



A Grounded Theory of Persistence in a Limited-Residency Doctoral Program

Donna H. Kennedy

St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY USA

Steven R. Terrell

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL USA

Michael Lohle

University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT USA

Abstract

Approximately 50% of doctoral students in social science, humanities, and educational doctoral programs fail to earn their Ph.D. This number is 10% to 15% higher for students enrolled in online or limited-residency programs. Using in-depth interviews and qualitative data analysis techniques, this grounded-theory study examined participants' recollections of their experience as students in a limited-residency doctoral program and their reasons for withdrawal while working on their dissertation. The resultant theory clarified relationships between attrition and support issues (i.e., advisor support, dissertation process support and program office support). The theoretical model helps identify steps faculty and administration may take in order to reduce high levels of attrition.

Main Arguments

Method

- A qualitative, phenomenological approach was taken to understand a group in a particular setting.
- Participants were formerly enrolled in an information systems limited residency doctoral program at the university where the study was conducted.
- A non-random sample of 17 participants were interviewed for approximately 20 – 90 minutes using unstructured questions starting with, *“Tell us about your experience in the doctoral program.”*

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded from initial open coding, to axial coding to the selection of a selective code.

Open Codes

Students confirmed:

- A lack of administrative and faculty support
- The program's coursework was effective
- They wanted more “face time.”

Axial Codes

Further refinement yielded three axial codes:

- Advisor Support Issues
- Dissertation Support Issues
- Program Support Issues.

Selective Code

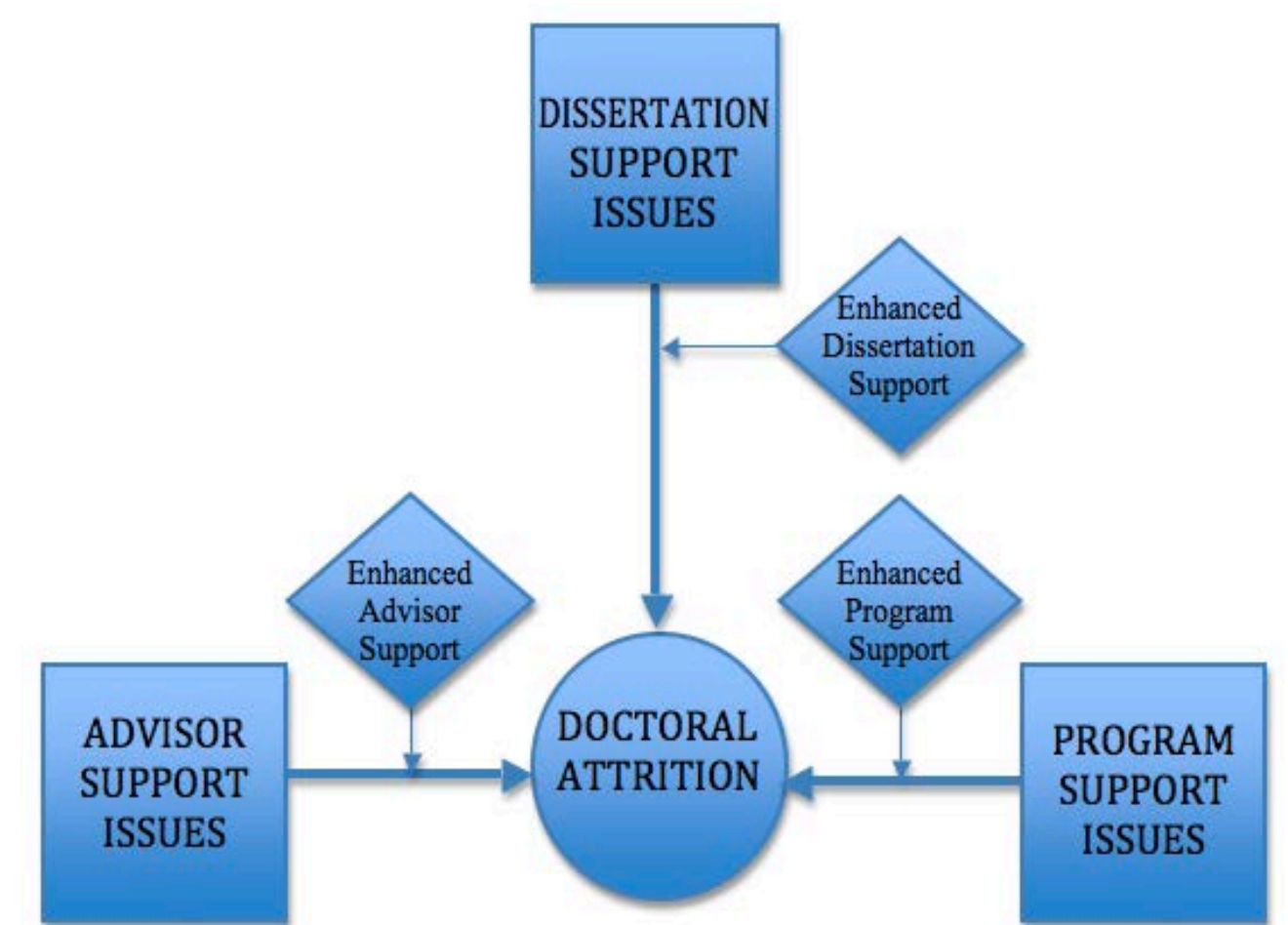
- Sixteen participants identified *advisor support issues* as their reason for dropping out. This was chosen as the selective code.

About Grounded Theory

- Glaser and Strauss (1967) confirmed grounded theory studies are not designed to confirm hypotheses, their intent is to allow theory to emerge from the data. The resulting theory “fits” the data.
- In this study data collected from the field “grounded,” or supported, the proposal of a viable theory.

Conclusion

Theoretical Model: The Nature of Participants' Experience of Doctoral Attrition in a Limited-Residency Program

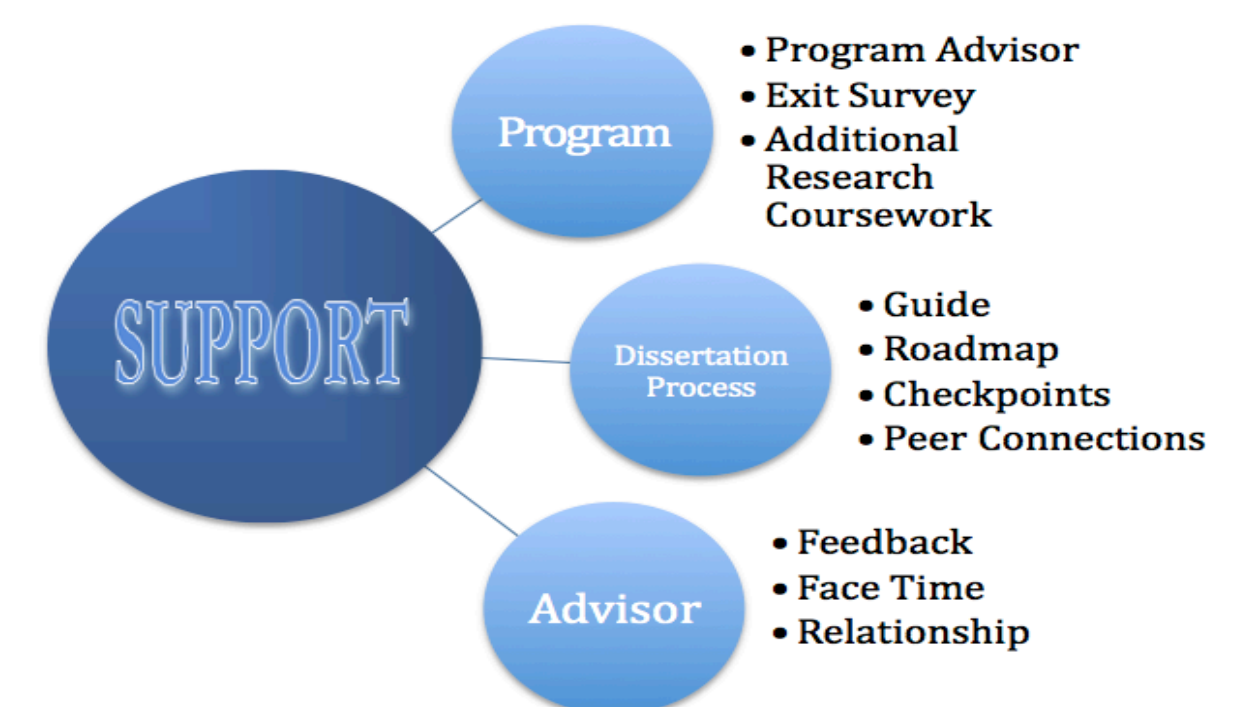


The three axial codes become independent variables in this model while doctoral attrition becomes the dependent variable.

Moderating variables are also introduced along each of the model's relationships to empower researchers to test the impact of initiatives designed to positively impact the independent variables.

Actions For Enhanced Advisor Support

Since advisor support issues were confirmed as the selective code, an additional model was added to address it:



Limitations

- Participants may not be typical of other doctoral programs.
- Recruiting was difficult because participants may have been hesitant to share experiences where they perceived themselves to have failed.
- Recollections are often incomplete.

Research Question and Goal

Research Question

- What is the nature of the participants' experiences of doctoral attrition in a limited residency doctoral program?

Research Goal

- Develop a theory to understand and explain attrition from a limited-residency doctoral program.
- Understand why students who had finished their coursework left the program while working on their final dissertation.

The research findings provide insight for faculty and administrators to develop tools, processes and procedures to help improve the doctoral experience and lower attrition.

References

- Kennedy, D. H., Terrell, S. R., & Lohle, M. (2015). A grounded theory of persistence in a limited-residency doctoral program. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(3), 215-230.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.