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## DOCTORAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PANDEMIC AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF GRIT

Josie Bryant

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DOCTORAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PANDEMIC AND THEIR  
PERCEPTIONS OF GRIT

by

Josie M. Bryant

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The College of Education and Human Services

Department of Educational Studies, Leadership, and Counseling

at Murray State University

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

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P-20 & Community Leadership

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### **Abstract**

The pandemic has significantly changed societal structures and individuals' lives. The early tragedies and stress of the pandemic affected health, relationships, families, education, work, travel, and immigration. Students who entered doctoral programs in 2020 chose a unique time to pursue an already arduous goal amidst unprecedented challenges. Using a phenomenological approach, this study explored doctoral students' experiences during the pandemic and sought to understand their perspectives of grit. The study aimed to offer first-hand insight into the pandemic's effects on doctoral students, and add critical contributions to understanding the necessary actions, support systems, and policies for a life in a post-pandemic world.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

The outbreak of COVID-19 significantly impacted societal structures. The pandemic required many people to face healthcare management skills with a novel lens of rules, motivation, and perseverance (Settersten Jr. et al., 2020). The initial expectation of a two-week mandatory shutdown stretched into months of health screening, social distancing, and quarantining. The ripple effects on higher education were acutely symptomatic with campus closures, pivots to online learning, declining enrollment, mental health emergencies, and unequal disparities (i.e., secure housing, food security, and access to healthcare) (Inside Higher Ed, n.d.).

Students in doctoral programs were already subject to the challenges of rigorous academic coursework and dissertation demands (Fletcher et al., 2011; Jefferson, 2022). The pandemic changed personal, professional, and academic organizations, where life would become viewed through a different lens (Settersten Jr. et al., 2020). Researchers began using the pandemic and its effects as an opportunity to explore, discover, and understand their fields differently.

### **Researcher's Experiential Knowledge**

In the beginning of the pandemic, the researcher took time to examine goals, understand and re-evaluate passions, and pursue meaningful goals. The pandemic's initial challenges were rapidly overtaking regular daily life. Overcoming the psychological, social, and physical struggles was on everyone's minds. Moving forward with a doctoral program seemed like an unpopular choice during an uncertain time. The researcher entered the first year of their doctoral program in fall 2020 and found themselves in good company.

The Doctor of Education in P-20 and Community Leadership (Ed.D.) program at Murray State University (MSU) began its ninth cohort in the fall 2020 semester, and the program

experienced one of the largest cohorts in years (R. Wilson, personal communication, August 29, 2020). Despite the precedented challenges with doctoral education and the unprecedented worries of the pandemic, the program was steady and even expanded. The researcher kept questioning, “Why are we doing this now? How will we make it through? What are we going to experience?”

The idea of completing a dissertation focused on doctoral students entering and/or completing their program during a pandemic led to reading about grit. The research about grit has been applied to fields in education, psychology, leadership, and social sciences (Duckworth, 2018). Learning how grit can be beneficial in times of difficulty reignited attention to its application for this study. The purpose of this study is to explore, discover, and understand doctoral students’ experiences of the pandemic and to learn about their perceptions of grit.

## **Context**

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the assumptions about life’s rules and norms (Settersten Jr. et al., 2020). Exploring the pandemic through the lens of life transitions during this time considers the pandemic’s social, economic, cultural, and psychological consequences. This study aims to offer observations, explanations, and reflections to provide a foundation on which research and policies can be built.

## ***COVID-19***

A pandemic is an “epidemic over a very wide area and usually affecting a large proportion of the population” (Morens et al., 2009, p. 1018). Population immunity, virus variants, and severe or fatal outcomes are common. COVID-19’s spread unfurled massive impacts on individuals, families, and communities. The first COVID-19 case was identified in late 2019 (Department of Defense [DOD], 2022), and Merriam-Webster (n.d.b.) identified

“pandemic” as the 2020 Word of the Year. COVID-19 eclipsed two years and infected 1 million people by January 2022, and surpassed 11 million cases by 2023 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). The public health emergency (PHE) expired May 11, 2023 (HHS, 2023).

The acute adjustments to reduce spread and treat cases required collective effort. Higher education pivoted to remote and online learning, and doubt about educational quality was examined. As the spring 2020 semester closed, institutions considered options to remain viable (Higher Ed Dive Team, 2022). Modern science, technology, and healthcare to improve campus safety drove costs to unsustainable levels. The stress, loneliness, and lost sense of control pressured individuals, families, and populations. Declining enrollment, mental health concerns, and basic needs threatened higher education (Department of Education [DOE], 2021).

COVID-19 induced loneliness and stress to a new level, and the perceived lack of control constituted protective factors against the pandemic. Research studies were centering around adaptations and coping mechanisms to seek strategies committed to wellbeing. As suspected, studies identified communities (e.g., online interest groups, schools, churches) and support systems (e.g., family, friends, spouses, colleagues) as protective against the pandemic by offering quality relationships and deep interpersonal connection (Settersten Jr. et al., 2020). The pandemic’s unpredictability jerked the notion of “normal” out of the stratosphere, and people sought control and regulation in novel ways. Mosanya (2021) was the first to identify Netflix as a protective factor against the loneliness of the pandemic. Virtual spaces were becoming inundated with remedies for pandemic-induced agoraphobia and Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms (PTSS) (Gargot et al., 2020).

A loss of support and a lack of a community was sensed among individuals, families, and communities during the pandemic. The acute distress enhanced chronic, underlying conditions of social and health inadequacies, insecurities, and injustices. Barriers to wellbeing highlighted needs for social support, advocacy, leadership, and policies.

### ***Experiences of Doctoral Students***

Students enter a doctoral program of study “with hope, aspirations for the future, and complex lives” (Kasworm, 2008; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019, as cited in Hill & Conceição, 2020, p. 36). Rigg et al. (2013) reported older students have higher levels of exhaustion and responsibilities, which may equate to them being less capable of coping effectively with the demands of college. Doctoral students do not clearly understand what doctoral study entails, how the process works, and how to navigate it effectively until they are in the midst of their program (Golde & Dore, 2001). Progression through the degree may show doctoral students that the training is not what they want or may not prepare them for the jobs they want to take. Up to 40% of doctoral students do not complete their terminal degrees (Rigg et al., 2013).

Doctoral students experience a high demand of personal resources in the pursuit of completion, which can lead to high drop-out rates, increased time-to-degree, college debt, and mental health issues (Pyykkonen, 2021; Golde & Dore, 2001). Barriers to completing doctoral programs can include academic stress, lack of support and community, and stagnation during the dissertation process (Fletcher et al., 2011). Sverdlik et al. (2022) reported doctoral students often struggle with mental health concerns, loneliness, and physical concerns. The challenges of doctoral education were compounded with stay-at-home orders, quarantining, and social distancing, which caused some students to pause their program of study or terminate their degree

early (Bal et al., 2020). Students who remained in their programs endured hardships with short- and long-term effects, such as prolonged time-to-degree and mental health struggles.

Stress can reduce cognitive function and focus. Positive psychology, growth mindset, self-efficacy, and other self-supporting characteristics are viewed as tools that promote immunity to the effects of stress. These characteristics build resiliency, motivation, and buoyancy during hardships or setbacks. Duckworth et al. (2007) modernized these concepts, combining them into the term “grit” – defined as the passion and perseverance towards long-term goals.

### ***Grit***

Grit does not directly correlate to intelligence, and it can be coached from an early age (Duckworth et al., 2007). “Grittiness” is directly proportionate to educational attainment and age. Román-Mata et al. (2020) posit the female gender as “grittier,” despite finding lower resilience among females. Debate remains as to which individuals or populations have the most grit. Awareness about grit has shown it promotes resiliency, success, better life awareness, and satisfaction. The benefits of grit are well-explored and understood in psychological and educational contexts. Limitations about the downsides of grit warrant further exploration.

### **Research Problem**

The research studies about doctoral students completing coursework and dissertations during the pandemic are modest. The scarcity of information about doctoral students’ perceptions of grit and their perceived benefits *and* drawbacks is a gap in the literature. In response, this study aimed to explore doctoral students’ experiences during the pandemic, discover their perceived grit, and understand advantages, and any disadvantages, to grit.



## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore, discover, and understand the perceptions of the pandemic, grit, and doctoral students' experiences in the Ed.D. Program at MSU. The pandemic timeline in the U.S. was defined by the federal government to last from March 2020 through May 2023 (HHS, 2023). For the purposes of this research, "pandemic" and "COVID-19" will be used interchangeably and reference the HHS defined timeline. Using the lens of phenomenological inquiry, the focus was on doctoral students and their "living through" the pandemic, examining their perceived grit and their perspectives of grit's positive effect on personal, professional, and academic contexts. The study also aimed to explore, discover, and understand the potential downsides of grit on one's personal, professional, and academic contexts.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The qualitative study did not contain a definite theoretical orientation. While phenomenology has philosophical underpinnings, the inquiry attempted to build real meaning from the participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The focus group interview provided a way to extract information about different topics by asking open-ended questions about doctoral students' experiences during a pandemic and their perceptions of grit. The study aimed to use focus-group interview facets to derive meaning from participants' experiences during the pandemic. Additionally, the study added real-time insight to the effects of the pandemic, as it was declared a public non-emergency by the federal government on May 11, 2023 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

An inductive approach to the research began with gathering information, building broad themes from the data, extracting a generalized model or theory, and proposing generalizations or theories from past experiences and literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

The research study used grit to offer relative meaning to the open-ended questions below. Duckworth et al. (2007) developed a Grit Scale (GS) that was shared in a recruitment email prior to the focus group session to enlighten participants as to their own grit. The research did not hinge on grit scores; rather, the study sought to explore, discover, and understand doctoral students' experiences of the pandemic and how (if at all) they perceived grit influencing their personal, professional, and academic contexts.

The following research questions were examined in this study:

RQ1: How do doctoral students experience the pandemic in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

RQ2: How do doctoral students understand their own grit and its meaning?

Sub-questions to RQ2 followed and helped understand grit in different angles. The questions aimed to discover and understand grit in depth.

RQ3: How do doctoral students perceive their own grit as positively influencing their lives in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

RQ4: How do doctoral students perceive their own grit as negatively influencing their lives in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

### **Significance of the Study**

Despite the research on grit, its benefits (i.e., success, positive health outcomes, productivity, performance, retention, and completion in higher education), and the cultivation of

grit, there is little insight on any disadvantages of being gritty (Duckworth, 2018). Only a few studies (e.g., Credé, et al., 2016; Kannangara et al., 2018; Lucas, 2016; Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020) delve into the cost of grit. The disadvantages of grit remain uncertain and warrant further exploration. This study included doctoral students during an unparalleled time and attempted to explore any potential costs of being gritty.

Exploring, discovering, and understanding the pandemic and the effects of grittiness on doctoral students pursuing their degree during the pandemic may help with the fields of psychology, education, health, and leadership. The balance of literature hoped to provide a well-rounded view of grit. Research about grit can provide recommendations for fostering grit internally, which can then multiply socially and improve lives and society (Davidson, 2018).

### **Definition of Key Terms**

Clarity on subjects and terms can provide common ground, as well as prevent drifting within the methodology of a research study. The phenomenological approach was used to describe the experiences of doctoral students during the pandemic. For understanding, the following terms merit definitions:

- *Pandemic*: An outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affects a significant proportion of the population (Merriam Webster, n.d.a.).
- *COVID-19*: An infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (WHO, n.d.)
- *Dissertation*: A formal written document on an original topic of research, usually presented as one of the final requirements for a doctoral degree (United States Department of State, n.d.).

- *Doctoral degree*: The highest award a student can earn for graduate study. The doctor's degree classification includes such degrees a Doctor of Education, Doctor of Juridical Science, Doctor of Public Health, and the Doctor of Philosophy degree in any field such as agronomy, food technology, education, engineering, public administration, ophthalmology, or radiology (Integrated Postsecondary Data System [IPEDS], 2023).
- *Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)*: A degree that is oriented towards candidates pursuing leadership roles in education, government agencies, and nonprofits. This degree is also designed for candidates in the business world who are responsible for improving organizations through teaching and learning. Ed.D. candidates use existing research to inform decisions around specific issues that lead to improved practices within their area(s) of study (Teach.com, 2016).
- *Grit*: The perseverance and passion for long-term goals, which entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress (Duckworth et al., 2007).
- *Memory*: Knowledge comprised of distinct types of processes associated with different memory functions. Because they are reconstructed, memories are not frozen in time (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).
- *Time-to-degree*: The median time elapsed from the start of any graduate school program to completion of the doctoral degree (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2017).

## Summary

June 2023, nearly a month after the federal government declared the PHE an end, seemed like the opportune time to reflect on the pandemic and its effects. As the aftermath of the

pandemic evolves, capturing its effects must be timely. Human experiences are vulnerable to memory disjointedness, especially with regards to traumatic events.

Research that captures information from doctoral students during the pandemic is lacking. Studies involving higher education populations include students in community college, undergraduate, and international student populations. Very few studies, such as Bal et al. (2020) and McWilliams and Shields (2022) have focused on doctoral students' experiences of the pandemic, let alone their perceptions of grit.

Research can continue despite pandemic strains of observing public health recommendations, personal timelines, travel limitations, and resource scarcity. Digital technology and online video conferencing platforms have become more accessible to students, educators, and researchers. The use of video conferencing, such as Zoom, to collect data has evolved and helped doctoral students finish dissertation projects. Donohue et al. (2021) noted benefits to research from the pandemic included being able to recruit more participants from widespread locations using technology-based communication and diversifying data collection methods.

The study aimed to understand the experiences of doctoral students during the pandemic. Identification of internal and external buoys that helped doctoral students persevere during a difficult time can extend into improving the resources and support systems for higher education institutions. Knowledge about grit and its potential disadvantages can support further research and balance its concept. Inquiry about overcoming challenges and implementation of grit-building strategies can build future models that deviate from unhealthy or unbalanced systems. Lastly, the study can offer a model of pause, reflection, and support that may help heal or become a source of healing in a post-pandemic world.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Information about the pandemic since the outbreak of COVID-19, a novel coronavirus, circulates daily. The pandemic, and its impact, continues to affect health, economic stability, social systems, and political outcomes. Declaring the pandemic “over” is debated as the virus enters its third year of chaos, and deaths from COVID-19 see significant decline (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2022). Based on the pandemic’s trends, HHS (2023) declared the PHE to expire at the end of day on May 11, 2023.

COVID-19 has influenced resilience in personal, professional, and educational contexts, especially for students entering, progressing, and completing their doctoral programs. The literature review provided clarity and context of pandemics, doctoral education, and grit. A triadic summary emphasized the study’s importance of research and relevance in history.

### **Pandemics**

The emergence and spread of diseases, viruses, or infections quickly assumes the term *pandemic* (Morens et al., 2009). Modern definitions of pandemic include “extensively epidemic,” “epidemic over a very wide area and usually affecting a large proportion of the population,” and “distributed or occurring widely throughout a region, country, continent or globally” (Morens et al., 2009, p. 1018). With the term “epidemic” used to describe a pandemic, arguments of whether a “large epidemic” is what defines a pandemic remains questioned. A review of pandemics’ similarities over time provides context for more-precise, and better-understood, use of the term, as well as clearer communication about these events.

### ***Pandemics: A Brief History***

In the 17th and 18th centuries, “epidemic” and “pandemic” were used vaguely and interchangeably in social and medical contexts (Morens et al., 2009). The first known use of the

word *pandemic* was in 1666, used to describe the observations of diseases spreading at concerning rates. Webster (1828) published his first dictionary and listed epidemic and pandemic as synonymous terms. As populations evolved, immunity and disease patterns placed the discovery of infectious diseases into categories of their similarities and differences.

Diseases studied when describing pandemics include the 14th-century plague, influenza, cholera, HIV/AIDS, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), scabies, West Nile disease, Ebola, and COVID-19 (Morens et al., 2009). In context, these pandemics have wide geographic extension classified as transregional, interregional, and global. The term pandemic implies disease movement, or spread, via transmission that can be traced, high attack rates, and “explosive” spread – multiple cases appearing in an abbreviated time (Morens et al., 2009). Minimal population immunity, novel variants, extremely infectious and contagious diseases, and severe or fatal outcomes are similar among events described as pandemics.

The improvement of medicine, science, and technology increases the understanding that pandemics arrive and disappear for prolonged periods of time. Upon their return, these diseases (often caused by the same variant) continue to be considered pandemics (Morens et al., 2009). The implications of using a subjective and fluid term complicates a widespread misunderstanding of disease.

### ***COVID-19***

The timeline of events is based on reports of suspected origin, initial diagnosis, and tracing amidst the widespread uncertainty of COVID-19, novel coronavirus (DOD, 2022; CDC, 2022). Responses and public health messages mutated with COVID-19, unfurling a massive impact on individuals, families, and communities. The rapidly spreading coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic surpassed H1N1 (swine flu), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and

Middle Eastern respiratory syndrome (MERS). The PHE expired in the U.S. at the end of the day on May 11, 2023, and organizations and systems began to shift to flexibly responding to COVID-19 (HHS, 2023).

**Global Timeline.** On November 17, 2019, China officially announced the initial infection of “patient zero” (DOD, 2022). The first person to test positive in Wuhan, China occurred three weeks later, then a cluster of patients presented with atypical pneumonia-like illness that resisted standard treatments (CDC, 2022; DOD, 2022). By the end of the year, the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office in China was informed of several cases of pneumonia of an unknown cause (CDC, 2022; DOD, 2022).

The first confirmed COVID-19 case occurred on January 7, 2020, in China, followed by a CDC response for investigation and preparation for developing tests and managing cases (CDC, 2022; DOD, 2022). By January 11, the first coronavirus death worldwide was reported in Wuhan, China. The Thailand Ministry of Public Health confirmed the first case of COVID outside of China on January 13, 2020 (CDC, 2022; DOD, 2022). Six days later, the novel coronavirus was reported in four countries: China, Thailand, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The first confirmed case in the U.S. occurred in Washington state on January 20, 2020, on the same day an emergency response was released.

Italy was a global COVID-19 hotspot by February 23, 2020, warranting a lockdown for the country (CDC, 2022). By early March 2020, the world had 118,000 cases in 114 countries and 4,291 deaths (CDC, 2022; DOD, 2022). The WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Due to the virus’s ability to spread through regions and countries so quickly, waves of lockdowns were implemented. States and local governments adopted variations of stay-at-home orders. Vaccinations and herd immunity shared global attention to tackle the pandemic.



Global unmasking and going back to regular lives deemed the end of the global emergency “in sight” (United Nations [UN], 2022). Transitions back to work and attending in-person events opened talks about returning to a new normal. Over time, health screening ceased, and individuals were hopeful for an end to the PHE. By May 5, 2023, the UN WHO declared the global health emergency over (UN, 2023).

**U.S. Timeline.** Two cases reported in Illinois soon followed the first laboratory-tested-positive COVID case from Washington state. Additional infections were found in Arizona and California. (CDC, 2022; DOD, 2022). The CDC issued a health notice in response, advising travelers to avoid all non-essential travel to China and relocated U.S. citizens from Wuhan, China back to the U.S.

By the end of January 2020, the CDC issued 14-day quarantine to U.S. citizens who returned from Wuhan, China (CDC, 2022; DOD, 2022). A telebriefing with Dr. Nancy Messonnier braced the nation for mitigation efforts to contain the virus in the U.S., which included school closings, workplace shutdowns, and canceling large gatherings and public events (CDC, 2022). The disruptions, Dr. Messonnier stated, “may be severe” (CDC, 2022). On March 2, 2020, the CDC reported 60 cases in the U.S., with most infections suspected to be travel-related. The Trump Administration declared a nationwide emergency on March 13, 2020, and states began to implement shutdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (CDC, 2022). On March 15, the New York City public school system shut down, while Ohio called for restaurants and bars to close (CDC, 2022; DOD, 2022).

More than 1 million cases of COVID were confirmed worldwide during the first week of April, with the U.S. surpassing Italy and Spain as a global hot spot by April 10, 2020 (CDC, 2022). By mid-2020, testing kits and vaccine research efforts exploded while The World Bank

stated the COVID-19 pandemic would plunge the economy into the worst recession since World War II (CDC, 2022). The number of cases surpassed three million by July 7, 2020, and many states postponed re-opening plans (CDC, 2022).

In 2021, variants (*Gamma, Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Omicron*) brought several waves of COVID-19 cases. The 2020-2021 academic year saw some return to in-person classes; however, some instruction remained remote or hybrid. Around 96% of K-12 schools remained open for in-person learning at the beginning of fall 2021, and the CDC released three studies in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR) looking at the pandemic's effect on education (CDC, 2022).

Early 2022 began with record-setting cases. On January 3, 2022, the U.S. reported one million new COVID-19 infections, the highest daily total of any country in the world, (CDC, 2022). In the next eight weeks, *Omicron* and *Delta* variants infected more individuals and widened the risk factors for multisystem infection, heart disease, anxiety, and depression. Individuals losing work, COVID-19 mortality rates, and reduction in preventative care and health screening showed robust data for vulnerable and unsupported labor, healthcare disparities, and trends in adverse outcomes due to the pandemic.

On March 3, 2022, the CDC (2022) showed more than 90% of the U.S. population was in a location with low to medium COVID-19 community transmission level. The two-year anniversary of WHO declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic showed this number to increase to 98%. Entering the third year of response planning, the CDC aimed to increase vaccination levels around the world, expand scientific knowledge, and strengthen health leadership worldwide.

The U.S. declared the COVID-19 PHE over at the end of the day on May 11, 2023 (HHS, 2023). HHS (2023) credits the Biden Administration, stating it “effectively implemented the

largest adult vaccination program in U.S. history, with nearly 270 million Americans receiving at least one shot of a COVID-19 vaccine.” The transition of COVID-19 policies and regulations will impact the local, state, and federal guidance. Flexibility will change coverage for COVID-19 testing, reporting lab results and immunization data, and some telemedicine prescription privileges (HHS, 2023). The public awaits to see what benefits may disappear and what liberties may return in 2023.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

Aside from the devastating health difficulties and mortality rates, unprecedented levels of financial burden, broken social support systems, unpredictable stress, violence, depletion of resources (shortages), and burnout ensued during the pandemic (Inside Higher Ed, n.d.). Healthcare systems felt the earliest impacts; however, school systems began spending countless hours supporting their students, families, educators, and communities. With higher education institutions already struggling pre-pandemic due to lower enrollment and budgeting concerns, the disruptions due to COVID-19 lead to campus closures, a pivot to online learning, steep drops in enrollment, disabling struggles for completion or graduation, and exacerbation of pre-pandemic disparities.

### ***COVID-19’s Impact on Higher Education***

Prior to COVID-19, postsecondary students and institutions altered instruction, projects, and functions to accommodate infectious disease protocols. Previous pandemics (i.e., SARS, MERS, and Ebola) relied heavily on online formats for instruction (Donohue et al., 2021). Students, educators, and campus support systems struggled to pivot to online or remote learning in the beginning of the pandemic (Bal et al., 2020). The impact of COVID-19 pressured institutions, educators, and students to juggle more unknowns. Pre-pandemic disparities,

achievement gaps, and deteriorating trust in higher education expanded as the 21st-century pandemic placed higher priority on social distancing, vaccines, and public health guidelines (Donohue et al., 2021).

**Campus Closures.** The pressure to lower tuition in addition to stagnant state funding and lower high school graduation rates caused many higher education institutions to consider new options for sustainability (Higher Ed Dive Team, 2022). Pre-pandemic data showed a total of 6,662 institutions open in the 2017-2018 school year (Lederman, 2021). A staggering 579 institutions disappeared in three years (Lederman, 2021).

Higher education institutions were struggling pre-pandemic, noting decreased enrollment trends in 2010 (Lederman, 2021). Remaining safe, supportive, and flexible during the 21st century pandemic proved too difficult, and colleges and universities that escaped closure experienced reduced programs, activities, educators, and staff (Higher Ed Dive Team, 2022). Prompt concern for instructional quality led many students to reduce courseloads or leave higher education altogether. The cycle has seen no relief from financial stimuli recovery plans, like the American Rescue Plan, and alternative educational pipelines and pathways to higher education (Lederman, 2021). Some experts expect the pace of closing or merging colleges to spike again as the aid of the federal stimulus funds fades.

**Pivot to Online Learning.** The shift to remote and online learning in March 2020 left students and educators manifesting a tentative plan. As public health officials were uncertain with the duration of the initial shutdown, pivoting to the online format pressed a challenge from the technology, instructional support, and pedagogy perspectives. Bal et al. (2020) shared reflections from graduate students who were balancing professional, personal, and academic roles during the switch to online learning. Coursework, dissertations, student support services,

advising, and other responsibilities took place via email, learning management systems (LMS), and video conferencing.

With most colleges operating in an online format, the U.S. DOE (2021) reported many students would be sent home and therefore expected to maintain passing academic standards under unknown conditions. Online course delivery intensified barriers for students with disabilities and created a sharp increase in anxiety about academic performance. Even courses with an assigned online format at the beginning of the spring 2020 semester had an uptick in uncertainty. Bal et al. (2020) reported courses with an online format received an influx in communication where students expressed confusion, frustration, and stress about balancing roles of online learning from home with caregiving, parenting, and working. Relying on technology to carry the burden of the pandemic's "six-feet-apart pedagogy" worsened learning and development for students, especially those disproportionately affected by fewer resources and support (DOE, 2021).

Online learning was challenging for students and educators with limits to internet access, online privacy breaches, and lack of technology to support LMS operations. Teachers and administrators tried building bridges to students by utilizing modern communication apps; however, messaging did not resonate with students struggling with the transition to remote learning (Bal et al., 2020). Support staff and instructional designers worked rapidly to create online learning spaces and strategies to serve the endless streams of phone calls, emails, and drop-ins for upskilling and training (Bal et al., 2020). Students, teachers, staff, and administration were fully immersed in the pandemic's effects, and 58.6% of students experienced difficulties with online learning (DOE, 2021). The statistics invite speculation that even more students experienced hardship with virtual learning spaces, causing decreased

engagement, failing courses, dropping out of courses or school altogether. With more than half of students struggling with remote or online learning, enrollment in spring 2020's wake declined.

**Declining Enrollment.** At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, 44% of colleges and universities were fully or primarily online, while 27% were fully or primarily in-person (DOE, 2021). Many of America's students were dropping out (or not enrolling), taking fewer courses, and concerned about their financial, occupational, and physical well-being. The DOE cited steep drops in enrollment, approximating a 560,000-student decrease in undergraduates enrolled in the fall of 2020. The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center noted a decrease of 3.2% in enrollment across all higher education sectors from fall 2020 to fall 2022, totaling a decline of almost 7.5% since the beginning of the pandemic (Knox, 2022).

Many students who remained enrolled in college changed their first-choice institution due to location and cost (DOE, 2021). The steepest declines in enrollment were found in the community colleges, almost 10 times steeper than the previous year, 2019. Students with caregiver roles reduced their credit-load or dropped out of college due to heightened risks and increased demands, including greater than average financial hardship, food insecurity, and generalized anxiety (DOE).

A sharp decline in male college students, especially men of color, was noted due to the pandemic (DOE, 2021). Public colleges reported a decrease in Native American men (18.4%), Black men (14.3%), Latinx men (12.6%), White men (11.7%); Native American women (11.2%), White women (7.0%), Black women (6.9%) and Latinx women (5.1%) (DOE, 2021). Given that community colleges saw the largest decline in enrollment, COVID-19 disproportionately affected low-income students and students of color and removed an opportunity to access postsecondary education.

Undergraduate enrollment continued to decline approaching the third year of the pandemic with an anticipated wane. Knox (2022) reported enrollment rates have decreased by almost a third since 2020, and two-year institutions saw a significant improvement in enrollment in fall 2021, compared to fall 2020. While institutions across the board have still not seen full recovery nearly three years later, higher education is on the upswing now as more institutions are better prepared to manage the pandemic's effects.

**Mental Health.** Colleges and universities have realized they cannot ignore the mental health issues that many students bring to campus (Supiano, 2018). Pre-pandemic, an estimated 18% of students reported being diagnosed or treated by a professional within the previous year for depression, and 22% for anxiety (Supiano, 2018). Kruisselbrink Flatt (2013) identified a mental health crisis in *College Quarterly*, stating many mental disorders manifest between ages 18 to 24 years of age. Of note, psychological disorders are increasing in severity and adolescent suicide has tripled in the past 60 years. Students seeking mental health and psychological care on- and off-campus pushed for supportive services during the pandemic to manage the mental health crisis.

**Academic Pressure.** University students feel the pressure of academic performance. With a college degree ranking among life's most significant expenses, students (and their families) are experiencing the pressure to succeed in their postsecondary endeavors (Supiano, 2018). The stress this carries into the transition and progression through postsecondary education shows a remarkable influence on students' mental health. Difficulty of postsecondary coursework, identity change, time management, and overwhelming multitasking battles high expectations of academic achievement, causing disappointment, stress, panic, lower confidence in academic

performance, and sometimes disabling struggle (Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013; Selameab & Mason, 2021).

When the pandemic changed instructional design, the quality of learning through an online format was questioned. LMS platforms, software, and communication apps were marginally prepared for their soon-to-be universal use (Bal et al., 2020). Students reported having trouble maintaining a routine, staying connected with others, and keeping up with academic work (DOE, 2021). The pressure to recover, maintain, or progress their coursework with passing academic performance was a struggle. Modifications to coursework and online learning negatively affected students' mental health.

***Financial Burden.*** Increasing tuition fees, college debt, and student loans caused higher levels of stress and worry. The financial burden of higher education triggers anxiety and depression, and negatively affects academic performance (Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013). Furthermore, tuition and fees did not show signs of flatlining with concerns of inflation due to pandemic-induced shortages (DOE, 2021). When the pandemic began to disrupt the national and world economy, students were left grappling with more uncertainty and worry.

In the DOE's 2021 report *Education in a Pandemic*, colleges and universities cut approximately 650,000 jobs from March 2020 to December 2020. Many students lost their jobs, and in turn, the means to support themselves through school. COVID-19's impact on students' financial insecurity also increased concerns about their future career opportunities. With 90% reporting concern about the U.S. economy and job market, students' financial apprehension extended beyond employment to more basic necessities: food and housing (DOE, 2021).

***Food Insecurity and Housing Insecurity.*** Students reported concerns about basic needs, including food and shelter. Food and housing insecurity among college students were problems



that predated the pandemic. However, with increased economic concerns, a new surge in basic-need insecurity surfaced. The demands of financial hardship disproportionately affected students who were also in caregiver roles, finding those students to sacrifice their own well-being for the care and needs of their children and/or family.

A considerable number of students experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness during the pandemic. Although not nationally representative, the DOE (2021) cited a survey by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice showed that 9% of students surveyed at two-year colleges and 13% surveyed at four-year colleges were temporarily staying with a relative or friend, or “couch-surfing” – a nomadic living arrangement where people stay in different homes, usually on a couch. The same survey reported 44% of students at two-year colleges and 38% surveyed at four-year colleges were experiencing food insecurity.

Basic-needs insecurity added fodder to the pandemic’s effects on higher education, igniting mental health concerns. Surveys echoed the significant impact COVID-19 had on mental health, citing that the pandemic negatively affected mental health and reported overwhelming feelings of stress and anxiety, disappointment, loneliness, and isolation (DOE, 2021). The ongoing struggles of campus closures, online and remote learning, declining enrollment, and mental health challenged many students; however, students of color were disproportionately affected by these challenges.

***Widening Disparities.*** The impact of COVID-19 on students, and education as a whole, negatively widened pre-existing disparities, reduced resources and support, heightened safety risks, and created new barriers for students. A disparate impact on college students of color was evident in the percentage of students who reported basic-need insecurities (DOE, 2021). Students of color were more likely to struggle with remote learning due to inadequate technology, making

it difficult to participate in online learning (DOE, 2021). A national survey found that internet connectivity issues were “often” or “very often” among Black and Latinx students (17% and 23%, respectively) as compared to White students (12%). Nearly twice as many Latinx and Black students reported educational disruption during the pandemic (DOE, 2021).

COVID-19 concerned basic survival for many, causing educational plans to capsize. Students of color saw their academic plans and goals affected disproportionately negatively by the pandemic. More than 77% of all students were worried about staying on track to graduate from their degree programs, but these concerns were particularly high in Black (84%) and Latinx (81%) students (DOE, 2021). Black and Latinx students were more than 25% more likely to report that COVID-19 would impact their ability to stay in college (DOE, 2021). Students of color also took fewer courses due to financial, or other, constraints caused by the pandemic, which in turn lengthened time-to-degree completion.

Racial minorities experience higher prevalence of mental health problems due to a myriad of factors such as lack of support, parental and academic pressure, lack of previous mental health care, and a sense of isolation caused by racial microaggressions from peers (Kruisselbrink Flat, 2013). Student debt difference by race revealed a heightened vulnerability of many students of color in postsecondary education, befalling greater educational debt burden and economic disparity than White students for additional strain and stress (DOE, 2021).

### **Doctoral Students**

Doctoral degrees are sought for professional requirements, advancement within a career, and/or personal fulfillment. Oftentimes considered for the brightest individuals to attain, doctoral degrees are earned by individuals without the highest IQs or GPAs (Donohue et al., 2020). The effort, perseverance, passion, and support needed to complete rigorous coursework and a

dissertation count for as much as, if not more than, intellectual abilities. While there is no argument that doctoral degrees are sought by those who regard themselves as good or “competent” students, earning a terminal degree remains intangible to many who pursue it without grit (Donohue et al., 2020).

### ***Statistics and Demographics***

The Council for Graduate Studies [CGS] (2020) noted a 3.8% decrease in first-time doctoral enrollment between fall 2019 to fall 2020. Acceptance rates into doctoral programs were higher in fall 2020 compared to fall 2019, showing 22.3% of doctoral applicants were accepted for admission (CGS, 2020). By broad fields of study, the largest total doctoral applications for fall 2020 were in social and behavioral sciences, engineering, and biological and agricultural sciences. Enrollment at the doctoral level by field of study was as follows: health sciences, social and behavioral sciences, education, and engineering (CGS, 2020).

CGS (2020) reported a total of 76,111 doctoral degrees were granted in the academic year 2019-2020. The *2020 Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities* reported research doctorate degrees awarded by U.S. institutions decreased to 55,283 (2020). According to the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), the number of doctorates awarded since 1957 shows an average annual growth of 3.1% with noted periods of stagnant growth or decline (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics [NCSES], 2021). To date, there are 4.7 million people in the U.S. with doctoral degrees (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Over 10 years, the U.S. Census Bureau distinguished how earned doctoral degrees rose 54.5% and comprised 14.3% level of educational attainment. Newly shared data from the National Science Foundation (NSF) reported a 5.4% decline in research doctorate recipients in 2021 (Flaherty, 2022). In the *Inside Higher Ed* article by Flaherty, the drop in doctorates was directly related to the pandemic.

Based on SED data, doctorates awarded to temporary visa holders peaked at 41% in 2007 and held at 39% in 2020 (NCSES, 2020). The number of doctorates earned by U.S. citizens and permanent residents decreased and experienced slower growth overall, only making up 735 doctorates earned. According to the SED survey, 46% of all doctorates in 2020 were awarded to women (NCSES, 2020). A number slightly higher, 53.1%, was reported by CGS (2020). However, men still earned most doctoral degrees in engineering, mathematics, and computer sciences (CGS, 2020).

Participation in doctoral education by Black and Latinx students who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents has increased (NCSES, 2022). Although starting from a small number, the proportion of doctorates earned by underrepresented minority (URM) groups (e.g., someone from Black, Filipino, Hmong, Vietnamese, Latinx, Native American, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander) experienced growth within the 10-year survey period. However, the number of doctorates earned by Black American students between 2019 and 2020 saw a 2% decline (NCSES, 2022).

Hill and Conceição (2020) described adults who enter doctoral programs as nontraditional, part-time, or first-generation students who lacked model parents who completed at least an undergraduate degree. Furthermore, doctoral students are considered as adults both in chronological age and in having acquired adult responsibilities (Hill & Conceição, 2020). Doctoral students experience challenges in understanding the unfamiliar process of graduate education, financial stressors, restricted availability for full-time study, infrequent interactions with faculty and advisors, and less acculturation to the academy (Hill & Conceição, 2020).

Pyykkonen (2021) identified the median age of graduates upon doctoral conferral is 31.4 years old for all degree types. The NSF reported the median age at which women received their

doctoral degree slightly higher than men, 32 years, compared to 31.3 years old (2016).

Nonetheless, doctoral recipients train under challenging personal and professional milestones.

The journey of doctoral education is transformative. Notable life events and milestones can occur during doctoral study, including but not limited to, establishing partnerships, having children, and becoming a caregiver for aging parents (Pykkonen, 2021). Aside from personal transitions, doctoral students may also undergo significant occupational transitions during the process (Hill & Conceição, 2020). Interplay between personal, professional, and academic contexts challenges the completion of doctoral degrees.

### ***Barriers to Completion***

Doctoral training is cognitively challenging, requiring high-level thinking, processing, producing, and writing (Pykkonen, 2021). Earning a terminal degree requires a high demand for personal resources, such as time, money, support, and space. As cited by Golde and Doore (2001), *The Survey on Doctoral Education and Career Preparation* found that new students do not clearly understand what doctoral study entails, how the process works, and how to navigate it effectively. Decades of research about doctoral education and completion have shown that the barriers to complete doctoral training have been attributed to high drop-out rates, increased time-to-degree, college debt, and mental health issues.

**Lack of Support.** Doctoral completers and non-completers have identified a lack of support as a major concern and challenge with this phase of education. Fletcher et al. (2011) identified “community lacking” as something that restricted students from engaging within their academic programs and coursework, resulting in the disconnect between doctoral students and academe. Feelings of isolation stretched into post-candidacy due to not engaging in courses (Fletcher et al., 2011).

Rigg et al. (2013) stated social support from family and academic advisor were essential in engagement and reducing emotional exhaustion of graduate students. Remarkably, no statistically significant relationships were found to mitigate emotional exhaustion for social support from friends or spouses (Rigg et al., 2013). The fluidity of family could argue that spouses and friends are within that term and might have elucidated that they were non-essential in a doctoral candidates' support network.

A poor relationship with advisors posed a barrier for non-completers. Hill and Conceição (2020) reported that relationships with faculty and mentors were perceived to be the most salient factor associated with successful completion of a doctoral degree. In fact, the article cited that attrition rates for online doctoral students tended to be 10-20% higher than face-to-face programs (Hill and Conceição, 2020). Lacking support from advisors and dissertation committee members created invalidation and unpreparedness. Moreover, a distant relationship with advisors, faculty, and staff was more likely to lead to early termination of the degree.

Inadequate support from employers to complete a degree, especially a doctoral program, stresses an adult learner. Doctoral students sacrifice time, energy, and money to attend school while balancing multiple family, community, and workplace commitments can reduce feelings of self-efficacy (Hill and Conceição (2020). In this sense, the support strategies that lead to doctoral student progress and completion emphasize holistic support in personal, professional, and academic contexts.

**Lost Momentum.** Completing coursework and comprehensive exams with waning interest, motivation, or passion can occur in the arduous journey of doctoral training. However, the dissertation phase in particular has been identified as a barrier to completion. Inability to complete the final stage of doctoral training has been linked to reasons such as being too busy

with other endeavors, rocky transition to independent research and scholarly writing, and lengthy time-to-degree (Blanchard, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2011; Hill & Conceição, 2020). Adult students are typically experiencing transitions in personal and professional contexts, which press on the intersectionality of identity, purpose, and duties.

Frustration with the process of research proposals, institutional review board (IRB) applications, and unforeseen research roadblocks also contribute to a loss of momentum. The disruption in timeline incurs debt for institutions and individuals, resulting in a decrease in motivation and effort over time. Overall, doctoral students are the least likely to complete their academic goals, compared to students at other degree levels. Golde (2000) stated:

This phenomenon of doctoral persistence and its converse, attrition, is most puzzling given that ironically, the most academically capable and successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system, doctoral students, are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals. (p. 199)

### ***Doctoral Students During the Pandemic***

Progress through doctoral training requires effective communication, coaching, and mentoring. Doctoral students experienced challenges pre-pandemic, but the pandemic added pressure as students took on extra roles as caregivers, teachers to children learning at home, and work-from-home (WFH) employees. As COVID-19 spread, providing safe and healthy environments meant social distancing and remote work when possible. Higher education turned to technology for enhancing instructional methods, facilitating communication, and reaching out to students for connection. Coursework evolved to accommodate unknown timetables and virtual learning environments. Although regarded as the upper echelon of learners, doctoral students felt

stress, isolation, and unreconcilable life demands that led to extended timelines for completion or leaving their programs altogether.

Studies about the pandemic's effect on doctoral students have highlighted consistent concerns as they progressed through their programs. While these concerns may have existed pre-pandemic, the balance of roles when shutdowns and social distancing were mandatory left many students struggling in a "new normal."

**Personal Adjustments.** A common hurdle reported by doctoral students was juggling the variety of personal roles. Bal et al. (2020) quoted a student's sentiment that many shared when stay-at-home orders were started – "How will I complete my coursework with the kids staying at home?" (p. 796) Students who had roles as parents and caregivers felt the burden of organizing, scheduling, and managing needs other than their own. Accomplishing coursework and meeting others' needs battled spatial limits, time constraints, and emotional reserves. Parenting and caregiving fell disproportionately on females, causing a power dynamic between female doctoral students and oftentimes male faculty, advisors, and mentors (Hill & Conceição, 2020).

Students who lacked parenting or caregiving roles were not immune to personal adjustments. Social isolation, loneliness, and perceived lack of control worsened academic stress, which was already prone to intensify during unexpected and dramatic external events like the pandemic (Mosanya, 2021). While parents and friends were identified as strong support for students, Netflix was also identified as a buffer for academic stress during the pandemic (Mosanya, 2021; Selameab & Mason, 2021).

Given the internal stress and the uncertainty of the pandemic, many people began rethinking their goals, seeking to understand their passion, and how they can pursue more meaningful work (Schimschal et al., 2022). Purposeful growth and connecting with past



experiences supported emotional intelligence. Aside from personal transitions, doctoral students oftentimes experience occupational adjustments.

**Professional Adjustments.** Organizations that accommodated remote work chartered unknown realms of time and expectation management. As an instructional designer stated, “Nothing could have prepared me for the scale of rapid upskilling needed to train faculty from every discipline to shift every lesson, activity, assessment, project, or lab online” (Bal et al., 2020, p. 797-798). WFH professions tried giving their employees a sense of survival, but not disproportional amounts of work. A predictive study by Román-Mata (2020) found that individuals who were employed were greater than two times more likely to be resilient. As such, employed doctoral students may have experienced benefits from their occupational stressors amid the WFH transitions.

Some doctoral students, especially those who were employed by a university or college that cut their positions, were forced to overhaul their occupational outlooks due to unemployment. While transitioning to a new occupation or profession is common for adults undergoing higher education and doctoral training, the pandemic demanded doctoral students to focus on financial and physical well-being in a different context. Students who were unemployed or had to find additional employment due to a family member or significant other losing employment, shifted their resources away from their academic commitments. Trying to maintain financial stability with job hunting, interviewing, and onboarding as a new hire removed focus and time from coursework, projects, and research. As a result, the pandemic affected progress and completion of doctoral programs.

**Academic Adjustments.** McWilliams and Shields (2022) described doctoral students’ experience of COVID-19 as having waves of denial, fear, anger, anxiety, isolation, and

perspective. Doctoral students succumbed to the pandemic with paused projects and delayed research. Flipping to online learning, altering coursework to be online, and observing other contactless methods to meet project and research expectations felt overwhelming.

Donohue et al. (2021) documented the impacts of the pandemic for doctoral students who were proposing, conducting, or writing up their theses, dissertations, or culminating projects. Participants of the study reported COVID restrictions impacted their participants, sites, and IRB protocols (Donohue et al., 2021). Studies that pivoted research methods to an online format found that some research participants were less available (Donohue et al., 2021). Spatial restrictions, lab resources, and access to materials were restricted due to campus closures and resource allocation. Reduced support from faculty, advisors, and cohort peers came with social isolation.

Few experienced beneficial impacts during COVID. Donohue et al. (2021) reported that benefits included allowing more time to recruit participants for research and expanding projects to encompass more regions with the use of online outreach and network potential. On a personal level, some students reported more time to focus on nutrition and physical health during the pandemic, getting more sleep, reconnecting with nature, having more time with family, and increased time for self-reflection and meditation. Through the uncertainty and stress of COVID, personal, professional, and academic boundaries were blurred. Research to discover, understand, and explore the pandemic's effects will be ongoing but subject to human memory as time passes.

### ***Memory of the Pandemic***

Doctoral students' recollection of the pandemic and their experiences of the pandemic within their personal, professional, and academic contexts are vulnerable to decreasing validity

as time passes. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018) explained by stating:

...memories are not frozen in time; they are reconstructed anew each time a person recalls something, and the reconstruction takes into account current knowledge, expectations, and context. For this reason, memories are not fixed but instead morph over time, and they may omit details or include fabricated details that did not occur. This is especially evident when people repeatedly remember the same event: what people report will change over time as new information and suggestions become incorporated into the rich, potentially multisensory tapestry of representations physically consolidated across the brain. (p. 75-76)

Researchers who wanted to learn about the attack on the U.S. on September 11, 2001 (9/11), PTSD, and trauma have found that poor recall and memory disjointedness increases with time (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Sachschaal et al., 2019). Emotionally charged and distinctive “flashbulb memories” evolved as time passed, making the knowledge of certain events complex and complicated by human coping strategies (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

Individuals who survived events of extreme difficulty have been suspected of possessing qualities or characteristics that promote success. Researchers use words such as “protective factors,” “buffers,” and “preservation” to denote a person’s ability to endure, persist, and grow by finding opportunities in difficult circumstances. Theories on motivation, self-determination, self-efficacy, resilience, growth mindset, and positive mindset have been used to describe these individuals’ capability to persevere. Psychologists have studied and researched these individuals with hopes of finding the secrets of success. In modern research, a widely accepted trait that

describes someone who persists despite challenges, setbacks, and rejection is “grit” (Duckworth, 2018).

## **Grit**

Yearning for achievement and success is commonplace for individuals, teams, and organizations. The definitions of achievement and success evolve with time and context. Qualities that drive success remain within a tighter circle. Psychologists have studied energy, motivation, focus, talent, intelligence, and resilience to idealize one attribute more essential in success. Integrated psychological resources and characteristics help fuel accomplishments. However, modern psychological, leadership, and educational research concede that success is a result of paired qualities. The advancement, promotion, and accomplishment of goals requires a hybrid of passion and perseverance for long-term goals – in a word: *grit* (Duckworth et al., 2007).

When debating how people differ in their pursuit of goals, Harvard psychologist William James stated, “The plain fact remains that men the world over possess amounts of resource, which only very exceptional individuals push to their extremes of use” (Duckworth, 2016, p. 23). The human brain has evolved to protect physical and mental health and aid in personal capabilities (Schimschal et al., 2022). Grit entails working strenuously towards challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress (Duckworth et al., 2007). Schimschal et al. designed an integrative model for the psychological resources of grit, which include interest, purpose, practice, and hope. Duckworth identified these resources to build grit, and Schimschal et al. proposed an interrelationship between the resources and their underpinning attributes.

### ***Interest***

Interests are triggered by interactions with the outside world, and they thrive with encouragement and support (Duckworth, 2016). Attributes associated with interest include curiosity, self-awareness, courage, and patience (Schimschal et al., 2022). Interest energizes passion with open-minded curiosity that facilitates learning and growth and tolerating uncertainty (Schimschal et al., 2022). Curiosity and learning bring self-awareness, bravery, persistence, courage, and patience. The core of interest allows people to learn, reflect, positively adapt, and confront one's own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Doing so fosters passion, practice, and sustained effort over longer periods of time.

### ***Purpose***

The majority of people are looking for daily meaning or purpose, whose underpinnings can sustain passion (Schimschal et al., 2022). Self-determination nurtures passion and interest. The development of one's determination requires satisfaction of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The ability to control actions, gain mastery, and engage with others helps to develop potential and well-being. In turn, self-determination builds self-concordance by answering which goals are aligned with an individual's needs, values, and interests (Schimschal et al., 2022). Emotional intelligence innervates self-determination and self-concordance by connecting past experiences to current and future state actions. Purpose requires self-compassion by taking approaches to solve problems, alleviate pain, and endure through struggle with humility.

### ***Practice***

More time on task with a continuous improvement philosophy gains traction towards goals (Duckworth, 2016, p. 117-118). Hardiness buffers against stress, requiring a positive

mindset, commitment, and resilience (Mosanya, 2021; Schimschal et al., 2022). The protective properties of resilience are built after stressful life events and experiencing adversity. Research on resilience has a long history across many fields of study, including positive psychology, education, leadership, and human health. Resilience is built by training on how to manage failure, so it is intrinsic rather than demoralizing (Bandura, 1968 as cited in Lopez, 2008). By increasing resiliency, self-efficacy increases with an ability to persevere under pressure (Schimschal et al., 2022). Improving goal setting and experiencing achievement builds confidence. Overcoming challenges builds self-efficacy and enables flow, a psychological state that increases focus, engagement, and performance. Incrementally, a person's resilience, self-efficacy, and flow fosters fulfillment (Schimschal et al., 2022).

### *Hope*

The type of goals people pursue can continuously improve competence, self-efficacy, and skills. Goal orientation and growth mindset can be linked with other motivational concepts, performance theories, and abilities (Dweck, 2006 as cited in Schimschal et al., 2022). The belief that abilities are not fixed and can be combined with other methods to accomplish goals can foster hope. The optimism of gritty individuals is explained by Duckworth (2016) as perceiving barriers as fixable, temporary, and specific to the issue. Individuals who are optimistic also see challenges as opportunities to self-regulate. Hope is the offspring of a growth mindset, optimistic self-talk, and perseverance over adversity (Duckworth, 2016). With interest, purpose, practice, and hope as the ingredients for passion and perseverance, grit grows with every challenge, setback, and rejection.

## Measuring Grit

Originally, Duckworth (2007) developed a tool called the Grit Scale (GS) for a study at West Point Academy that included 10 questions that respondents rated themselves on a scale from 1 to 5. Higher scores implied more grit. As of October 2022, Duckworth's website *Research* had an 8-point and 12-point questionnaire (see Appendix A). The 12-item GS is recommended when measuring grit, because it is more attuned to goal pursuit over a stretched time frame (Duckworth, 2022). As a self-reported questionnaire, the questions emphasize focused effort and interest over time (Duckworth et al., 2007). Using the GS is meant to show how gritty a person is at a particular point in life and is subject to change with time. The pattern, Duckworth (2016) stated on page 57 of *Grit*, is that perseverance scores are typically greater than passion scores which also supports these attributes as separate rather than identical.

Grit can change with cultivating interests, developing skills or habits, and connecting with a purpose. Grit can also grow with support. Developing grit depends critically on other people (Duckworth, 2016). While grit is not the only key to success, it is essential to individual well-being, overcoming difficulty, and accomplishing goals.

## Importance of Grit

Talent, personality, genetic grittiness, intelligence, and even anatomical advantages may add to an individual's repertoire for success; however, grit shows up for the long-term gains. Davidson (2021) stated that persistence and passion is a growth curve of an individual's well-being and potential. Over time, grit grows within people and then multiplies socially, through culture (Duckworth, 2016). Grit's social multiplier effect can uplift society. Whether in education, leadership, or business contexts, fostering grit is important to help people work in

complex and evolving environments. Furthermore, developing grit's psychological attributes helps buffer against stress and creates potential for a socially just, resilient, and unified society.

### **Pandemics, Doctoral Students, and Grit**

Uncontrollable and catastrophic pandemics have disrupted families, communities, and countries. The unknowns of pandemics can significantly alter industries and other sectors. Literature on education and pandemics in the 21st century included contingency plans that implemented distance learning; a faculty-related plan; a student-related plan; and the general principles for how a university should plan for academic continuity in times of crisis (Donohue et al., 2021). The pillars of academic continuity include the consideration of four aspects: learning should persist; course modifications should abide by academic program integrity; students should be given options; and information should be communicated in a clear and timely manner (Donohue et al., 2021).

Grit is essential for individuals who endure rigorous training such as doctoral education. Doctoral students were hit with unprecedented stress, hardship, and loss during the pandemic. Personal, professional, and academic adjustments were required to endure the difficulties facing students in March 2020. In a sector experiencing campus closures, declining enrollment, widening disparities, and mental health issues before the pandemic, doctoral students entering, progressing, or completing their program from 2020 to present day are fostering qualities of grit through the process.

While the psychological resources that are attributed to grit seem to have harmless and beneficial side effects, gaps in the literature exist about the disadvantages of grit. Duckworth (2016) noted this existing gap by stating “grit involves a tradeoff” (p. 280). Duckworth continued to identify it with Dan Harris (2016-present) on the *Ten Percent Happier* podcast episode about



secrets of gritty people, stating the potential disadvantages of having grit needs more studying. Additionally, the concept of grit has faced some criticism of having racist constructs because its tenants undermine the structural inequalities and institutional racism that keep individuals from reaching their goals despite hard work (Harris, 2016-present).

Critics of grit express concern with the brash resilience that connotes heartless behavior. Nagoski and Nagoski (2020) noted living in a culture that values grit, resilience, and self-control teaches that letting go of a goal is the same as failing. To combat this, giving up, or not knowing when to give up, continues a cycle of self-blame and stress. Persisting to one's detriment can cost time, money, and other personal attributes.

Lucas (2016) studied the cost of grit and summarized those gritty individuals who persisted in unsolvable puzzles earned less money than participants exhibiting less grit. Professor, and researcher, Lucas shared with that grit, or the passion and perseverance for long-term goals, can mean missing out on things and compels individuals to keep going despite costs (Verdantam, 2016). The pros and cons of grit remain uncertain.

To address this, quantifying grit and exploring its connections to doctoral education during the pandemic is fundamental. Identifying potential benefits *and* drawbacks to grit as experienced by doctoral students is substantive. The purpose of this study is to understand doctoral students' experience of the pandemic in personal, professional, and academic contexts. The study also aims to explore students' experiences and discover any disadvantages to grit in personal, professional, or academic contexts.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

The nature of qualitative research has been refined and expanded during the 1990s and into the 21st century (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological research begins with learning about a phenomenon through the experiences of others. Neubauer et al. (2019) poses that learning from the experiences of others is a foundational premise of research; thus, phenomenology is valuable to all human learning. The goals of phenomenology are to describe *what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced.

#### **Phenomenological Research**

Hermeneutic phenomenology, or interpretive phenomenology, originated from the work of theologian Martin Heidegger (Neubauer et al., 2019). Heidegger was interested in the nature of being and temporality, and the approach relied on human beings as knowers of phenomenon through lived experience. The hermeneutic style of phenomenology trusts that an individual's experience of a phenomenon is not separate from the world and is influenced by the individual's personal history. One's history is also considered subjective, where experience is inextricably linked to social, cultural, and political contexts.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a blended approach that aims to provide detailed examination of the lived experience of a phenomenon through participants' personal experiences and personal perception of objects and events (Neubauer et al., 2019). The researcher plays an active role in the interpretation of the study's findings and interprets them with experience in the subject matter. The methodology lends to a researcher's reflection of their own experiences as participants' experiences are explored and discovered. Understandings from IPA show perspectives of a phenomenon with the idea that individuals already understand themselves within a world, even if they are not consciously aware of that understanding.

Phenomenological methods allow researchers to explore, discover, and understand lived experiences of individuals. The design has philosophical underpinnings and culminates the experiences of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design of inquiry typically involves interviews with a range of 3-10 individuals, constructing broad understandings, reflective writing, and cycling back to data with revised perspectives. Neubauer et al. (2019) suggest that this approach is not standardized. Maxwell (2013) endorses this thought by stating there is no “cookbook” for qualitative methods.

### **Rationale for a Phenomenological Approach**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) state the use of phenomenology focuses on a single phenomenon, and the researcher collaborates with the study’s participants. A phenomenological approach was used, because the researcher correlated with the participants’ experiences as a doctoral student in the same program. The study also approached the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens as a peer in the program and explored its influences in personal, professional, and educational contexts. Inextricable links between the researcher and participants led to open-ended questions used in a small, focus group interview.

Maxwell (2013) highlighted that researchers frequently and intentionally separate their research and their lives, which is harmful to good research. In *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, segregating the researcher from their research can obscure or hide researchers’ influence on the process and conclusions, and/or cut the researcher off as a source of insights, questions, and practical guidance. Hermeneutic phenomenology with IPA allows the researcher to use their background and relationship with participants to absorb data with possible therapeutic benefits of focus group discussion. With rich, quality dialogue, data can be metabolized into understanding and meaning of the phenomena.

## **Research Design**

Phenomenological research starts with exploring the experience as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualized and reflects on the essential (phenomenological) themes that characterize the participant's experience with phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). The strategy for the study developed a 360-degree view of the pandemic as it was experienced by doctoral students in their coursework or dissertation stages of their programs, while also subscribing their knowledge and perception of their grit. Maxwell (2013) states hermeneutics involves continuously looking at alternative ways to describe the participant perspectives.

### ***Doctoral Students' Grit***

The GS questionnaire by Duckworth et al. (2007) started groundbreaking research into descriptive studies about grit and its difference between other character traits, such as determination, motivation, self-control, and resilience. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* described a 10-question scale that was developed for a study at West Point Academy (p. 54-55, 2016). Duckworth's website, *Angela Duckworth: Research* (n.d.), shares two questionnaires to quantify grit: an 8-point and 12-point questionnaire. The participants completed the 12-point questionnaire to gather insight on their own grit, which enriched the qualitative portion of the study. The scores were calculated by the participants for discussion. Afterwards, the questionnaires were submitted to the researcher to describe the study's population.

### ***Focus Group Inquiry***

A small focus group for the interview was valuable for several reasons. First, focus groups are ideal for getting insights that uniquely result from participant interaction. Tracy (2020) identified the "group effect" and the "therapeutic effect," where focus-group participants

show less inhibition with this approach. Participants with similarities, such as being part of the same doctoral program of the same institution, interact with a cascading effect in which each person's turn of the conversation links to topics and expressions that unfold naturally. The flow from focus-group interviews also generates self-disclosure that may remain hidden in one-on-one interviews. As such, this approach effectively explored emotional experiences and could have been transformative for participants as they may have learned new ways of seeing or talking about a situation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore, discover, and understand the perceptions of the pandemic from doctoral students. The study also sought to discover and understand the benefits and disadvantages of grit from these doctoral students who entered and/or completed their coursework and dissertation in the Ed.D. in P-20 and Community Leadership Program at MSU. The definition for the pandemic was the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the region, nation, as well as occurred on a global scale in 2020. Using the lens of phenomenological inquiry, the focus was on doctoral students and their "living through" the pandemic, examining their perceived grit, and grit's effect on personal, professional, and academic contexts. The goal was to understand the participants' perceptions about the pandemic and the fostering of grit in their lives.

### **Research Questions**

The study used grit to offer relative meaning to the open-ended questions below. The GS questionnaire was shared to enlighten participants on their own grit. Scores were not requested or referred to as proven truths. The research did not hinge on grit scores; rather, the study sought to explore, discover, and understand doctoral students' experiences of the pandemic and how their

perceived grit has positively or negatively influenced personal, professional, and academic contexts.

The central research questions explored the phenomenon and concept of the study. Questions about the general experience of the pandemic and students' understanding of grit held meaning to this study without specific reference to the existing literature.

The following research questions were examined in this study:

RQ1: How do doctoral students experience the pandemic in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

RQ2: How do doctoral students understand their own grit and its meaning?

Sub-questions to RQ2 followed to help understand grit in different angles. The questions aimed to discover and understand grit in depth.

RQ3: How do doctoral students perceive their own grit as positively influencing their lives in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

RQ4: How do doctoral students perceive their own grit as negatively influencing their lives in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

The researcher did not employ hypotheses for the study. The study contained GS data and doctoral students' experiences. The information illustrated the influence of the pandemic and the variables of grit without making directional correlation.

### **Description of the Population**

Participants were students enrolled in the Doctor of Education in P-20 and Community Leadership Program at MSU, either actively engaged in coursework, completing the dissertation phase of the program, or graduates. The doctoral program has students completing coursework

and dissertations at a distance. Participants joined this study with a shared background – their academic endeavors were pursued during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study did not collect demographic data, but the interview data was gleaned for contextual labels and identifiers that describe each participant. Doctoral students who shared information about their age and their location (during the pandemic and/or at present) provided descriptive information in their own words. The doctoral students were labeled with the abbreviation “EdD” and an assigned number at random, and these identifiers will be used throughout the report of findings.

Table 1 has descriptions of the doctoral students who participated in the study. The quotes in the third column provide evidence for the description. The participants shared a background of being part of the Ed.D. program at MSU during the pandemic, and they also endured the pandemic and/or currently live in rural areas. Participants provided details such as working on campus in Murray, KY, coming from rural areas of Kentucky and Missouri, and having connectivity issues due to their rural location.

**Table 1.**

*Description of Participants*

Participant	Description	Quotes
Edd1	Female, middle adulthood	“I didn’t go to college until my second child was born... So when I started college at 35 years old, I went full force.”
Edd2	Male, early adulthood	“I went straight from high school to bachelors, to masters, to the Ed.D. program.” “I’m a white man.”
Edd3	Male, late adulthood	“I had to take a test that I took 31 years ago.” “According to my wife...”
Edd4	Male, late adulthood	“I’ve been retired for 10 years.”
Edd5	Male, late adulthood	“I am sure I am, by far, the oldest person in this group.” “I was in Vietnam.”

### ***Murray State University (MSU)***

MSU, founded in 1922, is a public, state-supported, four-year co-educational University that primarily serves the Jackson Purchase region of western Kentucky but also serves the entire state of Kentucky and surrounding states. The main campus is in Murray, Kentucky, with regional campuses in Paducah, Hopkinsville, Madisonville, Henderson, and Fort Campbell, Kentucky (MSU, n.d.b.). MSU also provides several fully online certificates, undergraduate, and graduate degree programs. Today, the University serves over 9,000 students pursuing degrees in 148 academic programs within six colleges and schools (MSU, n.d.c.). Approximately 86% of the student population are undergraduates with the remaining 14% of students engaged in graduate studies. MSU is Kentucky's only public University listed in the U.S. News & World Report regional University "Top Tier" in academic quality for the past 27 consecutive years.

### ***College of Education and Human Services (COEHS)***

Students in the COEHS program are encouraged to become "future leaders, advocates, and practitioners through authentic, engaging, and student-centered academic programs for successful careers that positively impact communities" (MSU, n.d.a.). COEHS offers 11 undergraduate programs in Criminal Justice; Communication Disorders; Social Work; Teacher Preparation Programs; Elementary Education; Health and Physical Education; Career and Technical Education; Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education; Middle School Education; Secondary Education; and Special Education (MSU, n.d.a.). The college offers 13 graduate programs, where many are in continuation of their respective undergraduate pathways. COEHS is responsible for one out of only three online doctoral programs at MSU.



### ***Doctor of Education in P-20 and Community Leadership (Ed.D.)***

The Ed.D. program was developed to produce “bold and innovated agents of change who will lead P-20 initiatives that will be beneficial to the schools, communities, businesses, and organizations they serve” (MSU, 2020). Program highlights include cross-disciplinary curriculum; executive-style and distance delivery; cohort-based interaction; three-year completion rates; and an option for prior learning assessments. The program has specializations in pK-12 leadership; postsecondary leadership; STEM leadership; and agriculture education. A fifth option is designed for individuals who hold a specialization in education (Ed.S.) to bridge into the Ed.D. with up to 50% of credit hour transfer, which accelerates doctoral degree completion from three years to two.

### **Sampling**

Maxwell (2013) identified purposeful selection, or purposive sampling, to describe the activities selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to the research questions and goals that cannot be obtained from probability or convenience sampling. Participants were viewed as panels, where people were selected because they were experts in an area or were able to witness an event. Purposeful selection of panelists for a small, focus-group interview was necessary to ensure individuals share multiple reference points (doctoral education, program of study, etc.) with a common touchstone – the pandemic.

The researcher purposefully selected participants that could best understand the research questions. An email was sent to doctoral students who were enrolled in the fall 2020, spring 2021, and fall 2021 cohorts. Students remained in the program or were expecting to be finished with the program at time of the study. The program director had access to these students’ contact information and sent an email to these students about the study. The completion of the 12-point

questionnaire was voluntary. Return of the questionnaire within a 10-day period was expected, and doctoral students were asked to provide a brief summary and reflection about grit.

A single-stage, purposive sampling strategy included peer recruitment via email. Once a panel was assembled, the study pursued data collection through focus groups interviews, recorded audiovisual and digital materials, and IPA.

### **Description of Participant Risk**

Ethical considerations affect all phases of research. The methodology of this study was approved by MSU IRB (see Appendix B). Data collection methods, tools, and the participants themselves posed risk to taking part in the study. Even the relationship between the researcher and the researched can pose ethical considerations given the role of power. The relationship between the researcher and the participants must be considered to achieve reliable and valid research outcomes (Maxwell, 2013). Participation in the study was voluntary and was made confidential with the use of technology, data collection techniques, and file encryption.

### ***Role of the Researcher***

Educational research using a hermeneutic approach acknowledges emic and etic perspectives. Spiers (2000) differentiates between the concepts of risks and experience using etic and emic approaches. Risks consist of the assumptions from the etic (or external evaluation) of the issues, and the emic (or personal) interpretations of the experience. The researcher lies within the emic view with familiarity and experience within the context of the study. While this may help with rapport, this insider look may underpin assumptions or reputations that may lead to hesitations in the focus group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The outsider, or etic, role in the research may be akin to other focus group studies where the power of the researcher can pose ethical considerations.

### ***Risks of Focus Group Methodology***

Sim and Waterfield (2019) challenge the assessment of risk and harm with qualitative studies by stating that predicting and identifying harm are not straightforward in qualitative social research. The caveats of risk assessment in qualitative studies also fault at the indication of harm, whereas what may harm one person may be of benefit to another. Identifying harm and distinguishing its morality is also nuanced and subject to participants' cultures, experiences, and emotional integrity.

Ethical challenges of focus group methodology address the unpredictable direction of the discussion. The unpredictability of the discussion and interaction can be problematic. The discussion of highly emotional and sensitive topics may be amplified by some participants' over-disclosure of perspectives and experiences.

Balancing open, synergistic, and supportive dialogue is no small feat for focus group methodologies. Disclosure and transparency can help with minimizing the challenges of focus group interviews. The consent process (see Appendix C), briefing, moderating, and debriefing can be enlisted to mitigate the challenges of focus group methodology.

### ***Risks with Audiovisual Format***

The audiovisual nature of the focus group allowed participants to control filters, allowing students to select how much they wanted to share in the video conference format. Data collection via the online platform Zoom allowed participants to use voice-only, camera-only, camera-voice combination, chat, and emoji buttons to communicate. Potential slips in communication or communication management by the researcher may cause feelings of not belonging in the group.

### ***Risks with Memory and Recollection***

Recollection and discussion of difficult times may pose risks to participants. The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (2018) posit the challenges of recollecting highly emotional events, such as the attack in the United States on September 11, 2001 (9/11). “Flashbulb memories” were susceptible to change as time passed due to the views and perspectives, coping mechanisms, and memory reconstruction that occurs as time passes. Remembering the pandemic may also bring out flashbulb memories, especially if participants experienced deep emotions of grief, loss, sadness, and loneliness. Recalling or expressing deep or negative feelings may lead to participant harm in studies.

### **Confidentiality**

Ethical challenges with focus group interviews include confidentiality. The ability to keep information private and unidentifiable required intentionality with the recruitment of participants. Sim and Waterfield (2019) made efforts to delineate between confidentiality and anonymity by stating:

Confidentiality relates to what is done with information once it is in the researcher’s possession, and specifically the extent to which it is disclosed to others. Anonymity, in contrast, is concerned with the attribution of information – can individuals be identified from the data that they provide or from other information relating to them? (p. 3008)

Focus groups are absent of co-participant confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Tracy, 2020). Knowing this, Tolich (2009, p.99, as cited in Sim & Waterfield, 2019) suggests letting all parties in the study beware that “the only ethical assurance that can be given to focus group participants is that there are few ethical assurances.” While the researcher

upheld ethical practices and maintained the information privately, the information shared in the focus group was vulnerable.

Confidentiality could improve with focus groups composed of individuals previously unknown to each other; however, pre-existing relationships may also benefit a “group effect” or “therapeutic effect” in other cases. Attributing quotations to categories of participants rather than pseudonyms may also minimize deductive disclosure, as well as omitting information about participants in the report. The researcher allowed participants to read the interview transcript to determine if their identity was compromised.

### **Description of Instruments**

The 12-point GS questionnaire (Duckworth, n.d.) was sent prior to purposive sampling of the focus group. The questionnaire was considered an enrichment to the study rather than an instrument. The questionnaire enlightened potential participants in the recruitment phase of the study, and the information may have peaked interest leading to volunteering for the study.

The focus-group interview was conducted using Zoom, a platform that hosts online audiovisual meetings. Zoom has the capacity to show multiple users on screen, record audio and visual communications, and can be used from mobile devices (Daniels et al., 2019). Participants had access to Zoom with their MSU accounts. The platform demanded low levels of user competency with no financial commitment. The researcher took notes in case the audio-recording device did not work. Transcription and audiovisual content were recorded and saved. Zoom Support (2022) identifies audio transcription and closed caption display with cloud recordings as editable. The audio transcription file was saved and used in analysis software.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) identify six popular quantitative data analysis programs, and the MSU Ed.D. program offers a subscription to one that was available for both the PC and

MAC platforms. QSR Nvivo (NVivo) is a qualitative computer data analysis program that will analyze focus group data. The Zoom transcript was imported into Nvivo software. With the qualitative data, Nvivo organized, explored, connected, and collaborated themes from the interview. The software was bold in data analysis; however, the researcher also went through the transcript and assigned codes by hand.

Maxwell (2013) identified the researcher as an instrument in a qualitative study. The researcher's eyes, ears, and intellectual property were tools used to gather information to organize, explore, and understand the data. Informal data such as incidental observations are key to interview studies and can only be noted by the researcher. The study was conducted by a fellow doctoral student finishing their dissertation in the Ed.D. program with a specialization in postsecondary education.

### **Pilot Testing**

A pilot study was conducted a week before conducting the focus-group interview. Four of the five participants were able to attend the pilot study. Daniels et al. (2019) reviewed potential restraints or problems with audiovisual technology and focus groups. Pilot testing can optimize the use of software by curtailing problems on audiovisual platforms, including pilot testing for technical issues such as audio and visual malfunction, screen displays, and reactions. Testing in advance minimized distractions within the participants' environment, improved engagement, and comfort, and allowed the researcher to build rapport. Participants had an opportunity to build the environment conducive to their needs, such as hanging a "do not disturb" sign on the outside of their door, minimizing noise, and having technology accessories (e.g., headphones, microphone, camera) nearby.

## **Privacy**

Protecting identity and sensitive information involves ethical challenges with qualitative studies, specifically focus-group interviews. Tracy (2020) notes computer-mediated interviews can diminish privacy. Participants may have backgrounds or environments that provide details about their personal lives. Recorded files were saved in multiple spaces – on the researcher’s hard drive and on various software forums. Storing copies of files allowed for potential data copying or corruption. Strategies to keep files safe included keeping data under password-protected files and careful consideration of how, and if, data would be deleted or destroyed.

Aliases or pseudonyms are used in qualitative research to maintain an individual’s privacy. Participants could also change their name as it appears on the Zoom screen, opt for audio only (turn their camera off), and/or ask that some information be left out of the study. Tracy (2020) emphasizes the importance of researchers to carefully consider privacy policies by using pseudonyms as needed. The option of submitting quotations of participants bears reminding that privacy can ensure confidentiality.

## **Validity & Reliability**

Qualitative validity and reliability are not equivalent to validity and reliability in quantitative studies. Validity is based on determining whether the findings are accurate with respect to participants, researcher, and readers of an account (Creswell & Miller, 2000, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Threats to trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility can decrease validity. The focus group approach may propagate lying or an inauthentic front to prevent co-participant feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment, or the like (Tracy, 2020). The final report and descriptions of themes with details were provided back to participants to determine whether they felt that the information was accurate. Validation in this step required the

researcher to offer a follow-up interview with participants to provide an opportunity for them to comment on the findings. The doctoral students declined a follow-up interview.

Inviting participants to a follow-up interview allowed for additional reflection for all parties involved in the study, which could have clarified any bias they brought to the study. If participants were open to a follow-up interview, this time would have allowed the researcher to go over notes and to check their potential bias that could have influenced the interpretation of data. A researcher taking an unbiased approach to the data is incongruent with hermeneutic phenomenology's philosophical roots, because the researcher's past experiences and knowledge are valuable guides to phenomenology. (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Argument exists that reliability is an inappropriate benchmark for qualitative research. Tracy's (2020, p. 268) framework for quality qualitative work includes a worthy topic; rich content; transparency about methods and challenges; reflection; relevance; ethical considerations; significant contributions; and meaningful coherence. Qualitative reliability procedures concentrated on checking the transcripts to ensure accuracy. Coding, themes, and descriptions of the data were monitored for drifts in meaning and inference by comparing the study's data with the codes and respective definitions with other synonyms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Reliability and validity were upheld with methodological integrity by honestly conveying the researcher's and participants' experiences in the data collection process.



## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this study was to explore, discover, and understand the perceptions of the pandemic, grit, and doctoral students' experiences in the Ed.D. program at MSU. The pandemic timeline was defined from March 2020 through May 2023 and only referred to as COVID-19. Using the lens of phenomenological inquiry, the focus was on doctoral students and their "living through" the pandemic, examining their perceived grit and their perspectives of grit's positive effect on personal, professional, and academic contexts. The study also aimed to explore, discover, and understand the potential downsides of grit on one's life.

The research questions of this study included:

RQ1: How do doctoral students experience the pandemic in personal, professional, and academic context?

RQ2: How do doctoral students understand their own grit and its meaning?

The open-ended questions have directional tone to explore, discover, and understand the influence of grit. Research questions are expected to evolve during the study in a manner that describes the essence of students' experiences.

RQ3: How do doctoral students perceive their own grit as positively influencing their lives in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

RQ4: How do doctoral students perceive their own grit as negatively influencing their lives in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

### **Pilot Study**

The pilot study data was performed with 12 current or completed doctoral students in the Ed.D. program at MSU and may be referred to as "doctoral students" or "students"

interchangeably. Reflections about doctoral students' understanding(s) about grit are shared.

Doctoral students' reflections enriched the study but were not used in the data analysis.

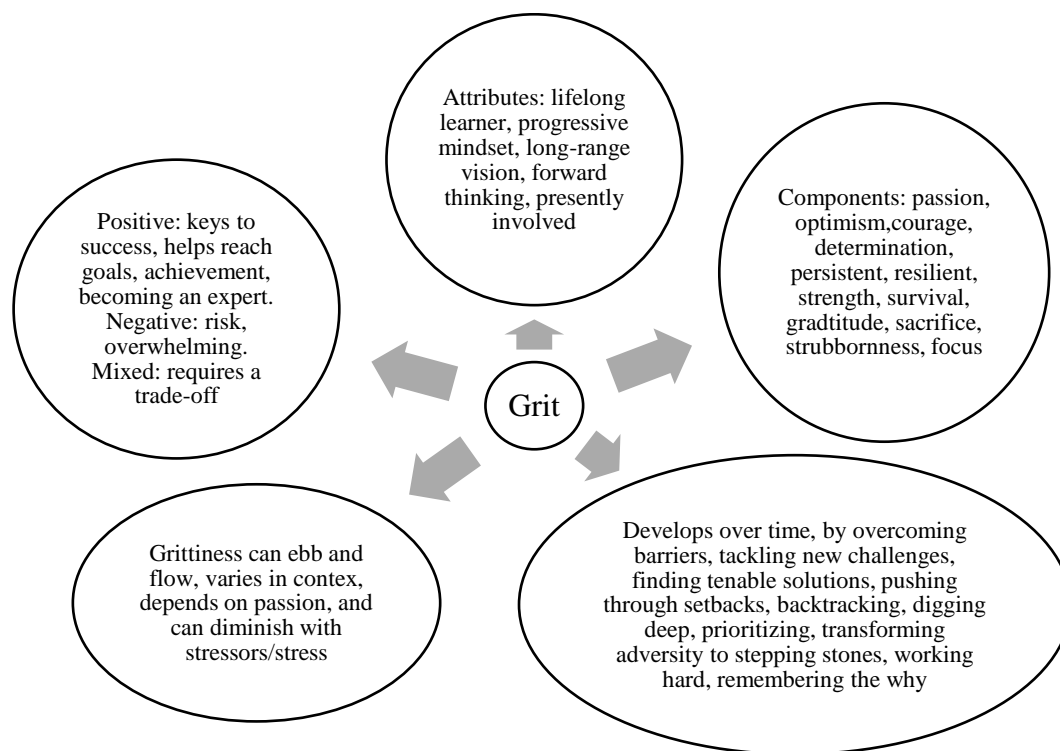
The findings of the study are based on the analysis of focus-group interview data with five doctoral students (current or graduates). The data reported has participants' direct quotes to ensure their voices are clear.

### Recruitment Pre-Work

After a recruitment email was sent by the program director, 12 students responded with a completed questionnaire and reflection about their understanding of grit. The students' responses were helpful in pre-work and preparation for the focus-group interview. A concept map was created to help with visualizing grit's meaning to doctoral students. Students' words were used verbatim in the concept map (Figure 1) to ensure clarity.

**Figure 1**

*Concept Map: Doctoral Students' Understanding of Grit*



### **Grit Score Questionnaire**

Grit was measured by students completing the questionnaire. Higher scores implied more grit. Students and the researcher calculated scores, and students' grit scores ranged from 3.25-4.67. The scores were not used during the focus-group interview. The pre-work provided an exercise during recruitment and allowed students to reflect and write on their personal feelings about grit. Despite the scores, all participants felt the measurement of grit and their own grittiness fluctuated. Students stated their grit varied based on their level of interest or passion, the amount of risk associated with their task or goal, and their overall wellbeing.

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this qualitative study involved making sense out of text and audiovisual information. The intent was to organize, code, theme, and describe the raw data with an approach to validate the accuracy of the information provided. Zoom recorded focus group information and transcribed conversation was scanned by the researcher for accuracy. Edits and inserts to help with clarification of the raw data were added before organizing and preparing the data for analysis. Reflection of the focus group interview allowed the researcher to interpret and draw upon the nonverbal communication cues and mannerisms that enriched qualitative data.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) aimed to investigate and make sense of experiences. The approach used a triad with an active researcher who could influence the degree to which they got to know the participant's experience and how the researcher made sense of the participants' shared story. Conveying the themes and descriptions in writing in this chapter using participants' voices and illustrating grit with a concept map. The data analysis of qualitative research attempted to understand an experience from the participants' perspective, all while

critically reflecting and formulating questions that optimize digestion and metabolism of the phenomenon.

### **Focus-Group Interview**

The Zoom supported focus-group interview lasted a total of 56 minutes and 41 seconds. All participants remained in the Zoom meeting throughout its duration except for one person leaving and returning to the meeting room within a minute. One participant disabled their camera. Voice tone, inflection, and nonverbal communication cues were added to data. Zoom created files for storing data in audio-only, video-only, and transcription format. The raw data also included moderator notes. Images were not included in the raw data.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of data included hand coding, reading through transcripts, and using QSR NVivo. The overall process of analyzing qualitative data included simultaneous procedures, winnowing the data, and using software for assistance. Validating the accuracy of the information was constant throughout analysis.

The researcher used NVivo software to code organized data into chunks and categories. The respective categories were described using participants' own words. Themes generated from the qualitative data included layers of details added from participants' responses.

### ***In Group Analysis***

Researcher notes were taken during the focus group interview using paper and pen. The study did not include a co-moderator. Themes and reflections during the interview were written as the researcher was analyzing during the interview. Analysis during the focus group interview included listening for inconsistent comments and probing for understanding, listening for vague

comments and probing for understanding, and offering a debriefing and summarizing the conversation.

### ***Immediately Following the Interview***

Raw data was immediately organized and prepared for analysis. By reading through the data, the researcher cleaned the data for typos or erroneous words due to transcription glitches. Validating the accuracy of the information required matching the transcript to the recorded cloud audio file. Once the transcript was completed, only one sentence of the conversation was missing due to a connectivity issue. The content of this sentence was not further clarified due to participant preference.

### ***Hours Following the Interview***

Winnowing the data allowed the researcher to remove and aggregate data into a small number of themes. Paper notes and Zoom supported files were kept confidential on an encrypted cloud space and backup hard drive. Hunches and themes were noted on moderator notes to be made into chunks and codes for software analysis.

### ***Days Later***

Three hard copies of the transcript were used for hand-coding. The participants received the transcript to review the day after conducting the interview. Performing these tasks in a timely manner allowed participants to reflect on their experience and verify their content. The researcher allowed seven days for participants to respond to a follow-up interview invitation. Participants declined the opportunity for follow-up interviews and made no requests for corrections, additions, or redactions to the transcript.

A summary of emerging themes and quotes were shared with those who were present at the focus group. Reading through all data required three paper copies of the transcript that

allowed the researcher to identify themes and descriptions. An opportunity to reflect on the overall meaning of the ideas and information allowed interpersonal analysis. The overall depth and use of the information

The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis and NVivo software. Hand coding the data included highlighting responses in context of personal, professional, and academic contexts, and negative, positive, or mixed sentiment. The paper transcript was tabbed with positive, negative, or mixed sentiment stickers that included words that indicated respective context. The participant's individual input was cut out and organized on a large piece of paper. Participants' input was parsed out to see their input in chunks, and then highlighted for connections to P-20 implications and significance.

#### ***After NVivo Analysis***

The transcript was coded with Nvivo, and 25 codes organized the interview into commonly threaded ideas. Meaningful data was isolated, grouped, and regrouped to help organize, explore, connect, and collaborate themes. Emerging themes surfaced from the analysis, which were cross-referenced with the student and group.

#### **Doctoral Students During the Pandemic**

The pandemic had positive, negative, and mixed effects on students' lives. The data was coded into personal, professional, and academic contexts. Sentiment was assigned to the codes. Negative experiences predominated the data; however, the pandemic had positive influences on students' academic lives.

### ***Pandemic's Positive Effect***

The trinary roles that doctoral students experienced during the pandemic uniquely added to the perspectives of COVID-19. Doctoral students reported positive effects of the pandemic. Experiences were parsed into personal, professional, and academic contexts.

**Positive Experiences in Personal Context.** The initial pandemic shutdowns and isolation provided an opportunity for personal enrichment and an increased dedication to their own coursework. EdD1 stated, “Him [son] being home gave us a lot more time to be together as a family. So, we, you know, we played games. We played outside a lot more.”

Social isolation was preferred by some students. The preference to be alone made the shutdowns accentuate their personality. EdD3 stated, “But I kind of like being out here on the farm, by myself. The pandemic didn’t cause me any real stress.” Students were living in rural regions during the pandemic, which positively affected their experiences of the pandemic.

Most notably, EdD4 was a retiree and reported their engagement in coursework helped them buffer stress from the pandemic. The student stated, “Overall, all in all, it’s been a really positive thing for me. I mean, it really exercises my brain muscles. And so that is, that is a great thing.” The pandemic was a good time to engage in learning, writing, and discussion.

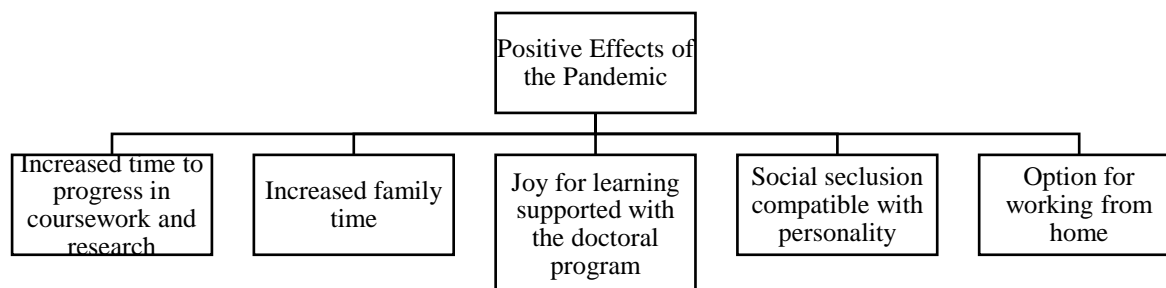
**Positive Experiences in Professional Context.** Doctoral students with teaching careers or campus careers noted that much of their coursework was hybrid or online, which made the transition to fully online courses easy. EdD2 noted, “The academic shift wasn’t too hard for me, since it is something I already had experience with.” EdD3 was teaching high school and college courses online stated that they felt there was even more time to be available to students while also getting coursework finished. EdD4 was retired and did not add to this context.

**Positive Experiences in Academic Context.** Three students (EdD3, EdD4, and EdD5) had similar experiences with the pandemic's influence on their ability to accomplish coursework. EdD3 stated, "The pandemic for me made the P-20 program so easy, and that's kind of an odd thing." EdD3 elaborated by saying there was more time to complete readings, investigate research, and perform literature review. The shutdowns added about an hour or two to their schedule each day to complete coursework. EdD4 stated their experience was also positive, stating, "I had plenty of time to do my assignments and my reading."

The positive effects of the pandemic included having more time with family and ample time to complete coursework. Students' careers were able to transition to a remote or WFH positions. The ability to multitask at home allowed students to blend and synchronize careers and academic endeavors, which led to positive reflections about the pandemic's effects. Figure 2 shows their reported benefits of the pandemic in a concept map. The positive effects of the pandemic suggested that these components were conducive to sustaining, surviving, and thriving during the pandemic.

**Figure 2**

*Doctoral Students' Reported Positive Effects of the Pandemic*





### ***Pandemic's Negative Effect***

Negative effects of the pandemic existed two-fold. While the positive effects of the pandemic existed, not all students experienced the pandemic without undue stress. The pandemic's burden affected personal, professional, and academic aspects of life. Students were able to share these hardships.

**Negative Experiences in Personal Context.** The initial pandemic shutdowns and isolation caused struggles. Figuring out how to function at home in trinary roles was stressful. For EdD1, transitioning to homeschooling their child was a struggle. The negative experience of having children at home during the social isolation and distancing was difficult to manage as a parent.

Mental health issues were experienced during the pandemic. EdD2 openly shared their battles with anxiety and depression. EdD2 expressed their perspective by saying:

I have anxiety and depression as a diagnosed condition, and I was able to control it for the most part... When the pandemic hit and we were forced to isolate, my mental health plummeted. I had to get back on medication for anxiety and depression. My roommate at the time was still working, and he worked an essential job. He would come home after being out, and we had to figure out a way to get him in the house and make it where, as soon as he got in, his clothes went into the washing machine so that we didn't risk getting sick. And it was a really hard time for me personally.

Stress, anxiety, and depression caused doctoral students to have less buoyancy to the pandemic's effects, which provided a negative loop into their experience of the pandemic. Compared to students who reported mostly positive effects of the pandemic, these students had a balance of negative feelings that changed their perspectives of COVID-19.

EdD5 shared feeling angry about the misinformation about the virus. While the student did experience positive things while working in the doctoral program, the media and information about the virus elicited anger.

At the same time, it developed a lot of anger in me. Because of where I'm working with, I knew that there was a sense of a matter of lies being told about where the virus came from and what was the solution. And that was the anger side of it, because we were told things that were not true. And things changed. And people were not honest about what was going on. So on a good side, I made a lot of progress in school. But at the same time, every time I heard someone talking about certain things on TV, I would say it was not true and no one's telling the truth about it.

Nearing the end of the focus-group interview, EdD2 reflected on the pandemic and shared a heartfelt memory. EdD2 said, "I'm really close with my mother who has cancer. And she's also a nurse. She didn't get to stay home... I was terrified of losing my mother." The statement was the only statement throughout the interview that addressed the possible loss of a family member to COVID-19.

**Negative Experiences in Professional Context.** The shutdown caused a chain reaction into everyone's work lives. For these doctoral students, working from home was an option. However, organizations were making choices in an unprecedented time while a contagious virus spread around the globe. EdD2 shared the experience of having their organization provide little notice about changing to remote work:

The campus was closing... And we also got very little notice that that was occurring. So it seemed out of nowhere. We got an email saying, "Hey, at this point, all classes will be

virtual for the rest of the semester.” So it was a really hard pivot. And with that being the first time that I ever taught in higher education, I was kind of on my own.

Communication about operations, functioning, and managing the basics for performing jobs was left to individuals to ‘figure it out.’ Traveling for work was suspended. The uncharted format of working from home was a learning experience. Operating in a system of unknowns was negative for some.

For EdD1, a hiring freeze that occurred at their degree-granting institution caused burden in their professional life. EdD1 stated:

I was supposed to be transferred to a full-time position, and I was supposed to take that position. But as everything kind of happened and unfolded, the university I was working with and getting my MBA from went on a hiring freeze. So that [position] was pretty much scrapped. So, I had to really figure out what I wanted to do.... Going into higher education at that time, in my area, wasn’t possible because of all of the hiring freezes.

Without an option to go into higher education at that time, EdD1 took on a job opportunity with a newspaper. EdD1 approached this role by correlating it to education in a different forum and said, “I kind of, in my head, correlated it with educating people, educating the public on what was going on. It was kind of still in that realm.”

**Negative Experiences in Academic Context.** Doctoral students missed having an option to meet faculty and cohort members in-person. While the MSU Ed.D. program was fully on Zoom prior to the spring 2020 semester, students felt that relationships with faculty were weaker than preferred. Transitioning to the dissertation phase was stressful. EdD1 noted not being able to meet with their dissertation chair was a hardship. The lack of interaction with peers and professors led to negative feelings about their educational experience during the pandemic.

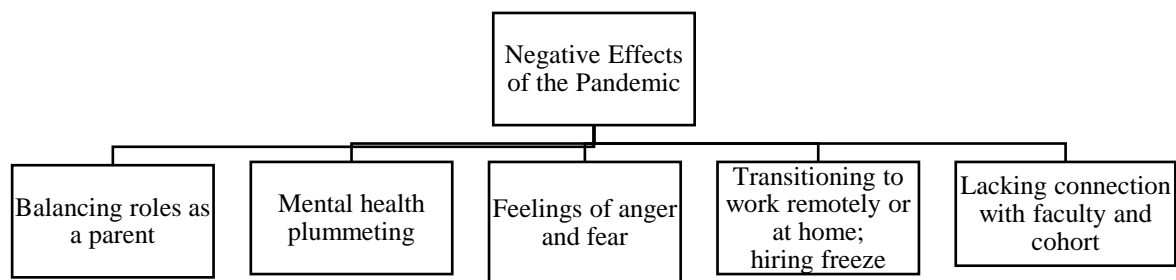
Classes via Zoom were not as fulfilling. EdD4 shared, “The Zoom thing just doesn’t cut it for me.” The student elaborated:

I did miss out on the interaction with professors, because there were times when things would be graded, and I would get comments. And I really didn’t understand what they were trying to say to me. And I think when you have a one-to-one, in-person conversation with somebody, you can expand upon your questioning and kind of get a better read on what they’re trying to tell you. So I did miss that.

During the focus-group interview, the researcher noted nonverbal communication with emphasis on words that connotated negative emotions and participants delivering negative experiences in an upset tone. Figure 3 shows students’ negative experiences of the pandemic in a concept map. The negative effects of the pandemic suggested that these components were antagonist to sustaining, surviving, and thriving during the pandemic.

**Figure 3**

*Doctoral Students’ Reported Negative Effects of the Pandemic*



### ***Mixed Experiences of the Pandemic***

Doctoral students reported feeling that the pandemic produced mixed emotions as well.

Edd2 summarized his experience by saying:

I struggled tremendously, but I think it also taught me a lot about myself, and how you don't have to be around people all the time... So I think it was kind of like a blessing and a curse for me personally.

Positive and negative experiences of the pandemic left some doctoral students summarizing their experience by calling it “a mixed bag.” Heads nodded when describing the pandemic as including good and bad experiences.

### **Doctoral Students' Understanding of Grit**

The doctoral students' understanding of grit included themes of persistence, perspective, purpose, and price. The focus-group shared their thoughts collectively. Quotes from participants are shared to use raw data to shed light on themes. Stories or quotes shared within each theme share their understanding of grit and its positive, negative, or mixed influence of life.

#### ***Persistence***

Persistence with accomplishing goals by overcoming barriers, sticking with a task despite setbacks, and having the willingness to go through a difficult task were shared by students in their own words. EdD4 stated

Grit for me is being able to be resilient enough and tough enough to overcome barriers in your professional life and your personal life successfully. To accomplish your goals, despite possible roadblocks... I think people with grit just have the forward to keep on going and get the job done.

The idiom, “When the going gets tough, the tough gets going” was shared to help add to the understanding of persistence. Doctoral students used the word “push” or a variation of this word in the interview. ‘Seeing something through’ until the mission was accomplished resounded in the focus-group as participants all remarked that grit meant persisting.

### *Perspective*

A person’s mindset, mentality, and attitude was an integral part of grit. Doctoral students stated that grit meant having the attitude of possibility. Personal mantras or core beliefs were shared during the focus-group interview. The following statements were shared:

- “Keep on going, and get the job done.”
- “Lead, follow, or get out of the way.”
- “Even though it sucks, I’m going to push myself to the end.”
- “Figure it out.”
- “I have something to prove.”

The statements have context within each student’s life. The focus group members shared stories of how these mentalities have guided them through difficult circumstances. Different examples illustrated how these perspectives gave individuals hope, gratitude, and motivation. EdD5 connected his core belief to his previous combat experience. EdD4 recalled a mission, “But at the beginning, I said, ‘There’s no way we do this. You just, you just can’t.’ But you gotta figure it out, because you’re leading a group of people, and it’s for our mission.”

Two doctoral students reported their fathers provided these statements throughout their upbringing, which remain part of a personal compass for life. Lived experiences of accomplishments and failures shaped their attitudes, mentalities, and perspectives about grit.

### ***Purpose***

Students' understanding of grit meant having a purpose to propel them through a process. The word 'purpose' was also coded with words such as 'mission' or 'goal.' All doctoral students believed that aligning actions to meet goals was most compelling when there was a sense of purpose. EdD1 shared her purpose to educate the next generation by learning from mistakes and successes. EdD1 said:

My 21-year-old is in college, getting her undergraduate degree at Murray State. She recently told me that she really looks up to me having those qualities to push through and keep going, even though you know, I started college when she was 11. She has seen me struggle the whole way. But it has kind of inspired her, and she's just doing outstanding.

Doctoral students had a strong connection to their purpose, which had a ripple effect on their perspectives and sustained their perseverance. With their purpose at the helm, doctoral students were able to recognize the price of being gritty.

### ***Price***

During the focus-group interview, a sense of a trade-off or sacrifice was a component of grit. The qualitative data showed these codes having the most negative sentiment. Doctoral students shared their sacrifices going through a doctoral program. EdD2 stated, "Recognizing that I want the goal and as much as it sucks, I'm going to push myself through it. And I don't have to be happy about it." Recognizing, accepting, and embracing 'this sucks' to help champion through challenge experiences and circumstances was a common belief of what grit meant to doctoral students.

The price of being gritty was connected when grit was placed as equal to being stubborn. Doctoral students also described grit as being stubborn or bullheaded. Although these qualities can be parsed, stubbornness was perceived as being both beneficial and negative. EdD3 stated:

According to me, it's positive. According to my wife, it's negative... I am stubborn. I know I'm stubborn, but it's kind of paid off. It's never really been that much of a negative for me. Has it offended some other people in my life? You bet. But I know some other stubborn people that offend people too. But they seem to be doing okay.

Grit also has a price when other responsibilities are considered. Using grit to accomplish goals using perseverance, perspective, and purpose can mean that priorities shift and other areas of life contend for first place. As a mother, EdD1 said:

Sometimes things have to take a back seat. I feel like sometimes my family doesn't get enough of me... Sometimes their needs have to be put on the back burner, because I have to work on my dissertation, or I have a deadline I have to meet. So it can be a negative at times when you have other responsibilities as well.

### **Doctoral Students' Perception of Grit's Influence**

Doctoral students perceived grit in positive sentiment by connecting grit to their confidence, achievements, pride, and self-satisfaction. The doctoral students' understanding of grit had recognized potential downsides of grit; however, examples and perceptions shared during the focus-group highly favored grit as a requirement for success.

Grit was connected to sustaining doctoral students during difficult times with EdD1 saying, "But it's the grit I feel like that is sustaining us to a point." Grit supports survival (or persistence) with exercising purpose and perspective-taking. Acknowledging the price of grit identifies the risks and benefits of exercising grit. With compassion, grit can help individuals,

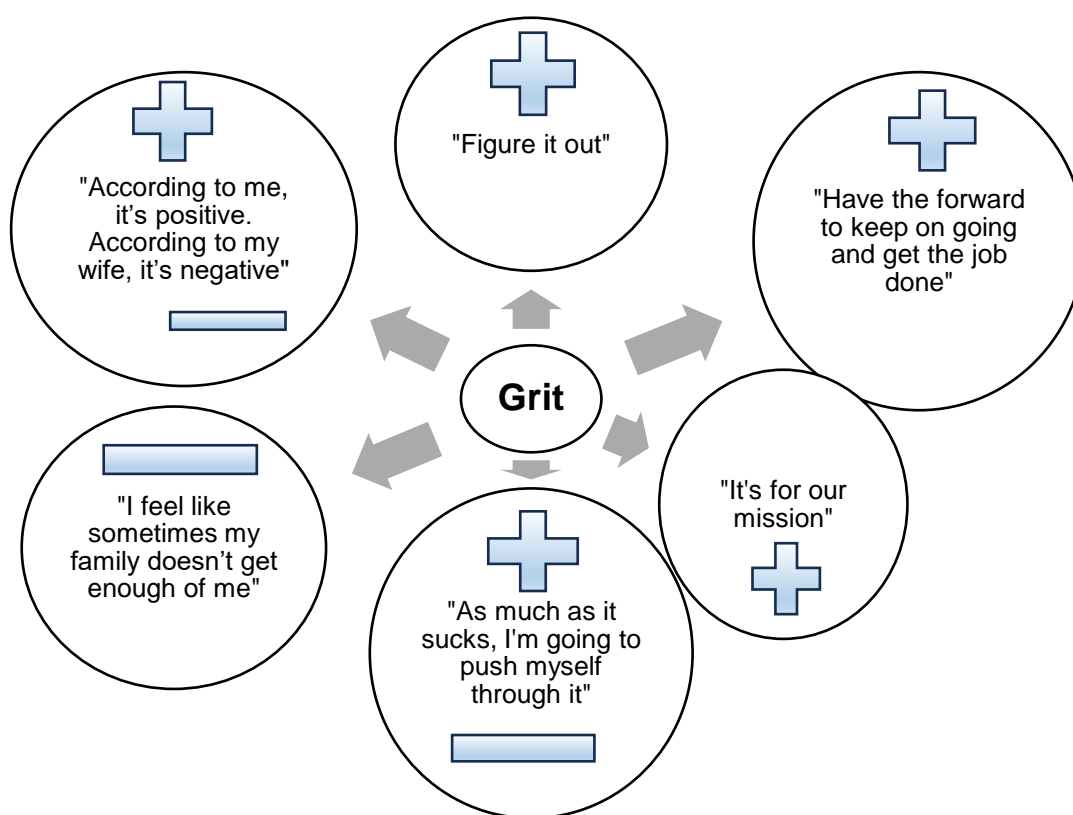


teams, and communities thrive. As a final thought and ending reflection, EdD5 added, “You know, there’s a compassion side of it too. Because even though you’re striving to get the mission done or do something, you have to do that in a compassionate way. It’s a piece of the pie.”

A concept map was created to help visualize the doctoral students’ perceptions of grit and its influences on their lives (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Concept Map: Grit’s Positive and Negative Influences Reported by Doctoral Students*



## **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore, discover, and understand doctoral students' experiences of the pandemic and to learn about their perceptions of grit. The study conducted a focus-group interview with five doctoral students who were progressing or graduated MSU's Ed.D. Program in P-20 and Community Leadership. Using phenomenological inquiry and open-ended questions, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do doctoral students experience the pandemic in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

RQ2: How do doctoral students understand their own grit and its meaning?

Sub-questions to RQ2 helped understand grit in different angles. The questions aim to provide a 360-view of grit and how this characteristic influenced doctoral students in various contexts.

RQ3: How do doctoral students perceive their own grit as positively influencing their lives in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

RQ4: How do doctoral students perceive their own grit as negatively influencing their lives in personal, professional, and academic contexts?

### **Conclusion**

The scarcity of information about doctoral students' perceptions of grit and their perceived benefits *and* drawbacks was a gap in the literature. In response, the study aimed to explore doctoral students' experiences of the pandemic, discover their perceived grit, and understand advantages and disadvantages to grit. The focus-group interview with five doctoral students generated data about their experience of the pandemic, their understanding of grit, and grit's influence on their lives.

### *Pandemic Experience*

The study's findings confirmed that negatives associated with the pandemic were consistent at the doctoral level. On a personal level, students with dual or triadic roles at home were juggling responsibilities and feeling overwhelmed. Mental health issues exacerbated stress, which resulted in decreased coping mechanisms and worsening anxiety and depression. Shifting to remote work during an uncertain time taxed doctoral students. Concerns about hiring freezes and career changes added to an unending list of unknowns. The sense of instability during the pandemic worsened with misinformation about the virus. Feelings of anger surfaced with the spread of misinformation about the virus, and an erosion of trust lead to an overall negative impact of the pandemic for doctoral students. Not only did negative effects ripple through personal, professional, and educational contexts; the pandemic transcended into doctoral students' doubts about their community, leadership, public health, and government.

Doctoral students reported increased time with family and ample time to multitask during the lockdown. A couple of students even perceived the pandemic as helpful in getting through their academic endeavors, making the program 'easy'. Available time used to accomplish readings, assignments, and research catalyzed students' progress. Time in isolation was challenging for some, which others appreciated being solitary. The mandatory social distancing and isolation provided time for doctoral students to explore personal journeys and create internal buoys that were needed for surviving the pandemic.

Exploring, discovering, and understanding doctoral students' experiences of the pandemic was supported by literature. Bal et al. (2020) quickly discovered that doctoral students shouldered burdens during COVID that were unprecedented to other pandemics in history. How doctoral students experienced 'ease' is also garnered with the advantages of technological

advances and online opportunities. The time saved and efficiency noted by doctoral students is balanced with some of the frustrations experienced with online learning such as a lack of interaction, inefficient lessons, and inability to benefit from campus resources (Biçer et al., 2021).

Without normal social support during the pandemic, doctoral students seemed to use the program and joy for learning as a buffer to the effects of the pandemic. The internet and social media were also a placeholder for resilient processes during the pandemic (Marzouki et al., 2021). The researcher believes the Ed.D. program added educational resiliency as an important tool to buffer the effects of the pandemic.

### ***Understanding Grit and its Influence***

The qualitative data analysis resulted in themes that supported students' understanding of grit: persistence, perspective, purpose, and price. Doctoral students shared their resilience, missions, attitudes, and sacrifices. The positive impact of grit was predominant. Students reported grit fueling their achievements, which is a hallmark for developing grit in human beings (Duckworth, 2018). Options to thrive were made possible with a gritty perspective. Wringing out resources (internal and external) to continue forward with hope and gratitude improved barrier endurance. Students agreed that this required grit.

The downsides of grit did not saturate the qualitative data; however, a few students mentioned their negative experiences with grit or being gritty. Offending others and putting others' needs on the backburner in pursuit of achievement were perceived harmful in personal and professional domains. Systemic barriers were mentioned as a negative side of grit, as these barriers can diminish an individual's perceived grit. Barile (2014) stated her concern with grit as creating new self-centered points of view in character and inadvertently ignoring civic

responsibility. Grit on its own cannot overcome widening disparities, food and housing insecurities, financial burdens, and complicated or abusive relationships.

The qualitative data did not fully embrace the positive, negative, or mixed influences of grit in personal, professional, and educational contexts. However, a 360-degree understanding of grit can remain as an ongoing bill for the future.

## **Discussion**

Data were collected from five doctoral students using phenomenological inquiry and IPA; thus, the method presented an analytic and reflective approach with key findings related to the pandemic. Due to the gap in literature, there were no studies that offered insight into doctoral students' experiences of the pandemic, their understanding of grit, and their perspectives of grit.

Doctoral students' memory of the pandemic was uniquely positive in ways that helped them progress and complete their doctoral studies. An explanation for this could include those students developing false positives of their pandemic memories. Gritty people tend to have positive psychology tools, such as optimism. This positive outlook on events, even tragic ones, can frame negative events with silver linings. Adjacent to optimism, doctoral students may also have a growth mindset and perceive their difficulties as teachable moments. Memories of the pandemic skewed positively could be result of grittiness, but doctoral students may have also used this as a protective mechanism.

Doctoral students' perspectives of grit were often mentioned as resilience, stubbornness, and staying the course until a goal is met. Differences did exist about its perception as function. Some students reported that grit meant "keep going" and "it can be done", and their influences orbited around self-satisfaction and pride. Other students stated grit functioned to "inspire the next generation" or influence others in a manner that was missing from their childhood and

adolescence. How grit operates within different contexts and spaces could be due to the challenges someone is exposed to during childhood. The range of participants' ages led to questioning how grit could develop differently based on attributes such as culture, age, and gender.

The study found that doctoral students experience a spectrum of feelings about challenges and setbacks. Qualitative findings support that persistence, purpose, and perspective to accept the price of achievement meant that grit was needed for basic survival and thriving. Surviving a pandemic meant the use of gritty tools to create a fertile ground for thriving. Endless hard work yielded doctoral progression and completion.

### **Methodology Bonus**

The phenomenological inquiry and focus group methodology helped doctoral students take a moment to unpack their unique pathways that brought them all to the MSU Ed.D. program during an unprecedented time. Sharing their experiences and examples of success and setbacks and verbalizing their mixed emotions about issues facilitated a 'group effect' during the interview (Maxwell, 2013). Participants took a moment to verbalize respect, inspiration, and greater insight into their collective experiences during the study. Compassion and personal growth provided an unexpected benefit to these doctoral students.

Comments that demonstrated insightful, compassionate, and supportive reflections included:

- "I just want to compliment him for going back into law enforcement."
- "I think it's so awesome to hear about and so cool to see, because I can't imagine doing it. ... With families, the fact that you all did that while going through this

process is just inspiring to me personally. So I just wanted to chime in and say,

“That’s so cool.”

- “And it just kind of hit me that they’re similar. They’re similar in the approach. And they’re similar in the goal. And that is to accomplish the mission. And for us as educators, that is to make education relevant and engaging and accurate for kids. So I just saw that similarity and thought that was kind of neat.”
- “I cannot imagine how the pandemic has affected our faculty, you know. They went into this the same as we kind of did, not knowing what was happening.”

### **Practical Significance**

Doctoral programs are determined to acknowledge and engage in key components for doctoral student success. Since doctoral completion is the highest level of educational attainment and taut with barriers to completion, it is worthy to understand a vital component of success from a students’ perspective. The study’s findings have practical significance for doctoral programs as it shares how doctoral students missed interaction and connection with cohort members and faculty. This can begin a discussion on ways to improve interaction and connection with online doctoral programs.

The qualitative data also shares how social support can help buffer stress. Synergizing doctoral students’ triadic roles would be a win-win for both the student and the program. Using this study’s findings can help programs shift to understanding what works well for some students and explore more of their ideas as what helps build resources to forge through the doctoral journey.

## **P-20 Implications**

The P-20 implications of this study centralize around the continuous learning by exploring, discovering, and understanding others' experiences and perceptions. Doctoral students' experiences of the pandemic and their perceptions of grit help create a sense of community, an understanding of impact, and synergies that balance grit on all levels.

### ***Creating a Sense of Community***

The phenomenological inquiry of the study created a sense of community among the doctoral students. Neubauer et al. (2019) poses that learning from the experiences of others is a foundational premise of research. The P-20 approach uses innovation, implementation, diversity, and leadership to support valuable learning to humans on all levels – individually and collectively; locally and globally. Thus, the study's phenomenology has a P-20 core that helps improve life and support thriving by learning and creating a sense of community.

Doctoral students voiced their desire for having a stronger sense of community during their program. Creating a sense of community in all sectors by creating dialogue can improve transparency in today's siloed industries. Furthermore, using phenomenology to understand what was experienced and how it was experienced allows more space and time for a "group effect" or "therapeutic effect" (Maxwell, 2013).

P-20 leaders committed to lifelong learning can improve the sense of community by leading their schools, organizations, industries, and communities with questions to learn about what experiences support growth and flourishing. Conversations about individual or shared experiences can build support and find ways to see or describe perspectives. Collective learning strengthens social bonds and increases social capital, leading to a better understanding of a group's impact on the entire organization.



### ***Understanding Impact***

The pandemic's impact on families, communities, economies, and politics is unfolding. The chain reactions since 2019 have devastated many individuals and sectors. Recovering from the pandemic will require a lens of bold innovation. P-20 leaders will uphold initiatives that will be beneficial to the schools, communities, businesses, and organizations they serve.

The study highlighted grit with storytelling among doctoral students in the MSU Ed.D. program. The study exercised compassionate discovery and exploration of others' experiences and perceptions, which has implications in creating free flow of information, influence, and understanding. Inclusive reflections and forward-direction change creates social support, advocacy, leadership, and policies.

A free flow of information between traditionally siloed sectors builds civic engagement and fosters grit. When this occurs simultaneously, synergy balances collaboration and creates work that is in the best interest of all parties concerned. Organizations are seeking individuals with practice doctorates, such as an Ed.D., to foster educational practice and organizational learning. Growth and resilience result from "living through" teachable moments beyond the formal educational environment. Increased understanding ensues and reduces barriers and disjunction. As sectors understand their impact on a meta level, tragedies such as a pandemic can be buffered with expertise, individuality, accountability, and responsibility.

### ***Using Grit to Create Change***

The study found that grit required persistence, purpose, perspective, and price. Doctoral students' understandings of grit and its influence noted a possible difference between individual or group grittiness. An independent focus of grit seemed to have personal negative consequences, while a collective focus of grit accomplished missions and achieved goals. These

observations, explorations, and reflections can be where future research and policies can build. Exercising collaborative grit can overcome system-level obstacles, such as money-controlled incentives and market systems, and advocate for purpose-driven practices.

### **Limitations to the Study**

The limitations of this study begin the methodology. Due to the nature of phenomenological inquiry, qualitative generalization is intended to provide value in the context of a specific site. Creswell and Creswell (2018) report that the hallmark of good qualitative research shows “particularity rather than generalizability.” Research with additional cases or case studies may be able to help generalize findings about doctoral students’ experiences of the pandemic and their perception of grit.

The study’s findings are also limited due to the rural regions where these doctoral students experienced the pandemic. Participants in this study were residing in rural locations during the pandemic. Participants stated their lockdown and early pandemic stay-at-home orders were carried out living “on the farm”, “in the country”, and in the Murray, Kentucky area. Due to this, the researcher believes the positive experiences during the pandemic could be a result of participants’ rural dwelling. Brooks et al. (2021) found that urban dwellers were more often to go unpaid or missed hours, unable to work or look for work, and overall negative labor-force impacts compared to rural areas—with the ability to work remotely being the key exception. The pandemic’s initial spread in major cities and aggressive pandemic-related would suffice in expecting that participants living in urban areas would have experiences and memories saturated with more negative experiences through all domains of life.

Doctoral students in this study were mostly in late adulthood stages of life, which contrasts to the middle adult ages compared to the NSF-reported age medians of doctoral

recipients. Given the topic of the study, the researcher was concerned that demographic data would illicit assumptions and biases in findings. Participants' own words provided context about their identification. EdD1 entered college in her mid-thirties. EdD5's example of fighting combat in Vietnam provided context into their generation. Two students (EdD3 and EdD4) mentioned their years of experience in their careers, which implied retirement-aged doctoral students. Because of the older ages of this study's focus group, perspectives, experiences, and understandings likely skewed to a generation non-representative of all doctoral students. The older ages of this study's focus group are also what makes this study unique.

The study performed recruitment from one program, the Ed.D., at MSU. While the cohorts included in this study were large in numbers and diverse in backgrounds and experiences, the participants were specializing in education and leadership. Attracting students with other professional interests and backgrounds would improve the diversity within neurocognitive context, which could result in differences in dialogue and data.

The individuals who responded to the recruitment email were interested in the topic; however, more than half of them were not able to participate in the focus-group interview. The interview was scheduled during a busy time for many doctoral students who were ending a school year. The limitations of the timeline could have dampened participation, which yielded to a lower-than-expected number of participants. The researcher expects that this study would have increased participants if conducted during the beginning or middle of a semester. With these limitations for this study, recommendations for future research follow.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the limitations of this study, the following recommendations for future research are worth considering:

1. Recruit for students who are residing in urban areas. Pandemic experiences would likely differ and could add a broad understanding of the effects of the pandemic.
2. Collaborate with other programs on MSU's campus to learn about their experiences of their doctoral journey.
3. Intentionally seek other regions, states, or nations/countries to increase diversity in experiences and perceptions.
4. Execute a focus-group interview with doctoral students at the beginning or middle of the semester instead of the end of the spring semester.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for future research are worth considering:

1. Future research should study the individuals who dropped from their doctoral program. Non-completers of a doctoral program are less represented in the research. The information and insight that could be studied in contexts of grit and its influence on life would add more breadth to doctoral student life.
2. Future research could invite doctoral students' families (chosen or biological) and support groups to understand how grit influences or affects them. Whether it be inspiration or burden, it would be intriguing to find out what they think of how grit has gotten doctoral students through the process of earning a terminal degree.
3. Future research could capture grit at the beginning and end of a doctoral program to compare and reflect on the doctoral journey.
4. Future research could implement the focus-group interview in person, if feasible. Doctoral students' feelings of disconnect or community lacking on virtual spaces

warrants offering an option for in-person focus groups. The in-person format could increase the richness and depth of qualitative data.

5. Future research could explore the positive influences of the pandemic on doctoral students, or how their doctoral program and pandemic had a mutually beneficial relationship.

Finding strategies, support, and systems that helped doctoral students persevere during a difficult time can extend into improving the resources and support for higher education institutions. Learning more about the complexities of grit can support further research and balance its concept. Insight to overcoming challenges and implementing grit-building practices can build future models that decrease unhealthy or unbalanced systems. Lastly, exploring, discovering, and understanding others' perspectives can offer pause and reflection that may become a source of healing in a post-pandemic world.

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## Appendix A

### 12- Item Grit Scale

*Directions for taking the Grit Scale: Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. For the most accurate score, when responding, think of how you compare to most people -- not just the people you know well, but most people in the world. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer honestly!*

1. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.  
     Very much like me  
     Mostly like me  
     Somewhat like me  
     Not much like me  
     Not like me at all
2. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.\*  
     Very much like me  
     Mostly like me  
     Somewhat like me  
     Not much like me  
     Not like me at all
3. My interests change from year to year.\*  
     Very much like me  
     Mostly like me  
     Somewhat like me  
     Not much like me  
     Not like me at all
4. Setbacks don't discourage me.  
     Very much like me  
     Mostly like me  
     Somewhat like me  
     Not much like me  
     Not like me at all
5. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.\*  
     Very much like me  
     Mostly like me  
     Somewhat like me  
     Not much like me  
     Not like me at all
6. I am a hard worker.  
     Very much like me  
     Mostly like me  
     Somewhat like me  
     Not much like me  
     Not like me at all



**Appendix A (continued)**

7. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.\*  
Very much like me  
Mostly like me  
Somewhat like me  
Not much like me  
Not like me at all
8. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.\*  
Very much like me  
Mostly like me  
Somewhat like me  
Not much like me  
Not like me at all
9. I finish whatever I begin.  
Very much like me  
Mostly like me  
Somewhat like me  
Not much like me  
Not like me at all
10. I have achieved a goal that took years of work.  
Very much like me  
Mostly like me  
Somewhat like me  
Not much like me  
Not like me at all
11. I become interested in new pursuits every few months.\*  
Very much like me  
Mostly like me  
Somewhat like me  
Not much like me  
Not like me at all
12. I am diligent.  
Very much like me  
Mostly like me  
Somewhat like me  
Not much like me  
Not like me at all

## Appendix A (continued)

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### Scoring:

1. For questions 1, 4, 6, 9, 10 and 12 assign the following points:  
5 = Very much like me  
4 = Mostly like me  
3 = Somewhat like me  
2 = Not much like me  
1 = Not like me at all
2. For questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 11 assign the following points:  
1 = Very much like me  
2 = Mostly like me  
3 = Somewhat like me  
4 = Not much like me  
5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 12. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

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## Appendix B



### Institutional Review Board

328 Wells Hall  
Murray, KY 42071-3318  
270-809-2916 • [msu.ibr@murraystate.edu](mailto:msu.ibr@murraystate.edu)

**TO:** Randal Wilson, Educational Studies Leadership and Counseling

**FROM:** Jonathan Baskin, IRB Coordinator *JB*

**DATE:** 4/21/2023

**RE:** Human Subjects Protocol I.D. – IRB # 23-162

The IRB has completed its review of your student's Level 1 protocol entitled *Doctoral Students' Experiences of the Pandemic and Their Perception of Grit*. After review and consideration, the IRB has determined that the research, as described in the protocol form, will be conducted in compliance with Murray State University guidelines for the protection of human participants.

**The forms and materials that have been approved for use in this research study are attached to the email containing this letter. These are the forms and materials that must be presented to the subjects. Use of any process or forms other than those approved by the IRB will be considered misconduct in research as stated in the MSU IRB Procedures and Guidelines section 20.3.**

**Your stated data collection period is from 4/21/2023 to 8/15/2023.**

If data collection extends beyond this period, please submit an Amendment to an Approved Protocol form detailing the new data collection period and the reason for the change.

**This Level 1 approval is valid until 4/20/2024.**

If data collection and analysis extends beyond this date, the research project must be reviewed as a continuation project by the IRB prior to the end of the approval period, 4/20/2024. You must reapply for IRB approval by submitting a Project Update and Closure form (available at [murraystate.edu/ibr](http://murraystate.edu/ibr)). You must allow ample time for IRB processing and decision prior to your expiration date, or your research must stop until such time that IRB approval is received. If the research project is completed by the end of the approval period, then a Project Update and Closure form must be submitted for IRB review so that your protocol may be closed. It is your responsibility to submit the appropriate paperwork in a timely manner.

The protocol is approved. You may begin data collection now.

**Opportunity  
afforded**

[murraystate.edu](http://murraystate.edu)

## Appendix C



College of Education and Human Services  
Department of Educational Studies, Leadership and Counseling  
Ed.D. in P-20 and Community Leadership  
3228 Alexander Hall  
Murray, KY 42071

### Consent Form

**Project Title:** Doctoral Students' Experiences of the Pandemic and Their Perceptions of Grit

**Student Investigator:** Josie M. Bryant (Principal Investigator)

**Faculty Sponsor:** Randy Wilson, PhD, 270-809-3168, [rwilson6@murraystate.edu](mailto:rwilson6@murraystate.edu)

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted through Murray State University. This form contains information you will need to help you decide whether to be in this research study or not. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. Please read the form carefully and ask the study team member(s) questions about anything that is not clear. If you then decide to participate in the study, please sign on the space indicated and send to the faculty sponsor, Dr. Wilson. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

- Nature and Purpose Statement:** The purpose of this study is to explore, discover, understand the perceptions of the pandemic, grit, and doctoral students' experiences in the Ed.D. P-20 and Community Leadership Program at Murray State University. The pandemic timeline will be defined from March 2020 through May 2023 and will only refer to COVID-19.
- Explanation of Procedures:** The participation in the study involves research. The experiences will include a pilot study, the focus-group interview, and an optional follow-up interview. Overall, one moderator (the principal investigator) will conduct these sessions with open-ended questions. Audio-visual content will be recorded for participants to view per request, and principal investigator's notes will be used to record data.  
**Time Commitment:** Participation in the pilot study will require 15 to 20 minutes time using remote, online (via Zoom®) video conferencing. Participation in the study, or "research" itself will require 60 to 90 minutes of time using Zoom®. An optional, follow-up focus-group interview may also be performed, which would require up to 30 minutes of time using Zoom®. These activities will be on three separate, non-consecutive business days.
- Recordings:** The study will use audio-visual recordings and transcription using Zoom® software. Recording the focus-group interview is required to enhance validity of participant comments with data analysis. Please do not enroll in the study if you do not want to be recorded.
- Discomfort and Risks:**
  - There are no known risks with participation in this study.
- Full Transparency:**
  - Using Zoom® will allow participants to use voice-only, camera-only, camera-voice combination, chat, and emoji buttons to communicate.
  - Recollection and discussion of difficult times has potential for deep and hurtful feelings that surface in dialogue.
  - Focus-group interviews cannot be controlled and predicted. Co-participants have permission to disclose information they feel is pertinent to answer questions. The principal investigator will moderate the discussion to prevent harmful dialogue; however, focus group methodology has an unpredictable direction in discussion. The caveats of risk and the unpredictability of discussion highly emotional and sensitive topics may be problematic.
- Benefits:**
  - The methodology allows for a "group effect" whereby participants learn, share, and heal from co-participants.

## Appendix C (continued)



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- b. The participation in this study could help with understanding the pandemic's implications for the organization and experience of life can move across domains of health, social and psychological contexts, and cultural learning
7. **Confidentiality:** The interview will be audio-recorded, and the researcher will keep participants' identities confidential. Please note the confidentiality between researcher and participant will be maintained, but focus groups are absent of co-participant confidentiality. While the researcher will uphold ethical practices to maintain the information privately, the information shared in the focus group is vulnerable. Knowing this, "the only ethical assurance that can be given to focus group participants is that there are few ethical assurances" (Tolich, 2009, p. 99, as cited in Sim & Waterfield, 2019).
8. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Your participation in this focus-group interview is voluntary, and you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice from the investigator.
9. **Contact Information:** Any questions about the procedures or conduct of this research should be brought to the attention of Dr. Randy Wilson at 270-809-3168 or [rwilson6@murraystate.edu](mailto:rwilson6@murraystate.edu). If you would like to know the results of this study, please contact Dr. Randy Wilson.

Your signature indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study.

The dated approval stamp on this document indicates that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the MSU IRB Coordinator at (270) 809-2916 or [msu.irb@murraystate.edu](mailto:msu.irb@murraystate.edu).

Participant's Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant) (Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Person Obtaining Consent) (Date)



Approved: 4/21/23 Expires: 4/20/24