1994 are essentially the same as today:

1. An Individualized Development Plan (IDP) is a plan that each student creates outlining the specifics of how the student will demonstrate competency in the 20 identified leadership competencies and how the individual will garner the theoretical base of these competencies. In 2006, the original 20 competencies were reorganized into 15 competencies.

2. The portfolio is the student's collection of documentation demonstrating each competency and its accompanying theories, as well as a synthesis paper characterizing the overall body of work and the student's interaction with it. Self-reflection is a key component throughout the portfolio process. The student's Regional Group (RG) reviews the individual competency documentation and provides feedback prior to sending these components to the faculty member(s) who then review. Once all pieces of the portfolio are successfully completed, the student then undergoes a portfolio defense in front of peers and faculty.

3. Coursework is classes that can be either courses structured and run as part of the overall curriculum for the University, designed and executed by the student with the approval of the appropriate faculty member, or provided by a faculty member as a seminar for a specific group of students. Initial mandatory classes included: Leadership Orientation; Individual Development Plan (now known as Leadership and Learning Plan Development); Issues in Leadership Foundations; Issues in Research; Issues in Leadership Theory, and Dissertation Proposal Development.

4. The dissertation process for the PhD functions similarly to most programs. There is a dissertation committee, which includes an advisory professor—often referred to as the 'chair'—who provides supervisory oversight to the topic, the style of the



research and the mechanism by which research is conducted, and reviews the dissertation work itself for robustness of research and ability to contribute to the overall body of knowledge within the specific area of focus.

### Programmatic Growth and Maturation

During its initial years, although the overall structure of the program had been determined, the process by which to fulfill these requirements was extremely flexible. Flexibility in allowing the student the creative freedom in selecting the specific area(s) of focus, the flexibility in constructing and executing the portfolio, and the self-reflection opportunities throughout the program were cited by many of the students as reasons for joining this program. One 10+ Completer remarked:

The program appealed to me because it was not a traditional—I'm not a traditional learner. I'm a very 'outside the box' person. And it was because I could make it practical and I make it who I was. And the way it was set up was very appealing to me. And so I decided, OK I will do that.

As noted by one of the original three program founders (Shirley):

I think in the beginning stages of the program, the program was so flexible we didn't even think about classes. We didn't have classes. We had to figure out how to get credits. We had to figure out how to get people registered for credits. So for instance, our initial orientation was actually 12 semester credits. And embedded in that was the material that we now have separated into three different courses. . . . So initially our idea with classes was more go to the regional group, meet with them, teach them something, and then get them to work on portfolio or dissertation around whatever you were teaching.

Throughout the progression of the program, a combination emerged of seminar-style sessions held within the regional groups as well as several classes that are required as part of the overall program. There are other organized classes that are electives, as well as individualized study options.

Academic rigor increased as the program matured, with emphasis on creating stronger linkages between the portfolio competencies and the required and self-designed or individualized courses. As expressed by Shirley:

So over time we've gotten much better. And we continue to work on that by really making sure that when people take a course from us, that we ask ourselves . . . the question, 'So what will you have at the end of this that you could put into your portfolio?' And I say to people all the time, 'Look, I'm not giving you a grade for this class or independent study unless you tell me exactly what you're putting into your portfolio and I can evaluate and give you a grade for your class, and an evaluation for your portfolio at the same time.'

#### Programmatic Changes Affecting the Curriculum, Focus, and Constituents

Since its inception in 1994, several major changes have taken place within the overall leadership program. These include:

1. Publication of the first program handbook in 1999. It is updated as needed and distributed to new students yearly.
2. Required dissertation proposal for extension beyond the 10-year graduation limit in 2004.
3. Required continuous registration (3 semesters per year), in order to encourage participants to make continuous and adequate progress in 2005.
4. Revised competencies from 20 to 15 to resolve issues of overlap in 2006.
5. Developed and implemented rubrics for competency evaluation in 2006.
6. Changed 10-year limit to completed doctoral program to 7 years in 2006.
7. Created online formats of all program courses in 2007.
8. Required doctoral participants to submit an article for publication in 2008.
9. Changed Regional Group name to Leadership and Learning Group (LLG), as well as Individual Development Plan (IDP) to Leadership and Learning Plan (LLP) to

emphasize the centrality of learning and leadership within both aspects of the program in 2008.

10. Limited total inactive time to 1 year (of 7) for PhD participants in 2008.

11. Student, regional group, and a second faculty member are added as part of the evaluation team for competencies in 2012. Each evaluates separately established rubrics.

12. Student, regional group, and faculty assessments are given equal weight in the determination of proof of competency attainment in 2012.

### Overall Leadership Program Student Demographics

One of the greater challenges in a part-time non-traditional program is determining the stage a person is in throughout the program. The ability of the student to take varying amounts of credits per semester and work on the portfolio, coursework, and dissertation simultaneously or incrementally can make it difficult to assess progress. Students like the 10+ Completers make it difficult as well because of the length of time they take in the program, and at times, hard to distinguish from the late dropouts, until they eventually graduate (Reamer, 1990).

As seen in Figure 1, since 1994, a total of 481 students applied for the PhD program in Leadership at Andrews University; 87 were denied acceptance. As of summer 2014, 72 students were still active in the program; 2 were inactive. One hundred seventy-three graduated from the program; 147 dropped out.

Figure 2 shows the Leadership program has an overall graduation rate of 54% compared to a national average of 57% (King, 2008). One hundred forty-seven students dropped out of the program, most within the first 2 years. The average time to drop out is 2.59 years, which is in line with the average time to drop out for STEM programs and *not*

consistent with the data that indicate that PhD candidates in Education programs drop out later in the program than they do in most all other subject areas, except the Humanities (King, 2008). Eighteen of the graduates were 10+

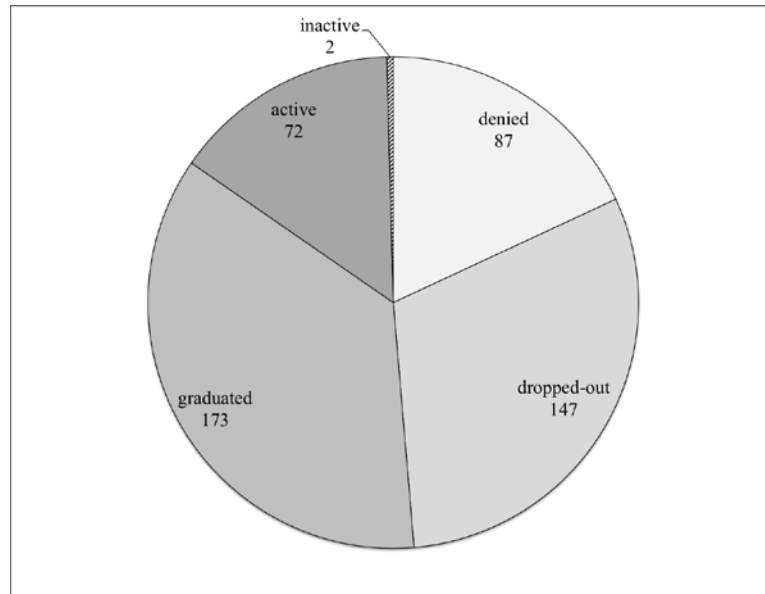


Figure 1. Applicant distribution 1994-2014.

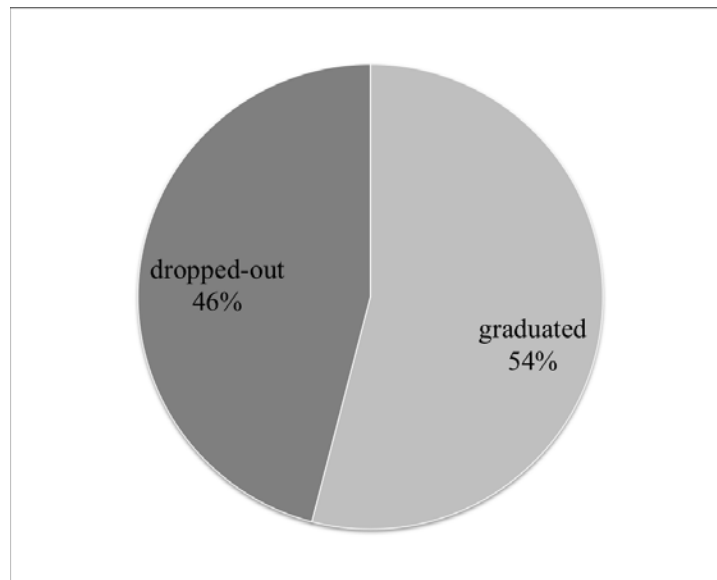


Figure 2. Percentages of graduates vs. dropouts.

Completers (two more had graduated during the writing of this paper), 10.4% of the overall graduating population or 5.6% of all students who either completed or officially dropped out of the program. Seventy-two of the students who have not graduated are still active, the majority of which are under 5 years within the program; two others are considered inactive. The average ETD is 5.86 years. As the students are required to have a master's degree prior to admission, the ETD is based upon start of doctorate only.

From 1994-2014, the Andrews LEAD program admitted 394 students: 197 women, 197 men. From the overall graduations, this 50-50 split still applies: 144 females and 145 males graduated. This number is not aligned with the average for PhDs in education where almost 70% of all PhDs were awarded to women. One might assume that the emphasis in the LEAD program is on Leadership rather than a program that is based primarily on educational theory and its applications; this may attract different numbers of men and women.

## **10+ Completers**

### **General Demographics**

Since the inception of the leadership program in 1994, there were 16 students who graduated 10 years or more past their admission dates. Attempts were made to engage all of these graduates for this research. Of the graduates, 4 did not participate in this study: Two did not respond to numerous requests for participation; one did not want to participate due to an excessive work schedule; and the last did not participate for personal reasons. The remaining 11 graduates plus the researcher (who will ultimately qualify as a late completer) became the resource pool for this study yielding a 75% response rate for

the study. Pseudonyms have been used for all the participants. The real first names of faculty are used. Table 2 highlights the general demographics of the participants.

Table 2

*10+Completers Demographics*

Name	Gender	Years to complete	Age range received PhD	Academic Support		
				Number of Advisors	Number of Chairs	Number of Regional Groups
Bart	M	14	56-60	1	1 *	3
Cathleen	F	12	66-70	2	2	2
Dorothy	F	11	56-60	4	1	2
Genn	F	13	51-55	1	2 *	1
Noreen	F	12	56-60	1	1*	1
Margret	F	14	56-60	2	1*	1
Noreen	F	16	56-60	1	1 *	3 plus dyad
Patrick	M	11	61-65	3	1 *	3
Robert	M	16	51-55	2	1*	3
Rose	F	12	51-55	2	1*	1
Tanya	F	11	61-65	3	3*	2
Tom	M	12	46-50	3	1 *	2

\*Indicates last advisor and chair was same person.

Synopsis of 10+ Completers' Characteristics

The overall group of 10+ Completers interviewed was comprised of 8 females and 4 males, of various ages. The participants were employed during their time in the program, in positions of high responsibility and work volume (which will be discussed in

the participant stories, below). All but one worked full-time during their journeys—except for one who retired to become a consultant in her field before graduation. Several of the students indicated full-time status although they had summers off. Their jobs were in the field of education. The average time to graduate was 13 years. Most experienced job changes because of promotion or change of location. Several also held two or more jobs simultaneously; the second job was as an adjunct faculty member at local universities or colleges. For eight of the 10+ Completers, their primary professions were within the education field, in either supervisory or administrative roles. Four of these participants worked within K-12 schools and four within university/college entities; the remaining four functioned within health care, three as management or administration, the other, as a clinician. All continued to work throughout the duration of their time in the program and were able to use experiences from the work environment as part of their portfolios, dissertations, or coursework. Several of the 10+ Completers worked more than 40 hours per week prior to any sort of work being done on their doctorate. Several of the students indicated full-time status although they had their summers off because their jobs were within the field of education. The average time to graduate was 13 years. The largest number of 10+ Completers was between 56-60 years of age when they graduated.

In examining the 10+ Completers' demographics, the only characteristic that stands out is that there were more females (66%) than males (33%), which does support that in the field of education women graduate marginally later than men. The data show that women graduated on average 12.0 years after starting graduate school (to earn both master's and doctorate) vs. men who graduated at 11.6 years (National Science

Foundation, 2014). It also supports the observation that more women may complete after Year 10 than men do (Sowell et al., 2009, p. 50).

In comparing the overview of their “academic support” numbers, there was little that could be called out as a potential reason for delaying completion, as their experiences varied widely. From an advisory perspective, some stayed with one advisor throughout their journey, while others had multiple advisors. One 10+ Completer spent a fair portion of time without an advisor mid-program before one was assigned.

The majority of people had a dissertation chair who also functioned as the person’s advisor, but others had separate advisor(s) and chair. There were two graduates who had two chairs, resulting from a change in dissertation topics, and one person had three chairs, due to faculty retirements. The others had only one chair, regardless of how many dissertation topics they worked through.

Similarly, experiences within their regional groups were mixed as were their impacts on their overall doctoral progression. Most of the regional groups met virtually monthly and face-to-face quarterly. Members of more localized groups were able to meet face-to-face monthly. Four of the graduates stayed in one regional group throughout the entire journey, four participated in two regional groups, and four had experiences with three or more. Several respondents also indicated that there were times throughout the program when they were not in any regional group. Margret and Noreen had no group conveniently located where they lived so they worked alone until they could find another group to join. Most of the others switched groups, not by choice, but because the groups disbanded as their peers graduated or dropped out of the program. In Genn’s case, her



regional group disbanded after she remained the lone student, but she still kept in touch with the graduates of her group and worked with them as needed.

For those who did have a choice whether or not to stay in a particular regional group, the reason for departure was that the participant did not integrate well into an already-formed group. For others, the goals of the team or team members did not fit the needs of the 10+ Completer. One reason identified was that the 10+ Completer felt the group was dysfunctional and/or not helpful in helping with doctoral progression. For Tom: “I switched over and started hanging out with the [new] group. . . . They had a more aggressive plan. . . . They had an agenda. ‘Let’s see what you did in the last month.’ We just encouraged one another to get through this thing.”

In some cases they identified the groups as too social and not academically challenging and supportive. Noreen felt that in one regional group she joined, “the academic environment wasn’t really there. They had a lot of family, had a lot of social, good things going together but I really felt that the academic challenge and support that I needed wasn’t really in the regional group.” Robert thought, “In the early days there was a whole bunch of just chit-chat. I don’t think we were so much focused on what the group could do to help people get through the program.” For others the group was filled with students who were further ahead in the program and were focused on their own goals, not the goals of the newer student. Patrick said it this way: “It’s very difficult when you’re in a regional group that you have four or five people all in different stages of development. We actually didn’t have a true heart-to-heart discussion because everyone focuses on what they had to finish.”

The support that the 10+ Completers received from their regional groups varied widely. Some of the groups, like the one that Tom identified earlier, had a plan for all involved and the last three people in the group (including Tom) graduated together. Lynn's group was like her 'extended family'. Tanya and her second group formed independently after leaving another regional group, founded on a committed and strong bond. Although Tanya was the last in her group to graduate, they checked in regularly with her and finally, attending her defense. Whereas Patrick did not find his regional groups helpful—particularly because of the different stages of the doctorate that the group members were working through—Rose found that the people further along in the overall process within her group were helpful. She believed that they provided encouragement and learned things from them about the dissertation process that she could do or avoid when it was time for her to tackle it. Although Bart did not particularly benefit from the GoToMeeting virtual sessions, he was energized during and after face-to-face meetings. For him, his group was full of diligent workers who helped him along. He believed that if one's regional group was not progressing, that one might fall into that mind-set as well.

### **Participant Stories—The Journey**

#### **Tanya's Story**

Tanya was in the nursing field for over 20 years, and worked as a clinical nurse and nurse educator, prior to becoming the Chair of her department. She joined the sixth cohort of the program in 1999. Her primary interests in entering the program were to position herself for a post-secondary education administrative position (which she achieved prior to starting the program) and to prove to herself she was able to complete a

doctorate and be the first in her extended family to do so. It was her expectation that she would be able to complete her PhD in approximately 5 years. Tanya was buoyed by the words and examples of two role models: her grandfather and father. Although her grandfather died shortly before she entered the program, it was his example of hard work and determination that provided her the motivation to seek this goal. Her grandfather's influence is evident in her feelings of responsibility and accountability to those who love and support her. Her portfolio was based on the 'Stockman's Creed', a poem that speaks of the life that her grandfather typified. Her father, likewise, is a strong man who was continuously supportive of her journey. Tanya was supported by her children and husband as well as her second regional team. Her regional group understood her issues, but held her accountable, which helped her progress. She was also supported by many from an organization which played an important role in her life and the lives of her children; they were an extended family who wished the best for her, providing positive words of encouragement.

Tanya's personal life was filled with both positive influences, such as attending different events for her children that occurred on weekends, and negative influences, such as the illness of a loved one; both of these contributed to delays in her completion of the program. Tanya's most problematic areas of the program were the completion of her IDP synthesis paper and selecting a topic for her dissertation: These problems resulted in extended periods of non-activity. During these events she felt disconnected from the program and embarrassed at her inability to progress as she would have liked. Finally, Tanya reconnected with her dissertation chair, and they collaboratively approached the dissertation process. Tanya felt that they were a team working toward the same goal.

Once she had resolved the issues around the synthesis paper and the dissertation, she continued her path in small productive bursts. Although she felt tied to her doctorate ‘24/7’, she never felt stressed—it was all part of the journey. After 11 years, she became the first person in her extended family to achieve a PhD.

### Patrick’s Story

Patrick entered the program in 1999, into the sixth cohort. His interest in the program was sparked by a friend who was in the program. As the president of a hospital located on the East Coast, he entered the program for his own personal learning and to use the leadership principles and skills he would learn within the responsibilities of his job. He did not have a specific timeline in which to be completed. Although he did have some health issues that contributed to his delay, the demands of his job were the primary external barriers to completion. Patrick’s greatest difficulties within the program were in the completion of the portfolio and the lack of timely faculty input and assistance when needed. Without a significant educational background, Patrick struggled in acquiring the appropriate scholarly knowledge for the competencies within the portfolio and in structuring a solid plan for completion of his dissertation; this left him feeling frustrated and unguided. He described this portion of his time in the program as ‘beating his head against a wall’. Determined to finish, Patrick ultimately consulted with an external coach in order to accomplish these goals—one who had recently completed her PhD. His sequence of program progression was completion of coursework, completion of portfolio, defense of dissertation. Patrick participated in three different regional groups, but did not find them particularly helpful or supportive in him achieving his goals. His support and

encouragement came from outside sources: his family, his friends, and his coach. For Patrick, his doctoral journey was one of endurance rather than enlightenment.

### Noreen's Story

Noreen started in 1995, in the second cohort of the program, while primarily living in Europe. Throughout her 16 years as a student at Andrews, she was a principal of a private school, Grades 1–9, and also worked as a medical transcriptionist. Noreen's reason for joining the program was to learn how to be a better leader as well as to help others become better educational leaders. She had no specific deadline for completion. Noreen was part of three distinct regional groups and a dyad with another person in the United States. The majority of her regional-group peers were based in the United States and the face-to-face connections with those peers and faculty were limited to a few events in Europe and the required on-campus events. Noreen suffered from not having a strong local academic community; without having a local academic environment, she felt unsupported and frazzled. When faculty came for training events, she felt motivated, but without reinforcement from others, it faded.

Programmatically, Noreen struggled on her dissertation. She had trouble making decisions because she lacked a solid understanding of research methods. Serendipitously, a chance encounter with an academic community gave Noreen just what she needed. A life-event for Noreen was the unexpected encounter of a learning community in India. The intellectual discourse and feedback provided the stimulus to help spur a significant writing period in Noreen's dissertation efforts. At this point in time she was able to reengage with her chair who became her primary champion for her dissertation topic. This pairing created a bond that helped her ultimately complete. Her chair, Loretta,

became her academic teammate. As Noreen said, “Never underestimate the human factor.”

Noreen had close relationships with her children, and the arrivals of grandchildren were positive life experiences, which were major influencers on her extended time-to-completion. She is proud of the fact that she did not allow the PhD journey to prevent her from spending time with her family. Noreen graduated 16 years after her start.

### Tom’s Story

Tom’s journey started in 2000 as a member of the seventh cohort of the program. At that time he was an elementary school administrator, and was concurrently working on a master’s degree in another discipline. He entered the program with the goal of using his PhD credentials to be able to teach at the college level; he hoped to be complete his PhD within 4–6 years. Throughout his 12 years in the program, Tom held several different jobs, including advancing to become the administrator of the K-12 school complex, and as an adjunct professor at a local college. At times, Tom worked two jobs to make ends meet. In addition to the amount of time working, Tom also was committed to being a parent who actively participated in the lives of his children. These items, combined with the need to complete his master’s degree, made Tom a prime candidate to experience delays in completion. At one point, he felt so pressured that he seriously considered taking a leave from the program. With the help of his advisor Duane, he was able to work through these difficulties and continue. Tom also spoke of his fear of tackling the dissertation as an impediment to progress as well. After he worked through this fear he was able to progress through to completion. Once he was on firm footing, he was invested in getting the PhD completed. “It was like I was willing to get this thing done. It

started snowballing in the positive direction.” He took the opportunity to take time away from the job for two summers to focus on his portfolio and dissertation and was then able to complete the PhD. His greatest difficulties in the program were keeping his momentum throughout the program and making the completion of his dissertation—at times—a priority over family needs.

### Rose’s Story

Rose began her doctorate at Andrews in 1995 in the second cohort of the program. Throughout her 12 years, she functioned in several university administration roles, including a residence hall dean, dean of students, and vice-president. She entered the program for an intellectual challenge and to become the best leader possible. For Rose, job advancement was not of importance. Her plan was to graduate in 4–5 years, and for the first few years, she was on track to do so, despite the demands of work and her commitment to the caring of her young children. Rose indicated that her delays were primarily job-related, such as job promotions, and assuming responsibilities of multiple positions. There were also times where her home life took precedence, especially with the building of her new home.

Throughout her elongated journey, she experienced many kinds of emotions. She expressed being thrilled, proud, struggling, passionate, floundering, scared, fearful, jazzed, on a role, machine-like—all contingent on where she was in the process or how productive she felt at that time. She worked well with her chair and accepted feedback graciously. She believed that the dissertation—with all the recommendations, edits, and changes to it—was part of the learning process. It was her natural interest in learning, growing as a person, and figuring out the way to completion that enabled her to continue.

When she finally completed her PhD, she was thrilled, astonished, and shocked at her accomplishment—all at the same time.

### Cathleen's Story

Cathleen started the leadership program in the first cohort and year of its existence—1994. Her intentions upon entering the program were to complete the doctorate and return to Africa, where she had lived for 12 years prior. Previously, she had gone as the wife of a pastor; this time, she wanted to return on her own contributions and credentials. During her time working on her doctorate, she was an English teacher in one school and then a principal at a private high school. Cathleen had an expectation to complete her doctorate within 6 years; however, she faced increased workloads, and additional responsibilities to her family which swelled her need to balance work, family, and doctorate. Cathleen also experienced events within her journey that made her stronger and more committed to completing the doctorate. Like many non-traditional students, she did not have a strong background in research; she also had a difficult relationship with her statistician. Both of these circumstances made her feel inadequate and fearful. From these two events, she changed two major components of how she dealt with her doctoral experiences: she learned how to find her own answers and to stop acting like a victim. This completely changed her experiences moving forward. “I stopped having the feelings of being intimidated.” She also encountered changes in her dissertation focus from a qualitative study to a mixed-method approach. Despite these challenges, she was determined to finish. She was able to complete over 50% of her doctoral work physically on the Andrews campus, which was helpful. For Cathleen, the most satisfying part of her journey was not the graduation but the interchange at her



defense of the dissertation. Despite its challenges, the dissertation process with its results was a shining moment in her PhD journey.

### Robert's Story

Robert started the leadership program in 1995; he entered the second cohort. Robert initially entered the School Administration Supervision PhD program at Andrews, but switched over to the Leadership program shortly thereafter. His original aspiration for a PhD was for professional development and to recertify his teaching license. The PhD would also provide him some opportunities should he want to move into the field of educational leadership or teaching at a university.

At the beginning stages of his time in the LEAD program, he was excited about his learning prospects. He soon found out, however, that the program was not as structured as he would have liked, and that caused complications for him in moving through the program. As time went on, other family and job responsibilities encroached on his available time for the PhD. He held three different jobs throughout his 16 years within the program, starting in administration of a local academy, advancing to the Director of Students for a university and then became the Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction at a community school system.

Throughout each of his various positions, Robert attempted to incorporate his dissertation work into each job, so when he changed jobs, he restarted the dissertation process again with a new topic. Restarting the dissertation several times was a significant reason for Robert's protracted journey. It was difficult, but Robert felt that tying the dissertation to his work was the best way to proceed. When he was approved by the IRB to start his last dissertation, and he started interacting with his participants, the 'light

came on' and he enthusiastically continued. Aside from the various job and dissertation changes, Robert had a family illness that required time away from his dissertation. During the tough times, Robert realized that he would never place getting a PhD over taking care of this family.

In those times, Robert prayed for the strength to continue his journey: His prayers were answered. His family member got well and he was able to graduate the same year as his daughter graduated law school. Unlike his time spent in the regional groups (which he believed was both a blessing and a curse), his family, doctoral chair, and work colleagues—several of whom had their PhDs—were his major sources of support during his doctorate. On the professional front, he was able to see his dissertation put into practice at his district, and he is now looked to as the expert on this program, which is satisfying. Although Robert enjoyed his time in the Leadership program, if he had to do it all over again, he believes he would have been better served staying in the School Administration program. Its structure would have been easier to follow and the doctoral process easier to complete.

### Lynn's Story

Lynn began her 11 years in 1995—the second cohort of the program. Her initial reason for entering into the program was to validate the work she was currently doing, and to potentially ease the way to a promotion. The creativity of the program and her ability to job-embed excited her from the start. Her initial timeline for completion was 4 to 5 years. Throughout her doctorate, Lynn enjoyed the process. She reveled in all aspects of the learning and in the creation of new theory. She was an enthusiastic learner, who used the theories she learned to direct her practices, or as ways to confirm them. Her

story is one more geared towards the journey of learning, more so than a journey to a PhD. Nonetheless, she had many family and life events that pushed the PhD aside. These wonderful events—weddings, graduations, anniversaries—took priority over school. At times she was committed to engaging in the learning, but it was still secondary to whatever activities took precedence. During this time she worked as a professor and program planner and evaluator at a local college in the West, and functioned for a time as the interim dean. During this time frame she also moved to a new state. Although her jobs and family events contributed to her delay, Lynn identified that her love of learning and taking the journey slowed the overall process. She has no regret for the things she did for family, or the time and pleasure she took out of the learning, despite their impacts to her completion time.

She felt supported and encouraged by her chair, her family, her girlfriends and her regional group—they were part of her extended family. She was passionate about her dissertation from the beginning and graciously took feedback on her dissertation from the faculty recognizing that this, too, was part of the learning. She was able to do between 30% to 50% of her PhD work onsite at Andrews; she also did not work during the summer so she could spend time on the program. Her defense was just enjoying the process. She felt as if she was discussing with a group of people her work, sharing with people who were interested in her interests.

### Margret's Story

Margret's journey for her PhD began in 1995—the second cohort of the program. After returning from working in the South Pacific, Margret wanted to develop herself professionally, but had no specific goals at that time on how she planned to use her

doctorate. She had no specific timeline for completion. During the program, Margret worked as an administrative assistant, then a fundraiser and grant writer within a university development department. It was Margret's intent to use her dissertation work as a platform for educational change on the islands on which she had worked.

Unfortunately, she encountered resistance from the group overseas and the program that she based her dissertation and much of her portfolio contents on was not initiated. That required her to select another dissertation topic and redo portions of her portfolio, causing her a lot of rework. This event was devastating to Margret and it took some time for her to recover. Her chair, Shirley, allowed her to grieve, and then helped her move on.

Her second dissertation was tied to her job in fundraising. She felt privileged to have access to some of the top researchers on fundraising which gave her an opportunity to work with the people who postulated the theories that she was using in her dissertation. This was a high point in the doctoral path—but it was still not without challenges. A significant statistical error was found in her dissertation which required a major rewrite, which was discouraging for her. Despite these setbacks, Margret continued forward, and corrected the problem. She felt supported and encouraged by her dissertation committee, as by her husband, family and friends.

Margret was motivated by the fact that both of her parents were teachers; her father received one of the first EdDs given by Andrews University. She reached out to them both for support and as sounding boards for her ideas. She was less satisfied with the amount of support given by her regional group. From a distance perspective as well as the belief that they did not function well as a team, Margret felt it was of little value to participate. Although Margret had several setbacks along the way, she is sure that one of

the biggest influencers of her delay started the day that she walked into the orientation. Going into the program without a specific goal and deadline, she unknowingly contributed to the length of her program.

### Dorothy's Story

Dorothy entered the program in 2000, and became a member of the seventh cohort of the program and had the intention of completing the doctorate within 5 years. Throughout her 11 year journey, she worked as an associate superintendent of education in a regional school system. Dorothy had no specific goal when she entered the program—she was influenced by her supervisor to add the ‘PhD’ to her credentials; she did hope that she would be able to broaden her perspective and gain worthwhile experiences. Most of the delays in Dorothy’s doctoral completion were external to the program itself—she experienced a myriad of negative events within her home life that required most of her focus for several years. These problems forced her to focus not only on her family, but also her own health. She also moved several times during her time in the program. But Dorothy never gave up. She progressed during the program a day at a time, working on it when possible. Dorothy referred to her journey as the story of the ‘tortoise and the hare’—she being the tortoise; she knew that she would be persistent enough to one day cross the finish line. She was supported in her efforts by her work friends and one friend in particular who served as editor, proofreader, critic, and encourager. Her regional group was one in which she was able to learn from those who were ahead of her in the process. Her group remained with her and supported her through to the end.

Aside from Dorothy's external hindrances to doctoral completion, she had issues with her portfolio. During the time she was in the program, thoughts about how a portfolio should be compiled and reported had changed in the minds of some of the faculty. Dorothy was at a crossroad: she risked an ineffective portfolio defense if she did not comply with what she thought were the rules or risk not being true to what she had become. Her decision was to be true to self, which in the end was exactly what was needed. Dorothy completed as she started—she did things in her own time, her own way, according to her own values.

### Bart's Story

Bart was a nurse in the military prior to beginning the Leadership program in 1996, entering the third cohort of the program. He was attracted to the LEAD program and its PhD so he could round out his education in a field other than nursing. Bart was looking for an intellectual conquest—just to prove he could do it. He moved to Andrews University to begin the program, began teaching nursing at the University and working part-time as a practicing nurse at a local hospital. Bart is a person who packs every moment of his waking day with activity. For the first 4 years of the program, Bart took his classes on campus and tied his IDP and portfolio to the work he performed at the University. One of the primary challenges to Bart while at Andrews was lack of structure. He came in with a military mind-set instead of a civilian one. To him, the culture at Andrews engendered a lack of structure and regimentation. This, however, did not seem to be problematic for him within the LEAD program. Because he worked on campus he was able to complete between 30-50% of his doctoral work at Andrews. In his 4th year in the program, he moved out of the area and again took a full-time teaching job and a part-

time job working at a local hospital. During this time, he fully engaged in family events and vacations, and was active both within the church and his school district. While Bart at times expressed guilt about not spending more time on the dissertation, he did not want to sacrifice time spent in other events he thought were more important. It was that effort in balancing his priorities that lengthened his time in the program.

Bart did not regret or feel that he would have changed his choices on the route to graduation. Three potential improvements, however, would have been the creation of a timeline and being more organized. He also could have been a little more diligent in his studies. In a sense, he had lost the structure that he had when he first came to Andrews. His strongest supporters were his wife and his chair; he did not feel that the regional groups were very beneficial, particularly the virtual meetings and their outcomes. Bart had the utmost faith that he would be able to complete the PhD, in his own time frames. His only true concern was that he might run out of time and be dropped from the program. Bart ‘wears’ his hard-fought PhD proudly. Its completion was both a relief and “one of the top 10 emotional highs” in his life—an ecstatic experience.

### Genn’s Story

Genn began her quest for her doctorate in 2001, in the eighth cohort of the program. During her 13 years within the program she worked as a training director. For several years she also was an adjunct faculty member for a local university. Her reasons for joining this program were to learn the science of leadership and to be able to use what was learned to become a better leader and educator overall. In her first 2 years, she enthusiastically went through her learning objectives and defended her portfolio in less than 3 years. Genn appreciated the creativity she could use in her portfolio. Her issues

began with her dissertation class. The class did not provide her with what she needed; she felt lost and didn't know what her next steps should be. Although her regional group was very supportive, the members didn't have enough experience in the process to help her either. Genn believes her biggest mistake was not reaching out to the faculty for help. She was embarrassed and frustrated that she couldn't figure out her troubles by herself.

Genn had trouble with selecting a dissertation topic. She was passionate about too many topics she wanted to explore, and once a topic was defined she was unable to narrow the focus to a manageable topic. She was directionless and disappointed in her lack of progress. So she focused on family events, bought a new house, and engaged her other passion for learning—travel. Coupled with the increasing job demands and extensive travel encountered after a job change, she was inactive for 2 years, but never thought that she wouldn't return. When she turned 50, a thought came to her: “Maybe I just couldn't do this in my 40's.” It was time to reengage. With the encouragement of her regional team (all of whom had graduated), her husband, and close friends, she reactivated just before her 10<sup>th</sup> year in the program with a renewed commitment. Once she restarted, with the support of her new chair, she was able to choose a single topic, keep it narrow in focus, and complete her doctorate. Once on track, she found the overall process exciting and although it was hard work, well-worth the investment. She regrets the lost time, but really did need to disconnect a while and reconnect with a new mind-set.

### **Mix of Emotions**

It was fascinating to hear the many kinds of emotions that the 10+ Completers expressed throughout their journeys. Their emotional experiences truly run the gambit,



both before, during, and after completing the PhD process. Some of the 10+ Completers began the journey basking in the sheer enjoyment of new comprehension and skills. The ability to be creative within the design and course development process gave some the feeling of control within their learning environment. Others entered into the Leadership program because it seemed like a good idea, but did not express the excitement or perhaps the ‘new-school’ jitters that others seemed to possess. A few felt lost, recognizing that the program was not as structured or mature as they hoped. The program ambiguity was seen as challenging by some, and disheartening by others.

Adjectives such as thrilled, proud, struggling, passionate, floundering, scared, fearful, jazzed, on a role, machine-like were expressed, contingent on where they were in the process or how productive they felt at that time. At times, they were ‘just getting through it’ or ‘going through the motions’, especially during times when other portions of their lives took precedence over the doctorate. At times they felt guilty or overwhelmed. Most expressed periods of excitement, however, around either solidifying their dissertation topic, or getting to the point of when they could see the end of the journey.

Some, like Lynn, expressed her love of the journey in the overall learning, or using their knowledge on the job, but once the journey was completed, did not feel the excitement and joy of completing such a momentous event. She felt relieved, like a “burden had been lifted.” Phrases like “a monkey off my back,” an “exercise in perseverance,” “a heavy load off of me,” “just happy to get it done,” “it was more of an emotional and stress release, more than any kind of gratification” were common. A true feeling of accomplishment and success was initially overshadowed by the relief of finally

completing it. All, however, after a period of time, despite the amount of time it took, felt proud of their accomplishments.

### **Themes**

Within the dozen interviews of the 10+ Completers, there were seven major themes that were woven throughout the stories:

1. Personal Intentions: the impetus to begin the programmatic journey
2. Flexibility vs. Structure: discussing the general flexibility in how to design and execute on the program to maximize its impact within his or her job and the discipline and requirements needed to complete the program
3. Doctorate, Job and Life: the need to prioritize varying aspects of the individual's responsibilities on the home, work, and school fronts
4. The Right Advice: finding the right connection and advice from the right person to continue with the journey
5. The Right Experience: the synergy between experiences and the will to commit to completion
6. The Right Time: the ability and willingness to commit the personal resources needed to complete the program
7. Conviction: the firm belief that they would succeed. Together, these themes combine to create the overall picture of these 10+ Completers, their journeys, setbacks, and ultimately their successes.

Tables 3 and 4 indicate the stories in which these themes were identified.

Theme: Personal Intentions

In a 2012 *U.S. News and World Report* article by Don Martin, on why people go to (and hopefully graduate) graduate school, six primary reasons were identified: personal growth; greater employment opportunities; greater career advancement; financial reward;

Table 3

*Trend Occurrences Part I*

Name	Personal Intentions	Flexibility vs. Structure		Doctorate, Job, and Life Balance
		Flexibility	Structure	
Margret	x	X	X	X
Dorothy	x	X		X
Tom	x	X		X
Rose	x	X		X
Patrick	x		X	X
Noreen	x	X	X	X
Robert	x		X	X
Genn	x	X		X
Lynn	x	X		X
Bart	x		X	X
Tanya	x			X
Cathleen	x	X		

sense of accomplishment, and greater recognition and credibility. Three of these goals are externally centered: job advancement, job opportunities, and financial reward.

For a few of our 10+ Completers, externally centered goals might have been an initial goal for looking into or entering the program. Robert, Tom, and Tanya, for example, planned to join the program with the intent of increasing their chances for advancements, which ultimately came much earlier than did their completion of the program. Tanya’s actually came shortly before starting the program. Once she received her promotion, “this was a perfect opportunity to be able to not only start to apply the principles but to learn the principles of leadership.”

Table 4  
*Theme Occurrences Part 2*

Name	Right Advice	Right Experience	Right Time	Conviction		
				Belief in God	Importance of Church	Belief in self
Margret	x	x	X			x
Dorothy	x	x	X			x
Tom	x	x	X	X	X	x
Rose	x	x	X			x
Patrick	x	x	X			x
Noreen	x	x	X			x
Robert	x	x	X	X		
Genn	x	x	X			x
Lynn		x	X	X		x
Bart					X	x
Tanya	x	x	X			x
Cathleen	x	x		X	X	x

For the remaining 10+ Completers, the primary reasons for entering the program—or staying—were internally-oriented. For Margret, her goal was

professional training. “I had the opportunity to do some studying—let me just refresh, let me get some professional training. But I'm the kind of person that likes to make things count. And I thought, maybe there's a program that I can look at.” Lynn wanted validation at work and to experience the fun of learning as she had earlier in her life and career.

Some wanted to improve at the jobs they were currently doing. These respondents were already in positions of influence, but they wanted to improve their leadership skills. They recognized in themselves the need to discover the ‘whys’ of leadership, tie theory to practice, and find ways to improve their personal practices. Noreen wanted the opportunity to become a better educator and to have a good learning experience like she did when she completed her master’s degree. For Tanya, her other aspirations for the PhD were to prove she could do it and to be the first person in her family to receive a doctorate, and Rose was looking for “some challenge and invigoration, for something new in my life . . . but not necessarily a new job.” Dorothy believed the program would “help broaden my perspectives about things. I don't know that . . . it would help broaden my perspective in my job. It wasn't a particular job aspiration. It was more for the experience, though I didn't know what it was.” For Bart, the reason was to “just see if I could do it.” For Patrick, it was a great way to learn and to see what he could do with his learning. For Genn, she wanted to use the PhD as a way to expand her knowledge of leadership and learning as a science and use that in her personal practice.

## Theme: Flexibility and Structure

Much of what drew the students to the leadership program at Andrews was its strength as a non-traditional program—flexibility. Most of the 10+ Completers noted the flexibility of the choices on how to proceed with and ultimately complete the PhD program as a determining factor in joining the program. As non-traditional students (older when entering the program, working, and going to school part-time), this non-traditional program's flexibility enabled them to embark on this huge undertaking while maintaining job roles, families, and important activities outside of the program. For these 10+ Completers, a traditional program's structure was a requirement, not an option.

I looked at a couple programs that were very close to where I was living. And pretty much with those programs, the EdD programs were job-embedded, and I didn't want EdD. [One] PhD program was appealing to me, and I applied and was going through the application process. But since I didn't have my educational specialist through them, they wanted me to do two years of coursework plus all the core courses for their EdSs.

There was no way I was able to do all that in two years, and keep my job. Plus they wanted me to take classes during the day on Wednesdays and Saturdays. And there was no way I was going to go and ask for a whole day off during the week, and then give up a whole Saturday every week for classes.

The ability to job-embed their learnings was one of the most important reasons they chose this program. 'The job' was something that occupied a main portion of their lives; a place where their influence was known; a place where they already had some level of expertise. It was a place in which to learn and where they could effect positive change. Rose noted:

They don't prescribe every course you have to take. But I preferred it that way because then I could truly make it job embedded. And again, I liked being able to shape some of that coursework possibly towards my research interest. And actually I found competency—I found the competency development piece, I enjoyed being able to show these skills in relationship to my work, and not have that prescribed.

One of the expectations of the LEAD program is for a student to be fully employed and to combine the work and school learnings together, to create a synergistic learning lab. This helped the 10+ Completers in two fundamental ways: (a) it enabled development of independent study courses that would match theory to their past or present work experiences, and (b) it enabled the use of theoretical learnings discovered in the leadership program as a means to validate or develop and implement new changes within their workplace. As leaders within their jobs and work communities, using the theories in the workplace provided the opportunities to put these learnings into practice. These opportunities in turn could be analyzed and become proof of learning and competence within their portfolio. Tom “thank[ed] the Lord my superintendent allowed me to create and to do a lot of job-embedded changes and in the program that I could apply to my portfolio.”

This duality of the learning—the job feeding the theory, the theory feeding the job—is what resonated with Margret.

That worked well for me because then you could take whatever you were doing in your workplace and have theory supporting your practice, or shift your practice based on theory. So it was a good connection with theory and practice for me at the very beginning.

The LEAD program also brought a freedom to take control of what you wanted to learn, how you wanted to learn it, and how you wanted to prove it. The ability to be true to oneself and to use one’s personal creativity to express her story was an important component to many. “It left room for us to be a lot more creative in a variety of ways because we could say, ‘Well what I if use this?’ Especially in the development of the IDP in terms of what it was that we were planning to do with our portfolio.”

Dorothy believed that the creative nature of the program best fit her personal style. “The program appealed to me because it was not a traditional—I’m not a traditional learner. I’m a very outside-the-box person. And it was because I could make it practical and to make it who I was.”

Interestingly, although the flexibility of the program was a powerful component of why these 10+ Completers started, it also came with a down-side for several. For them, with flexibility became ambiguity, especially for those who started in the first years of the program. They perceived a lack of structure and direction that led to delays in completion. These included an absence of direction on completing the portfolio, problems with structuring a dissertation, and finding major differences in the expectations between faculty members, each of whom followed their own set of rules. Ambiguity was accepted as an overall part of the program. “At orientation we were told over and over again, if you can't deal with ambiguity, this probably isn't the program for you.” Some students, perhaps decades from their last collegiate experience, found this lack of structure and guidance problematic. The absence of guidance on the development of the theoretical base underpinning his portfolio forced Patrick to seek a coach, external to the program, to assist him through his difficulties. Robert struggled with the lack of structure for much of his time in the LEAD program and ultimately would have preferred to stay in his original program because of its traditional structure.

That being said, the same people who reported frustration with the ambiguity and required a more structured or detailed approach, cautioned the program administration against going too far in the other direction. “The reduction of ambiguity has actually



made the program better. My caution with that is that I think you have to balance the structure and the flexibility.” Noreen described it this way:

It was at the beginning of the Leadership program. And I think they struggled at Andrews then at that time to provide a program that was really flexible. And at the same time provided enough support for novices. And I think that is a real challenge, because in my experience if you start giving a lot of support then rigidity is right around the corner.

Margret expressed it this way:

I attended the first Roundtable before they started the second cohort, which gave me a better flavor for the ambiguity embedded in the program. And those days it was, ‘well, what do you think?’ It was a lot less structured because they were just starting. It was starting to evolve into the program that it is now. And so there was a lot of flexibility toward the beginning because we weren't quite sure how everything was going to evolve.

Both Genn and Margret knew their tendencies towards randomness could be problematic and that played out in their journeys, particularly for Genn in the unstructured dissertational portion of the journey. Margret thought, “They’re getting much better at it and giving you the instructions and directions that you need.”

Patrick, who realized late in the program that he wasn’t as organized as he should have been, thought that “it’s a fine line between an unstructured program and a program you can really relate to your own profession.” Lastly, for Robert, “not having the structure there was a real strong disadvantage to me. I think I would have probably entered the program later. After they restructured things it probably would have been different.” Robert continued, “I told Shirley and others numerous times that those who were in the program now are really fortunate because [new students] have a lot more structure than they would have had before.”

While all appreciated the ability to choose how they would learn and show competence during the program, for those who could not handle the inherent ambiguity

that the initial years of the program displayed, it was difficult for them to create enough of their own structure to continue without some level of frustration.

#### Theme: Doctorate, Job, and Life

The literature on those who do not complete their doctoral pursuits speaks of the many difficulties encountered on the journey to the PhD, including not enough time to work and study. This was also noted for our late completers. Much of the literature discusses the challenge of balancing the academic pursuit with the events and experience within their external lives. The implication of balancing the doctorate, job, and life is that these different aspects are relatively equal in importance. For these 10+ Completers, their external lives, filled with family and community, and their jobs were the most important parts of their lives. In addition, they were *also* pursuing a doctorate. It became apparent within the interviews that there really wasn't a balancing act occurring for most of them. For these students, the PhD was not the primary focus in their lives. As Tom puts it, "I had so much on my plate that you work on the stuff that's right in front of you. . . . There were more pressing things going on in my job, my life, and family, that the other stuff got pushed aside."

Many of the 10+ Completers encountered life events that were not so positive, such as personal illnesses, family members in crisis, divorce. Robert faced a family illness: "My wife became really ill. I wasn't quite sure what was gonna happen with that. So I put the brakes on and slowed everything way down." Tanya's child became quite ill and required frequent medical treatments hours away from their home. "With working, with therapy three times a week, with sickness from the medication she was on—life happened during this time period." When asked what she did about her doctoral work

during that time, she responded, “How do you pick your school versus your child?” She ultimately worked with her advisor who helped her get through her courses at a slower pace. Dorothy dealt with a family member with alcohol problems, and having to make life decisions about her mother. Patrick dealt with his own health issues while continuing to work and do his research.

One might expect that the majority of these pressing items may have taken on a negative quality as they kept the students from their doctoral work; that was not the case. Only one of the 10+ Completers, Dorothy, felt that “a lot of things kept getting in the way of me trying to get my studies done” which in turn led to some frustration on her part. Although the events mentioned above were negative, there were also many incidents of positive experiences within the lives of the students that also impacted the ETD.

Most of the group had changes in work status: promotions, job changes, or another job. Each of the 10+ Completers had a high level of responsibility in their primary jobs. It was understood by the students that doctorate work took place around their work hours. The need to balance work and doctorate was understood by all. One of the reasons they picked this particular program was so that they could remain in a full-time job and study at the same time. At times, however, the workload was such that it necessitated suspension of all doctoral work for a protracted amount of time. For Lynn:

I was into a brand-new job after those first two years of completing the coursework. And it was massive. And just to give you a little idea, I became the dean of students and was not able to replace myself in my former job. . . . So I was really doing two jobs. And then lost my dean of men, and I functioned as the dean of men for this huge transition year. And so yeah, I probably have to say for the first year of that five-year stop just knocked off my socks with massive new responsibilities.

Others, like Robert and Genn, needed time to learn their new jobs, which caused delay. In Robert's case, a new job meant the start of a new dissertation, which also extended his time frame to completion.

For Genn, her job change altered her course completely. Going from a 10-hour workday to a 14-hour workday was grueling, and allowed for little time to work on the doctorate. "I remember a faculty member telling me that the expectation was that I should work on my dissertation 20 hours per week—minimum. And I thought, 'What, are you nuts?'" Shortly thereafter, Genn went officially "inactive" from the program for 2 years.

For several of the 10+ Completers, family life, particularly children, often took priority over the PhD. Ten of the 12 students have children and/or grandchildren and the importance of being with their families and fulfilling family responsibilities contributed to the slower pace of their doctoral work. What was intriguing to me was that instead of the thought that family time was time away from the doctorate, they believed that the doctorate was time away from the family As Lynn explains it:

I had a number of major family or life events that took place during that period of time. My children graduating from college, my children [were] getting married. And so there were blocks of time where I was otherwise engaged. And I did not allow the program to interrupt my responsibilities with my family. And so my 25th wedding anniversary, I took the program with me to these events because I was always working on some piece of it. But I still kept my commitment to major events that were happening for my family, so that wasn't lost in the process.

Noreen also made her family a priority in her life.

But things became a hard competition between finishing my dissertation and giving [up] my other life. I got a lot of grandchildren. . . . You know grandchildren --they don't lay there in their cribs waiting for me to finish the PhD. They grow every day. And there was no way I would let those years pass by and not knowing my grandchildren. A PhD is not worth that.

Tom spent significant time during the 'growing' phase of his young children just being a dad—coaching soccer, driving them to and from events, etc. He viewed these

activities as important contributors to his delay. Tanya spent significant time tending to her children's hobby. "I tried never to let school interfere with anything we did. My kids showed on the national circuit so we spent year round traveling around to cattle shows around the country." Bart's thoughts were, "I wanted life to have priority versus the PhD. And I gave life and family and church the priority, and I still got the PhD. Yes, it took me longer, but I did accomplish both." Bart frequently made his quest of "living life fully" his priority. He continued:

This was the time of life that my wife and I wanted to live it to the fullest. . . . For example, Myrtle Beach for six, seven, eight months of the year has beautiful weather. We bought a boat. We were in the boat more than we were on dry land. We bought a boat, another boat. We sailed it all the way from Myrtle Beach to Detroit, Michigan. I was working full-time. We made three trips to Mexico. We made several trips to Alaska because that's where my daughter settled. And so the boating, being outdoors, working full-time at my job, a couple of Sundays a month at the second job . . .

Shortly after her return to the program after a 2-year hiatus, Genn took the opportunity to fulfill a childhood dream. She traveled to Antarctica with her partner for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Although she was in a productive time in her doctoral work, she put it aside for the weeks she was away. There was no regret in making that decision.

Each of the students handled the time away from the PhD differently. Most felt fine with the delays, others felt resentment or guilt. Bart, although he chose to take on a second job, felt guilty.

Oh, I'd feel guilty as all heck. My adrenaline or my pulse would start rushing, beating fast. I'd start perspiring and thinking I should be studying, working on that dissertation, and not going to work. And I would say to myself, 'so calm down, you can do it when you get home tonight'. If you've ever worked 14 hours, you know you're not gonna work on a dissertation when you come home.

Patrick looked at the PhD a little differently. For Patrick, despite the support that his family provided, he believed it was hard on the family when "you have to place

yourself away. When you're working a full-time job, work takes all of your time. When you get out of work the little time that you have left you were spending on your PhD. It does put a strain on the family side." He felt he was doing a disservice to his family while working on his doctorate.

The ability to financially accommodate a doctoral program as well as a family and a life outside of the doctoral pursuit is often difficult for PhD students. One of the characteristics of the 10+ Completers shared with other non-traditional students was their financial independence. For most of the 10+ Completers, they had the ability to pay their tuition without too much distress, so finances did not produce the impact that having limited funds does for other students. Unlike traditional doctoral students who may take out loans, rely on their parents, or have to find grants for their programs, these students did not have those types of issues. While some part-time (non-traditional) students, often those who work part-time or have less stable jobs, have greater difficulty in completing a program (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Pauley et al., 1999), these were not the experiences of these graduates overall. Only one discussed financial issues and by choosing to make some spending changes within his family, he was able to continue his current level of progress. Most did not have to decide between financing school and sufficiently addressing what they wanted or needed in their external lives. Money became a factor only when the 10+ Completer no longer wanted to continue paying the tuition, not the fact the payment was a painful financial drain.

Regardless of the event and circumstances faced by the students—work, family, or academically related—ultimately, despite the shifting priorities, this group still graduated. But from the beginning, each had times when they focused on the PhD and

others when they took time away from the PhD to participate fully in their external world. The PhD was not the number one priority in their lives. It was not until the 10+ Completer finally chose to complete the PhD did it become a focus and was prioritized over the external areas of their lives.

#### Theme: Right Advice

As in most programs, each person had an advisor and dissertation chair; for some, one played both roles, others had multiple advisors and/or chairs throughout the program. Additionally, they had others to whom they could reach out to for help. The theme of right advice is about the moment when a person or persons said the right thing at the right time to get the 10+ Completer to the point where they could move forward. For some of them, there were multiple 'right advice' events throughout their time in the program. For others, just one. Although many who provided the advice were professors, other supporters were regional group members, family members, friends, or from other voices of reason.

For Dorothy, after several disagreements with her regional group on how to construct her portfolio, she heard the words she needed to help her turn the corner on her doctoral experience.

I did three reflection papers for my whole 20 competencies. My regional group said, "Oh that's never gonna fly. Are you sure that they're gonna not freak out?" Well, Shirley called me on the phone. And I'll never forget. . . . She said, "Dorothy," she said, "I'm so excited, this is the kind of thing we've been looking for". And so I said, "it's okay?" And she said, "Yes, you've done the charts, described exactly what your belief system is, and how you've become." And so that was my turning point. And it felt good. I knew then that I was able to pull it together.

For Tom, his 'right advice' came in this 5th or 6th year in the program, when Duane became his advisor. "He was the impetus. . . . 'Let's get this thing done, let's use

your time more wisely, let's make progress every day or every week.' I started challenging myself to put time aside." Tanya, who experienced three different chairs and two different advisors, progressed slowly until she met her last dissertation chair— Jimmy.

Jimmy is the one who saved me and I don't know why. He just kept me going. He would say things. He was very positive and yet would correct things. He made me think. He made me see something in myself, you know when you get down to the last pieces and you think, "I don't think I can do this after all these 9-10 years and everyone thinks I'm a loser because I can't finish this program." He never let me give up on myself. He was a very strong force from the school aspect.

For Genn, the most important advice she received was after she restarted the program and found a new dissertation chair. Through her new chair's guidance she was able to frame her dissertation in such a way as to limit the scope creep that had occurred previously. Her chair said, "Take your main research question, print it out, and put it on your wall. Everything that you research or write needs to be about answering that question, and nothing else." Internalizing that phase was her breakthrough moment.

Patrick, who never found the words of clarity or encouragement within the program itself, turned to an external coach to help him through the process. His external coach, who had recently completed her PhD herself, was able to guide him through the process and was an essential part of his completion. "I didn't have a lot of experience in doing this kind of stuff so having somebody that could give me counsel and advice was really helpful."

Margret found her right advice after she found out that she would have to abandon her dissertation topic. It was a devastating point for her as the topic was one in which she had heavily invested in, both in terms of emotion and the amount of work she had put into it. Her breakthrough point was an interaction with her dissertation chair. "One of the



things that I remember Shirley saying to me when I knew that my dissertation topic wasn't going to work was, 'You know what, you just have to let go of this. You need to let go of it, grieve, and then move on.' She allowed me the space to take the time to grieve over this project that I was just so passionate about, and start thinking about another project."

Cathleen's advice came from an interesting source—Gloria Steinem.

I worked with a statistician. He was very demanding. I found myself walking into his office filled with fear and uncertainty. Well, after going to the ladies' room to cry for the umpteenth time, I looked into the mirror and said aloud, 'I didn't do anything wrong. Why am I crying?' I remembered a class I had taken, Women in Management, taught by Gloria Steinem, one of the leaders for women's rights. She taught us to avoid allowing ourselves to be victims. She gave us instructions as to how to enter an office and how to avoid becoming a victim. I gathered my courage and returned to the office of the statistician. The result was that our relationship changed—the statistician didn't change, I did. Subsequently, I stopped having the feelings of being intimidated.

Noreen found her impetus to surge forward through an encounter with a professor who would ultimately become one of the members on her dissertation committee. "One summer at the conference I talked with Loretta, the first faculty member who expressed real enthusiasm about my project. . . . Seeing her eyes and hearing her suggestions put the key in the engine and started me." Just as Duane helped Tom, he also helped Rose. "Duane was a chief encourager. He was on my committee. Duane gave me wonderful feedback at critical points." Robert found the right advice from his dissertation chair and from his three colleagues at work who had their PhDs. His colleagues shared their "war stories" and encouraged him that he, too, would work through his issues and complete his PhD.

For almost all of the 10+ Completers, it was the words of others who helped them to break through, that found a path forward, supported them in times of uncertainty, and

helped them refocus their efforts. These ‘voices’ were there with the right advice at the right time.

### Theme: Right Experiences

The long journeys of the 10+ Completers were filled with all sorts of events—good and bad—that had an effect on their progress towards completion. But there were a few events for them that seemed to be more impactful in moving them forward. The right experiences, just as the right advice, make a long-lasting impact and fueled in them a desire to complete.

### **The Dean’s Letter**

Receiving the first Dean’s letter just prior to the 10-year mark letting them know that they needed to apply for an extension in order to stay in the program was the event that created the most urgency for the 10+ Completers. For 8 of the 10 students, it made an immediate impact in the prioritizing of the doctorate work.

Tom’s experience of ‘the letter’ was:

I called Duane and I said, “I got a letter from Andrews University that said, ‘you need to start making more progress or you’re gonna be in trouble.’” I didn’t know what to do as finances had gotten really tight again. He said, “Don’t go inactive. As soon as you go inactive you’re not gonna finish. You’ll get through that, and push through it.” And we did. Never went inactive. And again at that time made it a priority and just pushed it through. [We] buckled our financial belts a little tighter than we would’ve liked and just moved forward.

For Tanya the letter was one of the final pieces that moved her towards graduation. “[It] made me actually go ‘wow you’re at 10 years’. If I didn’t have all these other factors, I could’ve easily looked at that paper and said ‘whatever’. That was a kick in the pants that I needed.” For Rose, the letter was a jumpstart for her to set deadlines to guide herself through to completion.

Like Tanya, the letter was one of several events that moved Margret forward. When she came up on the 10-year deadline, she found that she needed to apply for an extension. She knew that she never wanted to receive another letter like that again. For Noreen it was a reminder that she needed to make progress, but she felt it was a bit heavy-handed in its intent. “And then the letters started coming. I was disappointed with the tone. I was thinking, ‘He doesn’t know my life at all! How can he say these things!’ . . . It’s like ‘do it or not’ but make a decision.”

For Genn, the letter from the dean was not the impetus to restart the program, but reinforcement of her own interest to complete. It was a powerful motivator, producing some anxiety, but also gave clarity on how much she wanted to complete her doctorate.

Although the first Dean’s letter was by far the most impactful and strongest motivator; each subsequent letter requiring an additional justification as to why they should remain in the program contributed to a sense of urgency to move towards completion as well.

### **Adjustments to Perspective**

In addition to ‘the letter’, experiences external to the LEAD program provided the needed context in which to focus on completion. At times, it was reminders of commitments made to self and others. A strong connector for Tom was a simple reminder of the program that he encountered daily. He acquired a wristband with a quote from Pope John Paul II from his son. “It said something like, ‘You can do it’, or something like that. I put that on my wrist and it was there with me for about six months. Every time I looked down on it, it was an encouragement to keep moving.”

For Tanya, it was a poem that reminded her of the connection to her grandfather and her family values.

My grandfather was a farmer. I grew up on the farm—my parents lived right down the road. My grandpa didn't even finish high school but was a very successful farmer and businessman and he always said "you take pride in whatever you do and you complete what you're doing." My vision statement [for the portfolio] was based upon my grandfather and his farming. There was a poem that I used in my vision statement which was called the Stockman's Creed. Every time I picked up a paper or tried to finish whatever I was doing at the time that Stockman's Creed and the dedication to my grandfather were in my face all the time and it was like, I can't walk away from this. How am I going to walk away and not be successful?

Genn also used a symbol of her role model, her father, as a reminder of her commitment to graduate. Her father was a fireman, who also never graduated high school. His dream for his daughter was for her to be the first in the family to go to college, which she was. After Genn reactivated, she came across her father's badge, a symbol of his commitment to his community. She made that badge a commitment to him to graduate with her doctorate. Every morning she looked at #239 to remind her of her promise to him—and to herself.

For Noreen, it was an opportunity that unexpectedly came for a trip to India where she accompanied her husband who was teaching a 2-week class. "All of a sudden I found myself surrounded by researchers and academics. And we had wonderful talks in the breaks and at dinner and at lunch. And all of a sudden I had this urge! To write! Important parts of my dissertation were done in India." She attributed its impact on her to the academic sparring that went during the conference, providing her the academic community she wanted so desperately. It provided the stimulus for her to continue to write.

For Lynn, it was completing her statistics class. Although she was adequate in statistics, she believed that she needed to get an ‘A’ in the class in order to graduate, which became a point of great frustration for her. Once she came to the realization that she could graduate without a 4.0 average, she was able to complete the statistics class and move forward. That simple realization, in effect, set her free.

Two of the graduates recognized that commitments made long ago—to graduate the same year as one of their children did—were now becoming a ‘now or never’ situation. The children were now approaching their ‘last’ graduation dates. The upcoming experiences of their children were now influencing their parent’s progress. If they, as parents, wanted to fulfill their promises to their children, they had to complete.

The 10+ Completers experienced events that either prodded them into moving forward, or kept them motivated to keep progressing. I found it interesting that three of the 10+ Completers found their own symbols to enhance and remind them of their commitments and capabilities. In their own way, they created an internal voice to support them in moving towards completion.

#### Theme: Right Time

None of the 10+ Completers had a professionally driven ‘hard target’ or deadline for which to aim. No one was using their PhD for a specific promotion, specific job change, or a specific financial target, so there was no hard stop on the program before the 10-year mark. After the Dean’s letter, all applied for extensions and received them. They could have continued getting extensions as long as they could show some progression on their doctoral work. So for most of the 10+ Completers they came to a point when *they* decided that it was time to finish. They determined the ‘right time’ to complete and

created an internal and artificial deadline that provided the needed motivation for them to complete.

As mentioned previously, for Tanya and Robert, it was the opportunity to graduate the same year as their children. Although both had intended to graduate sooner, the letter and the ‘last opportunity’ to graduate with the child created a concrete deadline.

In the words of Tanya,

I was planning to graduate when my son graduated from high school—that’s when I was going to graduate. Well, ironically I actually graduated with my son when he graduated from college. So the last year became very intensive—the writing—because I said I was going to graduate when Andrew graduated so I’ve got to get this done.

Robert saw his daughter’s ‘final’ graduation as his last chance to be the role model for his family as well as to fulfill the wish of his daughter. He created his own deadline.

She said, “Daddy when I graduate eighth grade are you going to finish your degree? Oh no! That’s too soon.” And so, then she was a senior in high school. “Dad are you gonna to finish when I graduate, so we can graduate together?” I said, “Maybe.” And that didn’t happen. And the same thing happened with undergrad. And finally, Law School. I promised her, “we’ll go up together in Law School for sure.” So it was funny. But I felt I couldn’t let her down either because she really looked to me as a role model.

For some, it was to remove the doctorate from the work, doctoral studies, and family balancing act. When Lynn found out that she was going to soon be a grandmother, she had her impetus and deadline to finish.

I needed to get out of this process so I can spend more time with them and not spend all my time writing or reading or doing something for the program. But before that I was enjoying the process. I enjoyed my advisor, I enjoyed my regional groups, I enjoyed the process so much that I wasn’t—I didn’t feel the urgency that I needed to get out.

Finances became the artificial need to complete for some of the 10+ Completers. It was not a financial crisis or lack of funds that created the deadline, but rather because

they were tired of paying tuition for every semester that they didn't graduate or, ultimately, didn't want to lose the tens of thousands of dollars they had invested in the program. For Genn, once she calculated the weekly cost of remaining in this program, the need to complete went from an abstract idea to a target with a deadline—next semester's tuition due date. Her partner placed signs strategically throughout the house to keep that goal in focus. For Tom, it was the overall investment that created his deadline.

“I have to finish this. I've invested so much time and money into this thing, I have to finish it.” Money did play a factor in this. Because I didn't want to spend tens of thousands of dollars and then realize that it was lost. It's one thing to lose the degree. But it's another thing when you lose money with that.

Patrick, once he decided to retire, was ready to graduate. For Bart, it was the ability to live the good life with his wife without the ‘monkey on his back’ and to finally be able to claim membership in a very elite group, those who have earned a PhD. For Margret, it was her husband's challenge that “[since she] wanted to finish this, ‘let's get it over with, let's get on with it and get done.’ Once that was in place, the thought of not finishing it was more painful than getting down and giving up some of my life and finishing it.” Rose, spurred on by the Dean's letter, set strict goals for herself to keep her motivated towards her “no more Dean's letters” self-selected end-date. Noreen's experiences in India sealed her completion. Once she finally found the academic stimulus she craved, the path to finish was no longer hard to climb. She finally knew she was ready to finish and be with her grandchildren; she completed quickly thereafter.

Only Cathleen and Dorothy did not create an actual deadline for completion. Both indicated that they knew they would finish so they just continued at their own pace until they were finished. The PhD itself became its own deadline.

Overall, most of the 10+ Completers were able to complete the PhD through several seminal events. They received advice or a message that resonated with them, providing either a breakthrough or enough support that enabled them to move forward. They experienced an event that produced a sense of urgency or reminded them of completion commitments to others or to themselves. They created or asserted their reason to set a deadline for completion, which they pursued. They, in effect, went from ‘being in a PhD program’, to wanting to be ‘a PhD graduate’. The *mind-set* had changed from one of participation to one of completion.

#### Theme: Conviction

The last theme was the 10+ Completers’ belief that they would complete the program. Each of them, deep down in their core, knew that despite all of the setbacks, issues and delay, they would ultimately graduate. This conviction might have taken the form of self-efficacy or one built on a foundation of religious faith, but everyone knew that ultimately they had the skills and abilities that kept them in and got them through the program.

This is not to say that there were not moments of soul-searching: Robert wondered: “Did I want to finish or not?” Tanya pondered, “Could I walk away and say I couldn’t do this? . . . I knew I couldn’t.” Dorothy at times questioned why she ever started the program. Patrick thought of dropping out while working on the dissertation. It was the encouragement and guidance of his outside coach that kept him in the program. For Genn, although she knew she absolutely could complete her doctorate, faced doubt at the point she started her dissertation over from scratch. For Tom, there was hesitation based upon fear.



I think that was in the back of my mind a little bit of a hesitation. Fear of stepping—like when Jesus is walking on the water, the disciple Peter's fear of stepping onto the water. After I got beyond that fear, and I finally came to the conclusion that “you know what, if I can't do it or I can do it, I'm never gonna know I can do it if I don't try to do it.” So and then I just kind of pushed through that fear and said, “I may not ever complete this dissertation, but I'm gonna try.” I think when I mastered that problem, then I think everything started going in my favor.

For some their belief in God and their relationship with Him was a factor in giving them the strength and conviction to complete. As Cathleen speaks about a technique she used to compartmentalize her tasks, she says: “My goal is to file all the issues in folders and place them in the lap of Jesus and leave them there as He helps me live in the present—the one open folder.” Tom thanked the Lord for the ability to embed his learning into his job. Robert referred to himself as “a man of faith.” Relying on prayer, he believed that it was the answer to his prayers that gave him the strength to continue on and not give up before completing the program. Others mentioned that going to church was another source of strength.

For others, it was the conviction in the 10+ Completer that he or she would continue through and finish the journey just as they had succeeded in other pursuits many times before. As Noreen relates, “I knew I could do a dissertation. There's never been a doubt in my mind. I have a history of academic success behind me. I have never failed anything! And I have never had a plan of not finishing.” Rose “never doubted that she could do it.” Tom has “never been one to quit.” For Bart, “I've gone this far now, I can't fail.” When asked the question if there was ever a time she thought she might not graduate, Lynn put it succinctly, “No.” Margret's thoughts were: “One thing that helped me finish was that I didn't want to start something that I didn't complete. I knew I could complete it. I am perfectly intelligent enough to do it.” Genn believed in her own abilities

to ultimately get beyond the problems and complete; she would not fail. Patrick remarked, “I was not concerned I couldn’t do it, it was more I wasn’t sure what to do.”

Tanya “was not a quitter.” In Dorothy’s view:

I never had any negativity about my ability. Because somewhere along the line someone was able to get across to me that getting a PhD doesn't have anything to do with how smart you are. It has to do with how persistent you are. And I'm a very persistent person. So I never doubted that I would get done.

All of the 10+ Completers, despite their confidence that they would ultimately graduate, needed reinforcement of that belief at times. Some placed their faith in Jesus for strength. Some relied on their current regional group members or kept in touch with others who had completed the program. As her two regional group counterparts graduated, Tanya kept in touch with them until the end. “They were critical to my success in this program. We had a really strong bond. We all said we would stick with each other and they came to my defense at the end.” Lynn had a similar experience with her regional group. “So the philosophy was we were all going to finish and we were all going to support each other until the original group of us completed.” Genn reached out to her previous graduates from her regional group, including one who had recently graduated; she now had a role model and supporter.

Many of the previous quotes dealt with the encouragement and support of the faculty, friends and family, without whose assistance several of these 10+ Completers would not have completed the journey. Margret came from a family of educators. “My mother is a teacher. . . . My dad was one of the first to receive an EDD from Andrews’ Department of Education. That was a motivator to be able to talk to him about the program and things that were going on.” For Genn her support came not only from her dissertation chair, but from her former regional group and friends. Her partner, who has a

PhD, spent many hours offering encouragement, acknowledging his belief in her abilities, and offering advice as needed. Two other 10+ Completers had other PhDs within their immediate families, but did not mention that person as either a role model or a strong support.

Lynn had a girlfriend who would come and actually sit with her and read what Lynn was writing. Lynn said to her, “If I can write this and you who know nothing about the topic can understand what it is that I'm saying, then I know that it is clear and that the writing will be clear for people.” Robert’s strongest supporter was his wife. His daughter, as well, provided constant encouragement and helped to convince him that the doctorate was something that he “not only should do, but could do and could be very thankful for doing it.” His dissertation chair, who also at one point was a colleague of his at the university, was also a strong source of encouragement. For Rose:

It would have been really hard for me if I had been in gear, if I had gotten back in gear and not gotten the support from the advisors. It may have taken me four years to finish. But they were able to rev up their support and ability to respond, and help encourage me once I was back in gear. And that was invaluable.

Bart took some proactive stress-relieving action to succeed at his dissertation defense.

I went to my son's house in Detroit. And I went over to the community college library for about three days in a row and just sat in that library and studied and reviewed. Then I moved over to Andrews University. And again I had two or three days in their library. I laid off of sweets for two or three weeks before I presented. And I made sure that I exercised moderately and I got plenty of rest. So I was refreshed and I was ready to go and I was ready to defend the dissertation on the day of the defense.

The personal beliefs of these 10+ Completers in the inevitability that they would indeed complete the doctorate seemed to align with how they treated the PhD journey in general. They made the choice of when to engage in the PhD process and when to not

make it a priority. They strengthened their self-efficacy when needed; they reached out for help when they were ready to accept it. They took charge, as they had done so many times before in their jobs and lives. Despite the stumbles, they knew they would succeed; whether it was of their own talents or with the help of God, it was something they were meant to successfully complete.

While not all of the stories showed all of the themes, it was clear that many of the experiences of these 10+ Completers stemmed from similar perceptions and actions by the graduates. Each had personal aspirations for the PhD and a strong conviction that they had the talent and skill to complete the PhD, not matter what the challenges; appreciated the flexibility of the LEAD program, particularly its job-embedded nature; never placed the PhD above family and job responsibilities until they chose to do so; were given advice that helped them breakthrough an issue; experienced an event that motivated them toward completion; and created the deadline to complete the journey.

### **The Journey of Christine**

Although each of the 10+ Completers had different stories to tell on how they entered the program, how they progressed, and how they ultimately succeeded, there is a composite story that largely encompasses the framework of the journey. The composite story is told through the journey of Christine.

Christine decides to look into a PhD program. Although some may be daunted by starting a PhD in their 40s or 50s, she has an accomplished academic career, as well as an accomplished professional life. Although the PhD may help in the future in terms of career opportunities and healthy financial progression, the underlying reason for going into a PhD program is personal—wanting to learn how to become a better leader or

perhaps to make a greater difference on the job through improved action, or increasing personal credibility for what she is currently doing. There is no imposed external deadline for her, so her pace and choices throughout the program are largely self-selected. Luckily, Christine has the financial resources that can sustain her throughout the PhD without adversely affecting her family or other important external interests.

Being a non-traditional learner, a non-traditional program is the best option for her. Andrews University is an appealing choice as it is one of the few universities that offered flexibility of a job-embedded PhD. The ability to be a part-time student in a program that does not necessitate long stretches of time on campus is also important. Christine values her professional identity and her role within her family and in the community. She believes that she can balance all of these roles without compromising the non-academic events and responsibilities she has outside the doctoral program. Despite these challenges, she is confident that she can complete the doctorate in approximately 5 years.

Once she is in the doctoral program, she completes an Individual Development Plan that provides the framework for development of her competencies and defines the types of study and projects needed to prove her expertise. Much of this evidence will be through work done as part of the job. There is no time limit for the development and execution of the IDP, so it is completed at her own pace. Although the dissertation might become part of the overall portfolio and proof of competency, there is no suggestion at the outset that the dissertation should be part of the IDP and that the dissertation work should be part of the initial planning stages.

At various points throughout the journey, Christine experiences times of significant delays. These come in the form of external events in her job or home life, or an issue within the doctoral process itself. These events shifted the focus to work or family or another life event—with the doctorate taking a back seat to other more pressing, or more preferred responsibilities. Although belief in God’s efforts in her life, or in her own abilities to use the talents which provide a strong foundation for her to be able to achieve her PhD, there are times when she is disappointed or concerned as to whether or not she *can* finish it, but whether she *will* complete it.

Similarly, there are also events that occur that spur her on to periods of high productivity on the doctorate. These events come in two different types: in the form of advice, assistance, or support that reinvigorate her resolve to complete, or as an experience that provides a feeling of urgency—such as the Dean’s letter telling her she is approaching the 10-year limit, or perhaps an external event that provides the impetus to move onto “life after the doctorate.”

After Christine’s focus is clearly back on the completion of the doctorate, she finds it easier to compromise in areas of work and life in order to work on the doctorate in earnest—it is again a priority. Her mind-set had changed from one in which the doctorate is a lesser responsibility and to be addressed as time is available to a mind-set of doctoral completion. It is the right time to finish. To provide a goal for completion and to help her in maintaining this momentum, an artificial deadline or reasons for graduation are set: an arbitrary date, to keep a family promise or commitment, a date to stop paying tuition, or a life event, such as retirement. Now in the completion mind-set, she uses mechanisms to maintain her momentum and confidence. She seeks support from regional

group members, family, friends and faculty. She looks to recent regional group graduates as models of success and for their assistance to help with the process. Finally, these efforts pay off with her completion of the journey. She becomes what she wanted to be—a graduate. Though the journey was longer than expected, she is now proudly able to wear the title of Doctor of Philosophy and has achieved the PhD.

It was interesting to me to see how individuals with different life experiences in geographically diverse locations had such similar threads woven through their stories. It's noteworthy that although some had started in the program at the same time or within a year or two of other 10+ Completers, there was little or no contact with each other as their time frames elongated.

Despite the relatively small number of students within the LEAD program and the fact that several of them worked or studied on the Andrews campus, there was little or no connection between students with similar elongation behaviors. I personally had only met three of the 10+ Completers prior to beginning this study and only spoke to Pat about how he was working through his academic issues. This may be indicative of several factors such as the belief that they were the only ones with issues, that they could do it alone, or that they were not experiencing issues but rather focusing on other aspects of their lives. It does make me wonder, however, if the 10+ Completers did have the opportunity to support each individual's efforts if it would have made a difference in the amount of time they were off the grid and ultimately decreased their ETDs.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

#### **Introduction**

No doubt, taking on the objective of attaining a PhD is a daunting task. While each graduate has her unique experiences both within the program and at home, their stories are ones of success and perseverance. For traditional students who attempt a traditional program—attending full-time on campus, with a well-designed pathway to completion—the research shows that 50% who enter a PhD program fail to complete. Nontraditional programs offer options for those who cannot or do not want to participate in traditional programs—part-time enrollment, options for how the individual can progress through the program, more virtual or distance learning opportunities—all of which are enablers for non-traditional students seeking a doctorate. However, although these types of programs provide more accessibility for the doctoral pursuits for non-traditional students, nevertheless, the effort to complete the PhD can be even more challenging (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Holmes et al., 2009; Lacefield, 1985; Pauley et al., 1999; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

The non-traditional student—which LEAD students are considered to be—is generally identified as having one or more of the following characteristics: is older than 30, attends school part-time, is financially independent, works full-time when enrolled, has dependents other than a spouse, or is a single parent. According to data published on



non-traditional undergraduates, non-traditional students graduate with college degrees less often than do traditional students, and the more non-traditional one is, the less likely is one to graduate (Horn & Carroll, 1996). It is reasonable to suggest that these conclusions are applicable for non-traditional graduate students as well. For my 10+ Completers, all had at least four of these non-traditional characteristics.

Martin (2012) identified six reasons why people seek a PhD: personal growth, greater career opportunities, greater career advancement, financial reward, sense of accomplishment, and greater recognition and credibility. Although a traditional student can have any or all of these aspirations when seeking the PhD, for many, it is for more external reasons (career and financial gain) that the PhD is desired. Many look to use the degree to springboard them into a research, academic, private industry, or governmental job within their field of expertise (National Science Foundation, 2014; Golde, 2006).

For non-traditional students, the reasons may not be so clear. For them, too, career and financial gain may be motivators for the doctorate, particularly as a way to teach part-time or after retirement (Gardner, 2009a). But as in the case of these 10+ Completers, personal learning, credibility, and accomplishment were stronger drivers. Onwuegbuzie and Wao (2011) found similar results for their study, which included part-time students. For the three 10+ Completers who indicated they started the doctorate for career and financial gain, all had already achieved that goal prior to achieving the doctorate, and thus at that point there must have been an intrinsic reason to continue.

### **Research Design**

This research was a qualitative study designed to use case study as the methodology to examine a phenomenon within a specific context. In this bounded case

study, the intent was to examine the journey of students at Andrews University in the Leadership PhD program who graduated 10 years or more after starting the program. The study was intended to examine the following question: How do the non-traditional students within the non-traditional Leadership program at Andrews University, who took longer than 10 years to complete their PhDs, describe their experiences?

### **Conceptual Framework**

At the beginning of this research, I identified two specific theories which provided the framework upon which the research would be built: constructivism and Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

“A constructivist approach assumes there is no single, objective reality because reality for an individual is constructed by his or her interpretations. From a constructivist perspective, questions are asked about meaning and understanding from the participant's point of view” (Kim & Merriam, 2011, p. 364). Throughout the stories of the 10+ Completers, it is apparent that their personal experiences, struggles, and motivations composed the students' knowledge and realities of the PhD program. Through the interviews it was apparent that they were ‘learning as they go’. Facing previously unknown events and conflicting needs within the multiple roles they played—scholar, leader, parent, etc. —their choices, knowledge, and conclusions were formed not only by past experience but also by what they were experiencing and feeling in the moment. At times this resulted in stagnation; at other times in high productivity, switching of priorities, and reinforcing and reestablishing the commitment to succeed. Each 10+ Completer had a particular and distinctive path, structured by his or her perceived reality.

For me as researcher, I, too, bring my own constructed realities, creating my own ‘research lens’ in rendering the reality of the single participant’s stories—while staying true to the participant’s interpretation (Yin, 2011, p. 12). Once gathered, my role is to aggregate the perceptions and realities of the graduates (Stake, 1995, p. 65) into richly descriptive findings (Merriam, 1998, p. 11).

By viewing the stories of the 10+ Completers in this light, I was able to deduce themes woven throughout their journeys—an abstraction of their shared reality. By looking through the ‘eyes of the participants’, I constructed an overall view of the program from the 10+ Completers’ perspectives. My own experiences and realities as a researcher blend into this perspective as well, constructing meaning discerned and understood from a scholarly perspective (Cupchik, 2001).

In many ways, this constructivist approach paralleled the LEAD program’s goals for their students. By its job-embedded nature and requirement of theoretical underpinnings, the 10+ Completers intentionally used experience and knowledge to create new realities as leaders and scholars. The recognition of these changed realities was captured in the self-reflection papers the students produced as part of their portfolio documentation as well as in their personal interactions on the job and in other life circumstances.

When looking for a theoretical construct that helped me frame why these 10+ Completers actually graduated, I started with the assumption that for those who continue to try to achieve a goal for more than 10 years, especially when there was no clear external reward for it, there must be something that enables them to continue. In my

reading of the literature, Tinto's Theory of Persistence and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory were two constructs worthy of examination.

Tinto's theory for graduate persistence has several components: (a) the persistence of the student will reflect the character of their specific field of study; (b) she will persist if she is socially integrated with the student and faculty communities of the program in which one is seeking the degree; and (c) the social integration of a doctoral student is closely aligned to their academic integration (Tinto, 1993, p. 232). This theory is also based upon several conditions, including the presumption that the primary community for the student is program-based at the local level and the external professional communities for that field of study. Part-time studies serve to undermine persistence by isolating the person from the intellectual and social life of the department (p. 234). Although there is merit in this theory, particularly for part-time students in traditional programs, it falls apart within the non-traditional program environment.

There were several simple reasons why I dismissed it as a viable option:

1. Tinto did not foresee non-traditional programs that provide opportunities for socialization and academic connections through the use of distance learning, cohorts, and regional groups.

2. He did not envision that non-traditional part-time students would become such a major force in doctoral study that there would be programs that required full-time work and were structured to be a purely part-time academic option.

3. He did not anticipate that job-embedded learning and research would lessen the need to be as closely tied to the 'local' academic community and the larger external community of professionals of that particular program. Some non-traditional PhD

students will stay connected to the communities of which they are already members and have no expectation of becoming part of a larger professional or academic community. If the students do choose to participate in these communities, they have options to do so beyond the confines of a university or locality.

4. Tinto did not foresee that almost half of the people who now seek PhDs would not work in academe upon graduation—in 2012 that number going into academe was 42% (National Science Foundation, 2014), nor that there would be significant numbers of PhD students wanting a PhD for personal reasons, not for a career or economic advancement.

Although I did focus on the construct of self-efficacy at the beginning of the study after reviewing my own journey to the PhD, it wasn't until I recognized the underlying theme of conviction—they knew that sooner or later they would complete the PhD—that I recognized that self-efficacy was indeed a key component of how these students succeeded. Failure was not an option. They had succeeded academically before, so they would do so now; their previous academic endeavors, and the support of others in the program like them, kept them on the course, regardless of when they completed. Self-efficacy was a basis of that conviction. They knew that they had the tools and capabilities to complete the program. Whether that knowledge came through their relationship with God, or was a surety of their own abilities, they could complete it. There were times when events negatively impacted their self-efficacy, particularly in their research self-efficacy, the most important factor influencing dissertation progress (Faghihi et al., 1999). For the highly self-efficacious, they reinstated control after an issue; for others, they sought help and created situations in which small successes reinforced it (Bandura,

1982, p. 131), often with the help of their chairs and other faculty members. Although some stumbled along the way, at some point they took the initiative to make a change. They reframed an environment in which self-efficacy could be increased, and sought out ways to use that change to their advantage (Bandura, 1997b).

### **Findings**

Within this project, 12 10+ Completers were interviewed. Of these eight females and four males, all but one (49 years) were all older than 50 when they graduated. On average, their time-to-graduation was 13 years. The participants were employed during their time in the program in positions of high responsibility and work volume. Although some experienced job changes because of promotion or change of location, others remained in their same positions. Several worked two or more jobs simultaneously. Four of these participants worked within K-12 schools and four within university/college entities; the remaining four worked within the health care arena.

Current research on non-traditional students supports many of the findings from the interviews. Intrinsic motivation, such as personal growth or accomplishment, was an important reason for entering the program (Terrell et al., 2012). Intrinsic motivation, such as a completion mind-set, enabled them to complete (P. Green & Bowden, 2012).

Although each of the 10+ Completers encountered events that altered their road to completion, all did complete. Each had significant periods of time in which they were productive, as well as significant periods of inaction. Similar to traditional and other non-traditional students, their journeys showed many of the same issues and disappointments, such as delayed or indifferent faculty responses (Golde, 2000), lack of support (from their

regional groups), isolation (Baird, 1997; Gardner & Holley, 2011), and the need to choose between the doctoral responsibilities and external ones (Kluever, 1997).

At some point they experienced an adverse academic event or events within the program, such as change of dissertation topics, problems with constructing the IDP, changes of advisors or chairs, dysfunctional or non-existent regional groups, or portfolio snafus. These may have contributed to the delay, but for the most part, except for the lack of structure that led to the ambiguity that some felt, programmatic problems were not perceived as the major reason for their delay in completion (Onwuegbuzie & Wao, 2011).

For these 10+ Completers, the more prevalent reasons for delay were in two other facets of their world: career and family. As non-traditional students, they had to shift priorities between doctoral work and the demands of challenging careers, family, or other personal responsibilities. External variables, such as family and job, can greatly impact attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985), or in this case, delay time-to-degree (Wao et al., 2011). As it became needed (or desired) to be more focused in their jobs because of promotions, job changes, or the need to perform several jobs in their careers, the choice was made to curtail or temporarily stop the doctoral work. At other times, family events, both good and bad, resulted in the same decision. As older students, most had several generations of family which influenced how much time they were able to spend on the PhD. The overall workload and responsibilities produced by their 'world' outside of the dissertation program were the key reasons that productive work on the doctorate slowed.

As described in the previous chapter, there were seven themes that presented themselves throughout their stories. The themes were: personal intentions; flexibility and structure; doctorate, job, and life balance; right advice; right experience; right time; and

conviction. Although each theme is described separately, it is the combination of these themes within the lives and experiences of the 10+ Completers that created the framework on which their realities of PhD completion were built.

The theme of personal intentions described the reasoning and aspirations for starting, staying in, and completing the doctoral program. The desire to gain new employment opportunities or greater financial reward may have been stated at the beginning of the journey, but was not the sustaining reason of remaining within the program. It was the aspiration of that 10+ Completer—her own private wish to learn, to validate, to be credible—that made her begin her journey, helped her stay the course, and allowed her to finally complete the doctorate.

As the lives of the students are unique to each one, so are the ways in which their personal intentions manifest themselves throughout the program. Prior to even researching a PhD program in leadership, one has to have a reason to pursue it. As discussed previously, there are reasons as to why one enters a PhD program. Financial and career incentives may be the reason that some start a PhD program, but is usually not what sustains the student through the journey. It is her personal intentions: the love of learning, and gaining new skills and knowledge that transfers into helping others that carries the student to a successful defense and completion (Spaulding & Rockingson-Szapkiw, 2013, p. 213).

The aspirations of the individual to earn a PhD, as well as her aspirations for her life outside of a PhD program, affect the outcomes in two distinct ways: what kind of program they will select and how they will execute that program in light of other non-academic responsibilities. For those who do not have external deadlines, such as a grant



running out, or a job promotion contingent on the degree, the internal deadlines are more flexible and the PhD could become a major or minor focus at different times throughout the process. For several of the students, the flexible timelines that this non-traditional program allowed combined with the student's own lack of a strong deadline significantly increased the time to completion.

In terms of flexibility and structure, many of the participants spoke about flexibility of the program and how they were able to enter the program and learn about leadership not only on a scholarly basis but how to live it in their lives and, particularly, back on the job. The opportunity to apply scholarly knowledge into events and strategies within the work environment as well as use work experiences within the academic realm speaks to the adult learner's need to be self-directing and the ability to use those concepts and real-world experiences in learning (Knowles, 1984). The PhD rigor of this program instead of an EdD (although that option exists) made the program attractive to those whose aspiration was a PhD. Additionally, a key attribute of a non-traditional program is the ability to learn outside the confines of a university. Similarly, full-time employed students with varied nonacademic responsibilities usually need to reduce the amount and range of time the student can be on campus (Steinheider, Constanza, Kisamore, & Reiter-Palmon, 2006). Enough structure, however, needs to be in place, in order to optimize the learning opportunities of the student. Too much ambiguity in what is expected of the learner or a perceived lack of direction on the part of the advisor or other faculty can lead to frustration and doubt (Baird, 1997; D'Andrea, 2002; Katz, 1997).

The need to prioritize varying aspects of the individual's responsibilities on the home, work, and school fronts was found in the theme of doctorate, job, and life. While

each of these areas in the 10+ Completers' lives was important, the idea of *balancing* them in their lives, particularly in the way balance is portrayed in much of the literature, did not come through in the stories. The PhD, until the students' mind-sets shifted to doctoral completion, was *not the primary focus* of these 10+ Completers. With lives that are richly faceted with complex, high-responsibility jobs, family commitments, and a myriad of other obligations and callings, these students often minimized the time working on the PhD or put doctoral work aside completely to focus on other priorities. As shown throughout the stories, the students did not allow the PhD journey to get in the way of their external lives. They *chose* how much of their time was spent on the doctorate, career, family, or other external activities. This meant that doctoral work was halted for significant periods, while commitments within the non-academic realms took priority in the minds and actions of the students.

Several 10+ Completers started the doctorate with the personal commitment to never compromise their time with their families. Others mentioned that the doctorate journey was a way of bringing added benefit to their jobs and how they themselves acted as leaders within the context of the job. In effect, the PhD was supplemental to the job, but not *essential* to the job itself; they were already successful within the current positions, or capable of acquiring other jobs that they sought. Students who were nearing the 'best years' of their lives did not want to miss them at the cost of increased focus on the PhD. For all of the students, they chose to make the PhD a lesser priority than other facets of their lives for specific reasons at specific times. Their mind-sets were ones of continuing in the doctorate, not ones of complete doctoral focus.

That being said, at some point that focus shifted. The concept of the PhD became a true priority, as indicated by comments of making tough decisions to work through holidays, having tough talks with families about how there was a need to focus on the doctoral work, taking time off from work to get writing done, and finding quiet offices in which to concentrate. As Margret put it,

I had the idyllic vision at the beginning that I could work full-time, study some, and have a life. In other words, I could go on vacation every year, I would have some weekend time off. It wouldn't—I wasn't ready to give up on a total life. Now I had realized I was ready to give up on some things.

It was at this point when the goal of the student changed. It moved from one of “I’m going to finish my PhD,” to “I’m going to complete this PhD now.”

Much like putting together the pieces of a puzzle, these 10+ Completers fit certain actions and experiences together to create the environment in which they were able to finish. When it was needed, the person received the right advice from the right person to help them continue with the journey. These 10+ Completers found what they needed to ‘hear’ in many different ways. Whether it was through God, chairs, advisors, friends, family, a poem, or a long-ago teaching—something finally ‘clicked’. Even if it had been said many times before, the right person with the right message helped the individual move forward.

The theme of right experience(s)—the synergy between old, current, and new experiences (Knowles, 1984)—was another piece of the puzzle. Something happened in their lives that disrupted their current patterns and provided them an opportunity to revisit the state of PhD progression. Receiving the Dean’s letter was such an experience for many. A serendipitous encounter in a foreign land, the graduation of a peer who was a role-model for the 10+ Completer, the realization that your child was going to graduate

before you—whatever triggering event occurred gave them a reason to rethink and readjust their priorities to again strongly focus on completing the PhD.

The right advice and the right experience combined with the will to commit to completion created the right time to complete the PhD. This time was when the student finally committed the personal resources needed to complete the program. The mind-set had changed. They were no longer ‘in the program’, they were now ‘completing the program’. It was the right time to finish.

The theme of conviction was one that I believe was pivotal to the successes of the 10+ Completers. Although there were significant times of inaction and minimization of the PhD in the big picture of their lives, their belief that they would get this completed, and that they had the gifts and talents to do so, remained. Their self-efficacy in academic pursuits helped them complete. There were times when their conviction may have waned, but in those instances, they found ways to reaffirm it. In those times the question that some had was: “*Do I still want to do this? But never one of ‘Can I do this?’*”

### **Discussion of the Findings**

In reviewing the themes and the subsequent impacts that they had on the students’ overall transition into graduates, there were four distinct areas of discussion which arose: the nontraditional paradox; completion mind-set; conviction; and barriers.

#### **Non-Traditional Paradox**

Although nontraditional programs emerged out of the needs of non-traditional students, the relationship between the academic institution’s programs and the non-traditional students who enroll is not without problems. For our 10+ Completers, the flexibility in the program, the creativity in how one could show competence, the ability to

attend part-time, and the job-embedded nature of the learning were keys to selecting the program. Such programs, by their inherent flexibility, particularly its part-time, non-campus-based learning, limits the consistency and amount of contact (especially face-to-face) with faculty (Archbald, 2011). No matter the confidence and capabilities of the student, there is still the need for consistent support and encouragement—the ‘inherent and complicated tension’ between self-reliance and guidance (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Providing that support can be challenging to the program just as expecting that level of support may be challenging to the students.

As non-traditional older students who may have come back to academic study decades after their last collegiate learning experiences, they may not have the necessary underpinnings, especially in the areas of research methodology. Such expertise is expected of traditional students, who, like they, have already achieved a master’s degree, but within the recent past. Difficulties with the research components of the doctorate are strongly related to incompleteness (Varney, 2010).

Non-traditional students have significant responsibilities outside of the PhD pursuit. The demands of career, family, and community all impact the ability to dedicate the time needed for pursuit of the doctorate. The patterns and intensity of studying are based upon interaction between study and other major commitments (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). The tension between the various commitments forces choices which may delay the overall doctoral process. Herein is where the paradox lies:

1. Non-traditional students, the people most in need of a non-traditional program, are those who often need what a non-traditional program may have trouble offering: direction, oversight, and help. Non-traditional students need support from faculty, support

from peers, and access to university support services (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Lacefield, 1985). Often access is limited for these students because faculty and support services are not available at nights or weekends—times when most non-traditional students work. While having a good relationship with the chair and other faculty is an important part of doctoral success (Grasso et al., 2009; Jimenez y West, Gokalp, Vallejo Pena, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011; Manathunga, 2005; Onwuegbuzie & Wao, 2011; Pauley et al., 1999), accessibility to them and responsiveness to the student is important to success. It doesn't help if you can't reach them.

2. Most likely, the non-traditional student does not spend the majority of time on campus, as a traditional student would. Some support services that are available to students, such as writing help and library assistance, may be most effective when used face-to-face, which may be difficult for the non-traditional student to accommodate. The student may not even know what support services are available, as she is not fully integrated to the university and its overall structure outside of her department and program. She does not have the opportunity to experience the same climate of support as full-time graduate students (Jimenez y West et al., 2011). Yet increased interactions with university support systems for part-time students are predictors of persistence in the program (Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) believe that some universities “encourage enrollment of [non-traditional students] . . . but on the other hand, do not seem to be concerned about understanding their needs and circumstances, maintaining an institutional system designed for a very different type of student” (p. 34). The university

may not provide support options when the non-traditional student's flexible learning times require them.

3. Many non-traditional programs require full-time employment from their students to provide a job-embedded environment for study. Presumably, they attract those non-traditional students in jobs/careers that provide a rich learning environment in which to combine theory and practice. These types of jobs can also come with much responsibility and often a work week that extends far beyond 40 hours, ultimately limiting time for study.

4. Non-traditional students with familial or other external responsibilities may choose non-traditional programs that can offer them time to tend to those responsibilities. As they attend to those responsibilities, the amount of time that non-traditional students can attend to their studies is lessened.

5. The financial independence that a non-traditional student may have may mean she has little time to be a student. For her, not having to rely on others to provide the financial support to attend graduate school means that she has to provide it, usually done by working full-time.

6. Financial independence can also provide latitude as to when a person finishes the PhD. If financial pressures to complete are not there, one key item that influences students who are reliant on others, such as parents or university funding to complete, is not an influencer for a non-traditional student who controls her own finances.

7. Full-time status enables focused interactions with other students (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 71). Interactions between non-traditional student peers may be limited, as they, too, have similar time restrictions and have limited availability for contact. Aside

from being good sources of support, peers can be good sources of informal knowledge of the programs, expectations, etc., which may never get shared. Many programs defer much information to the graduate student subculture, which may work well for on-campus students, but not for those less integrated or available (Lovitts, 2001, p. 80).

8. As found within the stories of my 10+ Completers, there were major blocks of time where the majority of students did virtually nothing to progress in their doctoral journey. The job, family, church, etc., usually took priority over their goal of achieving the doctorate. It can be very easy to be ‘off grid’ or inactive in an environment that embraces part-time study, off-campus access, self-developed courses, and job-embedded projects—all for self-directed adult learners.

9. Getting responses from faculty may not be timely because of the number of part-time students working on their doctorates at the same time. Students who prolong their study beyond the 5-7-year mark place greater burdens on faculty as student/faculty ratios increase (Goenner & Snaith, 2004). When faculty travel to regional groups, conferences, and other educational settings both in the United States and abroad, they can be inaccessible for periods of time.

Adult learners, being successful in career and life in general, may also have trouble reaching out for help when needed. Non-traditional fully employed students have a higher level of vulnerability, either as a lack of support or lack of reaching out, and they view their university experiences as ‘a journey’ that they can or must do alone (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Doctoral study, especially in non-STEM fields of study, is insular by nature. The more opportunities for students at all phases of the doctoral process to interact, feel secure enough to reach out, and support and be supported by others, the



more integrated they are into the process, and the less isolated they feel. The feeling of belonging—‘fitting in’—decreases isolation (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Barnes et al., 2011; Reamer, 1990; Roberts, Gentry, & Townsend, 2011). As cited by Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011), Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) found that non-traditional students are less likely to perceive being involved with the university and the program when they must always take the initiative to reach out to faculty. The connection is stronger when others reach out to help them (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, p. 49). Frequent communication initiated by the faculty can help the process progress more quickly (Watts, 2008).

Manathunga (2005) identified four warning signs that a student may be in trouble in their doctoral journey: constantly changing dissertation topic or planned work; avoiding all forms of communication from the school and other students; isolating themselves from the school and other students; and avoiding submitting work for review (p. 223). It can be easy to not recognize, or miss completely, these signs when the overall time spent working with this student is infrequent, especially during the dissertation process.

Although non-traditional programs for non-traditional students may be the only way in which many students complete their PhDs, there are characteristics of both the students and the programs that can cause additional challenges to success. The non-traditional student’s lack of continuous contact with faculty and peers, the need to work full-time, and external responsibilities can be made more acute by the freedom and overall design of non-traditional programs. For my 10+ Completers, who did not place the PhD as a top priority in their lives for most of their time in the program, it was easy to

take long stretches of time away from the doctorate and focus on external areas of their lives. Designing programs with a “high-frequency contact model” focus would make students, faculty, and other university support areas responsible to keeping the PhD journey moving forward and the students less likely to fall into inactive periods, decreasing overall ETD (Watts, 2008, p. 231).

### Completion Mind-set

What was apparent among all of the 10+ Completers is that no one had a clear need to get out of the program quickly. Although most had an idea of when they might graduate, the path toward that date was not a smooth and consistent process. The overall doctoral program was done in disconnected chunks. The IDP was one hurdle to be jumped; the portfolio was its own hurdle, as was the dissertation. The student had in mind how to continue with the doctoral process, but no true plan how to finish it. Knowing that you can finish does not necessarily lead one to concretely plan its execution. As none of the 10+ Completers had an external concrete deadline, such as a job promotion or a raise as a goal to help solidify their timelines, most went through their doctoral process moving with the ebb and flow of priorities. As Margret so eloquently stated: “When you’re enjoying the process, getting to the endpoint is not such a big deal.”

It was not until the ‘right time’ that their deadline became real. For most, the right time was precipitated by the right advice that directed them towards completion, and the right experience. For most of them, the latter was receiving the Dean’s letter of their impending 10-year deadline. It was at that point, or shortly thereafter, that the mind-set switched to one of continuing in the process to one of completion. An end-point, artificial or otherwise, was set. That forced a shifting of priorities; now, taking time from work or

skipping a family holiday was something that they were now willing to compromise, something that would not have been conceded early in order to complete the PhD.

Once the 10+ Completers had actually shifted into the doctoral completion mindset, some said that it was easier to complete the journey than they thought it would be. The need to prioritize the PhD over external events did not have a negative impact on their relationships. If anything, it was a positive event in the lives of their families. Several students wondered why they didn't do it sooner.

### Conviction

All 10+ Completers ultimately believed that the doctorate would be completed. This manifested in two distinct ways: belief in their capabilities to complete the PhD (self-efficacy) and the belief in God and His part in their success.

### **Self-efficacy**

Bandura discussed several ways an individual can heighten or maintain high levels of self-efficacy for a specific task or event, in this case, during the doctorate process. Enactive mastery is the interpretation of one's previous successes and the perseverance needed to complete such tasks. People with significant academic success in the past can use that experience as assurance that they will have success in the next effort—in this case, the doctorate.

Others who support the student through the doctorate can strengthen self-efficacy through modeling doctoral success or through providing a supportive environment. Observation of vicarious experiences of others who model doctoral success, provided the student believes the model must be similar in capability for success, can enhance their personal self-efficacy. 10+ Completers used recent Andrews graduates, faculty, and other

life resources, such as family doctors, friends, and external help, as successful models to emulate in terms of doctoral success. A strong support system within the facets of the student's overall life, such as supportive chairs, faculty, regional groups, graduates, work colleagues, church members, etc., all lend themselves to maintain or enhance the individual's self-efficacy as needed. Through personal social communities and verbal persuasion, they created a supportive environment to gain the supportive feedback constructed to highlight their capabilities and their opportunities to bridge gaps to achieve their goals. So for those supporters who were not wrapped in the mantle of a PhD in effect enhanced the personal efficacy of some of the 10+ Completers by modeling effective coping attitudes and strategies for managing problem situations, demonstrating the value of perseverance in the pursuit of the PhD, and providing resources for efficacious coping (Bandura, 1997b).

Ultimately, the amount of self-efficacy one has towards a project determines how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles or aversive experiences (Bandura, 1982). The more support and modeling opportunities that one encounters, the greater the chance of sustainable self-efficacy.

The 10+ Completers did what they needed to do to keep their self-efficacy high at periods within the process when it was most needed. This was no clearer than when times were troublesome during research. Strong research efficacy is an indicator of doctorate success; lack of efficacy is an indicator of failure (Varney, 2010). Although there may have been fleeting moments of doubt, during those times they found a way to continue.

The student's research self-efficacy and student's relationships with their advisor and committee members significantly contributed to dissertation progress. Positive and

cooperative relationships with their advisors and committee members facilitated completion of the dissertation. In every case, the 10+ Completers developed positive relationships to encourage and assist them throughout the dissertation research, most often with their chair or another committee member (Faghihi et al., 1999).

### **Belief in God and Church Activities**

Throughout their stories, several of the 10+ Completers mentioned their religiosity in several different ways. Some mentioned their relationship with God, be it through prayer, as an expression of a self-given identity as a ‘man of faith’ or through God’s intervening in events to positively impact the student’s actions. Although the research is limited, there is a positive correlation between self-efficacy and spirituality (Holt, Roth, Clark, & Debnam, 2014). In drug recovery programs, the greater the person’s spirituality, the more it impacted their overall self-confidence in being successful in the program. Those with lower spirituality had significantly lower self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a strong factor in substance recovery programs (Brown, Tonigan, Pavlik, Kosten, & Volk, 2013). Religious individuals can have better health outcomes potentially because of higher levels of self-efficacy (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001). Although the true relationship between a belief in God and self-efficacy is not clear, Ellison et al. postulate that the belief that “with God, all things are possible” (Matt 19:26) may help the individual’s sense of self-worth and control through the relationship with the all-powerful Being, with whom he can engage with for guidance and solace. Additionally, there may be a sense of vicarious control over the person’s affairs through that relationship.

Attendance at church and activities involving the church family are important events in the lives of many religious people. Self-efficacy may be enhanced through behaviors such as attendance at church and through socialization with church members. Through active participation in a religious community, a person's self-efficacy may be increased by the emotional and social reinforcement that community provides through common activities and worship.

### Barriers

Much of the literature on non-completion describes the barriers that can get in the way of an individual completing the PhD. Several of the individuals did experience concrete programmatic and academic issues that needed to be overcome in order to move forward in the doctoral quest, such as lack of guidance, lack of skill set, and multiple dissertation topics (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). But what I found among this group was that except for these 'school-related' issues, there really weren't barriers, at least in the ways that we attempt to define them. The effects of academic or external barriers in preventing the student from progressing on the doctorate did not appear in the interviews the way I would have thought, especially as they are often discussed within the literature on completion and attrition.

Upon reading the stories presented by experts such as Golde (2000) and Lovitt (2001), I felt the pain of their students who spoke of the barriers that ultimately prevented them from achieving their PhDs. Some of the most poignant examples centered around 'not belonging'—not fitting into the program, not bonding with peers, not having an advisor/chair who cared about her research, not relating to the too competitive or

unsupportive department environment; these were all barriers encountered by doctoral students. Although the 10+ Completers had times without faculty contact, were uncomfortable with ambiguity, or had less-than-optimal experiences with regional groups, no one was disenfranchised from the LEAD program. Even during times of non-activity, or in the case of Genn, who took 2 years off, they were graduate students until they completed the doctoral pursuit.

Similarly, the external barriers that impacted Lovitts's dropouts and her at-risk completers, such as family pressures, recognizing that the PhD was a bad 'life decision', lack of family support, inability to meet expenses, or facing poor job prospects were impactful on the students' ultimate departures.

I did not hear the same type of emotion and disappointments in the stories of the 10+ Completers—although they experienced external events and circumstances that impacted their progression as well. I was fully prepared to discover how they heroically overcame the barriers that presented to them and ultimately obtained a hard-fought PhD. But that level of pain and determination never presented itself.

But then I realized something I hadn't previously, that most of documentation on attrition and the barriers to the completion of a PhD are based on one primary assumption: *The PhD is and must be the focal point for the student. Anything that takes or distracts the student away from this goal is a barrier that can lead to attrition.* For these non-traditional 10+ Completers who were working on a doctorate for their own learning or personal intentions, what becomes clear is that they *didn't need* the PhD and that they *did need* their families, jobs, and other external life components. For most of the

10+ Completers, it came back to their choices within the realms of job, doctorate, and life and how they chose to pursue each of them.

For those who experienced personal life events, such as family or personal illness, moving, getting a new job, building a new house, or tightened finances, there was never a feeling of victimization that came through in the interviews. Instead, it was clear feeling of *choice*. Each *chose* to shift their priorities to focus on things that were not barriers, but instead vital parts of an integrated life. In general, there wasn't a feeling of drama or sadness of the potential impacts to the doctoral path, but rather a mature and proactive reemphasis on the current priorities.

For those who had the opportunity to accept new jobs and new responsibilities, they *chose* to take the job and assume the increase in work effort in order to succeed or excel within it. For those who were not forced to change dissertation topics but did so in order to better match the current circumstances, the change wasn't a barrier. The time spent with grandchildren or loved ones, the vacations, the involvement in church activities, etc., were not barriers, but instead, some of the most precious and life-affirming parts of their lives. They *chose* them over doctoral progress. When the right time came in which the doctorate was the focal point, they got it done.

## **Recommendations**

### Recommendations for Non-Traditional Programs

Even if the PhD isn't the most important goal in the lives of these 10+ Completers, it's clear that non-traditional programs for non-traditional students have inherent challenges that can be mitigated with proper planning and execution.



Non-traditional programs have a population of students who are different from the traditional students in traditional programs, therefore they require a different style of programmatic execution to increase shorter completion times and decrease attrition. Programs need to provide enough structure and information to the students to ensure they truly understand what happens during the doctoral journey. Accommodating the students as they work on the PhD by ensuring adequate support from faculty and university resources at times when it can be truly needed is important to success. Non-traditional students have limited time to work on academic pursuits; delays and non-responsiveness can impact momentum and motivation.

Holding the program, university, faculty, and the student as jointly responsible for the student's success or failure is important to recognizing ways to improve not just the success for that single student, but for future students as well.

1. Ensure that students are clearly prepared for what is expected within the program. Clear, concise direction, deadlines, and procedures for working within the program should be made available at the outset, or earlier. Providing a strong base of program and university expectations while ensuring flexibility on those items that are of importance to the student, such as course design, competence artifacts, part-time status, and remote capabilities, will better position the student for success.

2. If the program has students who have characteristics similar to the 10+ Completers, create programmatic deadlines for those who do not have concrete deadlines for achieving the PhD. Dates and targets mutually agreed upon by chair and student will count a long way in helping them chose how best to move forward.

3. Move the Dean's letter to earlier in the program cycle—this is a strong motivational tool. The Dean's letter is the right experience for the students to move them into the right time to complete. Moving it up in the process may shorten those periods of inactivity found within the journeys of the 10+ Completers.

4. Provide instructions within the *Student Handbook* outlining events or scenarios that previously academically successful students haven't considered when entering into the doctoral programs. Letting students know to expect they will feel lost at times, how to identify when they are in trouble, and what they can expect from advisors and faculty can go a long way in assuring them that it happens to everyone.

5. Provide opportunities for learning how to successfully research and write early in the process. Research efficacy is one of the strongest predictors of graduation. Non-traditional students may have limited or dated experience in such areas so ensuring adequate training and opportunity to produce a viable research project prior to the dissertation can increase the potential for on-time graduation.

6. Make the dissertation a focal point for the students from the beginning. Looking into potential topics and areas of interest can help guide the student in creation of coursework and portfolio artifacts that directly relate to the dissertation. Ensure that the student has a completion mind-set at the beginning of the program. By working through the program with definitive milestones and deadlines in mind, the student and the advisor/chair can be put in the position to make better choices, especially in terms of accessibility of faculty and work-life balance for student.

7. Reach out to the student if you haven't had contact lately. Highly effective advisors and chairs who meet regularly, provide guidance, and monitor progress of their

students can more easily detect the warning signs of potential issues and perhaps influence the student's choice before the choice or situation occurs. Non-traditional students expect you to reach out. Consider having office hours at times when non-traditional students work. Be more accessible.

8. Provide the student, especially when starting the transition stages of the program—IDP, portfolio, and dissertation—access to a graduate who has recently gone through what they are going through, one who is trained to provide feedback and encouragement. These graduates may become role models who may foster stronger self-efficacy within the student.

9. Consider having a primary and secondary chair or advisors for the student as the program progresses. This strategy has several potential benefits for both the student and faculty. Having two faculty working together on behalf of a single student can provide more opportunities to proactively reach out to a student who has gone off grid. Having two opportunities to access one of your chairs may be easier than getting to your only chair. At times of travel, illness, or other duties that make the chair or advisor inaccessible, having another faculty person who knows what is going on with that student's journey can keep the process moving forward. Sometimes a chair or advisor cannot provide what the student needs at a specific point in time. Throughout the stories, there were points in time when the 'right advice' did not come from the chair, but came from another faculty member. Having a second choice may enable those 'right advice' opportunities easier to facilitate.

10. Require project plans with completion dates from the regional groups that include what the regional group as a whole wants to complete, but commitments for

completion from its perspective members as well. Regional groups are not just group of students helping other students; they are an integral part of the University's learning and assessment process. If a regional group is dysfunctional or has no clear direction on how to execute on moving their participants forward in their process, it lessens its ability in achieving the goals of that team. There should be a clear strategy for the team throughout the year and moving forward, adjusted as needed. A faculty member should monitor these plans throughout the year.

11. Ensure that the Leadership program has adequate numbers of faculty and administrative support for a non-traditional program. Understanding that enrollment in a non-traditional program can inherently lead to isolation and disconnection from the program and the University itself, providing adequate support for its students is paramount for success.

12. Supporting a non-traditional program should not have the look and feel of a traditional program. Having administrative support systems and faculty support systems tied to the regular hours of the university can make them largely inaccessible to non-traditional students. Fully employed students do not have the same level of flexibility in their professional lives that resident students do in a more traditional program. In order to embrace the concept of non-traditional programs, you need to consider how current university structure does and does not meet their needs and act accordingly. Attending meetings at 9 a.m. and seeking help at offices closed at 5 p.m. may not always be possible for the types of students you wish your program to attract.

## Recommendations for Further Study

The numbers of non-traditional students in non-traditional PhD programs are increasing. With the changing demographics of our society and the societal construct of life-long learning, it stands to reason that as the United States continues to age and becomes more diverse, more people may be seeking higher-level degrees for personal learning. Programs like the LEAD at Andrews University provide a unique view into how older students, who work full-time and have lives inherently different from traditional students, experience the doctoral experience. Although this research focused on late-completers at a single university, the population of all LEAD graduates and LEAD non-graduates could provide insight into such non-traditional students within other programs and other disciplines.

1. The ETD for educational PhD doctorates is gradually decreasing. What has changed? Are there differences in how those in traditional versus non-traditional programs persist?

2. What differed between the non-traditional 10+ Completers and the non-traditional on-time completers and dropouts of programs like the LEAD at Andrews?

3. If indeed there is a growing population of adult learners who want to have a PhD, but don't want to sacrifice other facets of their lives, how does that affect how programs are tailored to that type of students?

4. Andrews' LEAD program average ETD is 5.86 years, which is much lower than the average completion time of 11.8 years for 2013 education PhD graduates. What influences this?

5. The students who drop out of the LEAD program do so more quickly than the average education PhD dropout. What influences this?

6. How should part-time studies be defined and measured? What should the expectations of progression of a part-time student be in terms of TTD and ETD? How should a part-time student's progress be compared to a full-time student's progression? Is 'years' in school a relevant measure of progression for both types of students? Could credit hours be a better measure?

### **Summary**

During the journeys of the 10+ Completers, they experienced many of the same issues and events that many other non-traditional students in non-traditional programs face. Unlike many of their fellow graduates, they completed their doctorates well past the expected time frames for completion. But they managed to complete their programs on their own terms and, ultimately, in their own time frames. For all of them, entering in, learning throughout, and finally graduating from the Andrews Leadership Program was a worthy endeavor. They found many ways to persist and ultimately complete, and their conviction and surety that they would graduate was a strong factor in their completion.

Perhaps it was the maturity of the students and their considerable life experiences that enabled the 10+ Completers to be more of a 'chooser,' rather than act as victim. It may also be that this non-traditional program in Leadership, with its job-embedded and self-reflected focus, provides a psychological environment for its participants to exhibit some of their most basic characteristics: leaders, successful in job and in life, decision-makers—in effect, choosers of their own paths.

APPENDIX A  
CONTEXT AREAS AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW  
QUESTIONS

## Context Areas and Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Background
<p>Describe the rationale or aspirations you had for entering the PhD. program at Andrews.</p> <p>When you started the program, what did you hope to gain (or do) with the doctorate?</p> <p>As you embarked on the program journey, what milestones or pace did you envision for yourself?</p>
The Journey
<p>Describe your journey through the doctoral process. Please address, for example, the timing of each of the major deliverables (completion of course work, portfolio chapters and dissertation).</p> <p>Were there specific things that occurred along the way that influenced your progress positively or negatively? What happened? How did they impact you?</p>
Thoughts and Actions
<p>Throughout your doctorate work, did you experience doubts or concerns about your ability to complete your doctorate? What was the cause or rationale for your doubt(s)?</p> <p>How did that feel?</p> <p>What internal or external supports did you use to help you overcome these doubts?</p> <p>Was there a specific moment in which you made a specific decision to complete the doctorate? What were the thoughts or feelings at that time that led to the decision to complete the program?</p> <p>Now that you have graduated, how did it feel to finally complete your doctorate?</p>
Personal Learning
<p>Now that you've achieved your PhD, are there things you would do differently if you had it to do over again?</p> <p>What have you learned about the overall PhD process?</p> <p>What have you learned about yourself?</p>



APPENDIX B  
PARTICIPANT'S PACKET

## Participant's Packet



Hello, my 10+ Leadership Program Completers! Thanks once again for participating in this project. Enclosed in this packet you will find two different sections to review. The first contains the questions I wish to cover within the interview process. If you review these prior to the interview, it may help your recollection. If you want to jot down a few notes to make sure you get as much of your story into the interview, please do so. The interview will be semi-structured. This means that depending on how the interview progresses, these questions will may not be asked directly, but we will cover the areas within the flow of your answers.

You will receive a transcript of the interview for you to review to ensure that it runs true what you want to share; if something is missed we can add it in.

The second section is demographic information I may wish to use within the study. Most of the studies on Ph.D. completion and non-completion have been done predominately in non-denominational universities where the population generally lives onsite and goes from undergraduate work directly or shortly thereafter into their doctoral program. These students/graduates tend to work solely on completing their study/doctorates but may also work part-time as teaching or research assistants. The leadership program at Andrews and its student population is 'cut from a different cloth', shall we say. We shall see if different themes come up from that.

Fill out pages **4-5** and return to me @ [lisaxxxxxx@gmail.com](mailto:lisaxxxxxx@gmail.com). Also feel free to cut and paste the questions and answers into an email, if that is easier.

Please call me at any time if you should have questions I can be reached via email at [lisaxxxxxx@gmail.com](mailto:lisaxxxxxx@gmail.com) or 610-xxx-xxxx.

Background
Describe the rationale or aspirations you had for entering the PhD. program at Andrews.  When you started the program, what did you hope to gain (or do) with the doctorate?  As you embarked on the program journey, what milestones or pace did you envision for yourself?
The Journey
Describe your journey through the doctoral process. Please address, for example, the timing of each of the major deliverables (completion of course work, portfolio chapters and dissertation).  Were there specific things that occurred along the way that influenced your progress positively or negatively? What happened? How did they impact you?
Thoughts and Actions
Throughout your doctorate work, did you experience doubts or concerns about your ability to complete your doctorate? What was the cause or rationale for your doubt(s)? How did that feel?  What internal or external supports did you use to help you overcome these doubts?  Was there a specific moment in which you made a specific decision to complete the doctorate? What were the thoughts or feelings at that time that led to the decision to complete the program?  Now that you have graduated, how did it feel to finally complete your doctorate?
Personal Learning
Now that you've achieved your PhD, are there things you would do differently if you had it to do over again?  What have you learned about the overall PhD process?  What have you learned about yourself?

Demographic information for participants in interviews -- Lisa M dissertation		
NAME: _____		Date: _____
1. What age range were you in when you completed your doctorate:		
___ Less than 35 yrs	___ 46 – 50 yrs	___ 61 – 65 yrs
___ 36 – 40 yrs	___ 51 – 55 yrs	___ 66 – 70 yrs
___ 41 – 45 yrs	___ 56 – 60 yrs	___ 71 or higher
2. What regional group(s) did you participate in while in the program?		
_____		
_____		
3. Did you live on or near the Andrews campus (other than for orientation, leadership conference, or graduation) and interacted with Andrews staff or students?		
Yes _____ No _____		If answered no, skip to question #5
4. What percentage of the time that you spent working on your doctoral program was done on the Andrews campus?		
___ Less than 10%	___ Between 50% and 70%	
___ Between 10% and 30%	___ More than 70%	
___ Between 30% and 50%		
5. Do you consider yourself (check all that apply):		
___ a member of the SDA community	___ a member of a strong non-religious community	
___ a member of another religious community	___ not a member of any community	
6. Did you have any family member (or person that you consider 'like family') who was a role model for seeking your Ph.D?		
Yes _____ No _____		

7. Describe your work/job situation during the time you were in the program. This can mean a paying job, a volunteer job, or anything you consider to be a major activity that you were responsible to execute on a consistent basis (e.g. stay-at-home mom, caregiver, etc.). (check all that apply.)		
<input type="checkbox"/>	I worked full-time (40+ hrs).	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I worked full-time during some of the program and part-time (20+ hrs) at other times.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I worked full-time during some of the program and did not work at other times.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I worked part-time (20+ hrs).	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I worked part-time during some of the program and did not work at other times..	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I worked exclusively outside the home.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I could work-at-home or work in the office.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	My job entailed extensive travel.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I had flexibility to adjust the hours I worked when needed.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I had summers or semesters off.	
8. Did you ever take an official leave of absence from the LEAD program?		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	If answered YES, continue to question #9, else END.
9. How long did you leave the program?		
<input type="checkbox"/>	1 -3 months	<input type="checkbox"/> 9 – 12 months <input type="checkbox"/> 2 – 3 years
<input type="checkbox"/>	3 – 6 months	<input type="checkbox"/> 12 – 18 months <input type="checkbox"/> 3 – 4 years
<input type="checkbox"/>	6 – 9 months	<input type="checkbox"/> 18 – 24 months <input type="checkbox"/> more than 4 years
Thank you for your answers.		

## REFERENCE LIST

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### Education

PhD	2014	Leadership	Andrews University
MEd	1993	Education Instructional Systems	Pennsylvania State University
BA	1983	Biology/Sociology Dual Major	University of Pennsylvania

### Relevant Experiences

Siemens Medical Solutions (SMS) Education Services (2008-present)

*Clinical Education Director*

Immaculata University (2007–2010)

*Adjunct Professor–Undergraduate and Graduate Health Information Systems*

Siemens Health Services (SHS) Education Services (1985–2008)

*Training Director–Tools, Technology, Professional Development, and Integration*

*Advanced Clinical Training Specialist*

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Presbyterian Medical Center (1983-1985)

*Medical Research Associate*

### Publication

Finkel, D. M., White, P., Margerum, L. A., & Blackman, B. (1986). The effect of insulin therapy on platelet sensitivity to arachidonic acid (AA) in newly diagnosed diabetics. In C. D. Burrell & F. L. Strand (Eds.), *Second colloquium in biological sciences* (Vol. 463, pp. 287-288). New York: The New York Academy of Sciences.