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A Different Slant on Cohorts: Perceptions of
Professors and Special Education Doctoral Students*

Caridad H.Unzueta

Whitney Moores-Abdool

and

Dolores Vazquez Donet

Florida International University

Miami, FL

Abstract

To improve student completion rates in higher education, faculty are using cohort educational models (CEM); however, very few studies were found regarding CEMs effects in educating culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) doctoral students in the field of special education. This study investigated two questions: (a) Are there differences for students in the doctoral experience when they are part of a cohort, as differentiated from not being part of a cohort? and (b) What motivates students to continue in a cohort doctoral program, as differentiated from those continuing independently? Participants included six CLD doctoral students (three in a CEM, three not in a CEM) and three professors (attending or serving as faculty at a Carnegie-designated research extensive university in a multicultural, urban area in the southeastern USA). Researchers included three CLD female special education doctoral students (two in a CEM, one not). The qualitative case study method was used to explore perceptions of cohorts, experiences, and the effects of cohorts on participants. Findings included: (a) organizational efficiency and benefits to student learning outweigh concerns; (b) the cohort structure definitely impacts students who are pursuing their doctoral degrees independently, (c) the cohort structure impacts professors. Non-CEM doctoral students perceived their educational experiences as being very different from that of CEM students. Benefits of a CEM included inter-student support, a flexible learning model, support for CLD learners, opportunities for building trusting relationships, ease in class scheduling, and opportunity for maturation. Presence of the cohort affected the non-CEM students and professors negatively in several ways. Although CEMs are strong mechanisms for supporting students, they call for an awareness of group cohesion within cohorts to effectively engage the students in the academic process to address the retention problem of doctoral students, decrease the disparity between CEM and non-CEM students, and improve graduate studies programs.

In order to address the need to improve student completion rates in higher education, universities are grouping students pursuing the same field into learning groups or cohort educational models (CEM). A cohort is a group of students bound together by a program of study that takes the majority of coursework together (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Miller & Irby, 1999; Potthoff, Fredrickson, Batenhorst, & Tracy, 2001). As a result of the need to increase degree completion success rates, CEMs in higher education are placing students in groups, moving them through coursework together (Barnett & Cafarella, 1992). In essence, the CEM stems from extensive research in social cognition which delineates that one learns best by interacting with others and sharing experiences (John-Steiner & Mahn, 2003; Wesson, Holman, & Cox, 1996). Additionally the dynamics of group cohesion plays a major role in CEM's unity and support system.

Social cognition includes Vygotsky' theory of the *zone of proximal development*, which consists of two levels: solving problems independently and accomplishing goals by seeking the assistance of a more knowledgeable peer (John-Steiner & Mahn, 2003). Both of these levels are infused into the CEM to address students' academic needs as a result of the grouping of peers in coursework. The CEM enables students to participate in both traditional and non-traditional learning through the social process (Wesson, Holman, & Cox, 1996). Traditional learning incorporates formal instructional delivery models such as lectures; whereas non-traditional learning integrates peer-to-peer academic support systems.

CEMs' peer-to-peer academic support systems often tend to function as an entity which develops "its own personality," (Wesson, Holman, Holman, & Cox, 1996, p. 16). Contributing to the CEMs operating in this capacity is the idea of group cohesion; which is commonly discussed in therapeutic literature on group work. Festinger (1950) identifies group cohesion as the culmination of all elements causing members to maintain group membership (as cited in Toseland & Rivas, 1998). Radin and Feld (1985) define a group as a collective of individuals that exhibits these four characteristics: (a) The individuals engage in face to face interaction; (b) there are few enough of them to notice an absence; (c) they are interdependent, that is, they need one another to attain their own goals; and (d) they perceive themselves as a group. (p. 50)

Group cohesion mirrors Vygotsky's second level of the *zone of proximal development* in that social interdependence encourages individual goal achievement. The final two characteristics of interdependence and group perception convey the concept that the group exists as one unit (Radin & Feld, 1985). Social group learning and group cohesion theories provide a framework for understanding CEMs in the context of doctoral programs of study.

Rationale

Until recently the majority of CEMs have focused specifically on bachelor and master degree programs (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). With fifty percent of all doctoral students failing to complete their programs, it is no wonder that universities are now turning to CEMs to promote the retention, graduation, and success rates of students (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). University faculty members often write grants to fund CEMs; however, it is interesting to note, when the grants lose funding, the CEM often vanishes (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). This trend has been attributed to the lack of university commitment to sustain the CEMs (Barnett, et al., 2000).

While CEMs are appearing more in university doctoral programs, very few studies have been conducted on its effects in educating doctoral students in the field of special education. Even fewer have addressed culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special educational doctoral programs, in fact we have been challenged in finding any such studies.

Although educational prospects for CLD students have broadened over the years (Kelly & Prescott, 2007) and there are more undergraduate degrees earned by minority students, graduate programs have not seen the same upswing in enrollment of CLD students (Ulloa & Herrera, 2006). There exists no one reason for this disproportionality. Some believe that the lack of social integration into academia itself may be partially to blame for this discrepancy (Nettles, 1990; Ulloa & Herrera, 2006). It is imperative that the small percentage of traditionally CLD students who hurdle the challenges of accessing graduate school be supported. Research has shown that these students, and most others in graduate education programs, benefit from the CEMs in professional collaboration, academic supports, and developing personal relationships with peers (Potthoff, et al., 2001; Slater & Trowbridge,

2000; Teitel, 1997). The success of CEMs appears to be related to the extent to which cohort members support and mentor one another (Teitel, 1997).

Background for the Study

In 2003, special education faculty, in collaboration with educational leadership faculty, at a Carnegie-designated research extensive university in a multicultural, urban area in the southeastern USA, designed a CEM to address the issue of under-representation of women and CLD faculty. This was done in teacher education, as well as special education, specifically where there was an insufficient number of special education doctoral candidates, including CLD populations who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education (Smith, Pion, & Tyler, 2003; Smith, Pion, Tyler, & Gilmore, 2003). Retention studies of individuals from CLD populations indicated that peer groups and mentoring must be established early in graduate programs (Nettles, 1990). For example, among Black, Hispanic, and White doctoral students in special education programs at four major universities, Blacks received the fewest teaching or research assistantships that facilitate collaborative activities with faculty and other full-time students (Nettles, 1990).

The researchers of this study are doctoral students in a special education program in the college of education (COE) that encompasses both CEM and non-CEM members. We became interested in the CEM phenomenon as a result of our collective experiences in graduate studies. Rubin and Rubin (2005) state that "finding a topic means paying attention to ordinary events and then asking which of these interests you the most" (p. 43). One of our researchers thought of an ordinary event, taking classes with a cohort, and then began asking what about that topic was most interesting. This occurred as a result of being in a doctoral CEM for two years and meeting other students outside of the CEM who were pursuing the same degree. Our discussions brought to light the fact that we were experiencing our doctoral studies in very different ways. Curious about the CEM, we wondered how the CEM might impact students outside of the model.

Research Questions

As a result of our conversations, and our exposure to qualitative research methodology, we decided to explore CEM within the context of our collective university experiences. We studied individual students in the doctoral program of special education. We asked ourselves what the perceptions about cohorts were from the perspectives of students within and outside of the CEM. Two major questions investigated were: (a) Are there differences for students in the doctoral experience when they are part of a cohort, as differentiated from not being part of a cohort? and (b) What motivates students to continue in a cohort doctoral program, as differentiated from those continuing independently in a doctoral program? To gain more insight into CEM, we decided to interview professors involved with CEMs, as well. Professors were asked, "What are your perspectives on CEMs for graduate programs?"

Researchers and Setting

Our research team consisted of three female special education doctoral students, two of whom were enrolled in a CEM and one who was not in the CEM. Two members were of Hispanic descent and the third was of White descent and a member of a religious minority. All three were enrolled in their last semester of coursework.

Caridad was an English teacher who has taught in various private schools throughout her 11 year career. She was of Cuban descent, in her early thirties, married, and had two young children. Caridad represented two traditionally under-represented populations (Hispanics and women). Furthermore, she believed that she was a minority in other ways, as well, including not being a member of the CEM, as well as not teaching in the public school system like most of her colleagues. She had earned various degrees, including a Bachelor's Degree in mathematics education with a minor in computer science, a Master's Degree in mathematics education with a secondary education minor, and a Specialist degree in administration and leadership.

Whitney, a member of the doctoral CEM, was a white American Muslim, in her thirties, who is married with three children. Her experience included social work in both mental health and homeless support programs and four years in the public school system. She was currently an educator working with students with severe mental retardation.

Dolores was a 36 year-old married, Hispanic woman who was employed as a Library Media Specialist in an elementary school within the public school system. She considered herself a minority in regard to gender and ethnicity, and she was the only person in her family to have earned college degrees. Holding various degrees including a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education with a minor in Reading, a Master's Degree in Mathematics Education, and a Specialist Degree in Advance Teaching and Learning with a certification in Special Education, she had been an educator for thirteen years in various classroom settings, and was a nationally certified Middle Childhood Generalist.

The doctoral program was located in a large, urban, culturally diverse metropolitan area in the southeastern USA. The public university was the top producer of Hispanic graduates in the nation and the third largest producer of minority graduates. The COE at this university opened in 1972, graduated more than 24,000 individuals, and established and implemented bilingual and ESOL programs since 1977. It was the first university to develop a program in multicultural and multilingual education, and has become the model for the rest of the state's institutions. In fact, approximately 50% of all teachers in the local school district hold a degree from this university (College of Education, 2004). The COE graduates and those admitted into the COE teacher education programs include a substantial proportion of Hispanic and Black students.

The enrollment of students at this university represents a diverse community with about 52% Hispanic, 14% Black, 21% White, and three percent Asian, Indian, and other ethnicities. Enrollment of women was approximately 58% of the total student body. The representation of minority group members among financial aid recipients suggested that at least 50% of the students were members of minority groups. Black students comprised five percent of all the students receiving financial aid and received 16% of the available funds; Hispanic students comprised 40% of those receiving financial aid receiving 32% of the funds (Fact Book, 2001).

<center>Methods</center>

The researchers used a tape recorder as the recommended technique for gathering data when a study required a lengthy interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). "The one-on-one interview is a data collection process in which the researcher asks questions and records the answers from only one participant in the study at a time" (Creswell, 2005, p. 215). The interview protocol was pilot tested through mock-interviews between members of the research team; questions were subsequently revised in order to allow "the interviewee to explore these questions in depth … encouraging the interviewees to reflect, in detail, on events they have experienced" (Rubin & Rubin, p. 2). Revisions insured that all items were open-ended, elicited ideas, meanings, and perspectives that were crucial in understanding the cohort phenomenon from the participants' points of view. Revisions explored student perceptions of cohorts, their experiences as doctoral students, and the effects of cohorts on themselves. The interview protocol served merely as a guide, keeping in mind that "in qualitative research, the questions to be asked evolve during the course of the study and can differ from person to person" (Rubin & Rubin, p. 95).

The research team decided that the most thorough and efficient method of interviewing participants would be for each member to delve into a different perspective regarding cohorts. One member interviewed students within the cohort, another interviewed students not in the cohort, and the third interviewed professors. Each researcher engaged in interviews with three participants.

Participants

The first set of participants consisted of members of a doctoral cohort. These students were recruited from the population of all special education doctoral program students ($N = 16$) currently in the special education cohort at a Carnegie-designated research extensive university. The population consisted of three males and 13 females, of which 44% were Hispanic, 25% were African American, and 31% were Caucasian. The mean age was 36 and each of the students was non-traditional, meaning that each represented a minority group (racial, gender, ethnic, or religious) and held full-time jobs while enrolled in a full-time university doctoral program. Each student was randomly approached, invited, and provided with a letter of invitation to participate in the study. When a student declined to participate, another student was then asked. The three participants who agreed to participate included two female students and one male student.

Mily was a Hispanic female in her late twenties. She had earned a Bachelor's Degree in elementary education and a Master's Degree in educational leadership. Currently she was an administrator in a local public elementary school.

John was a European-born male of a religious minority in his mid forties who was married with two very young children. He currently taught within the juvenile prison system, instructing young adults who have been incarcerated. Education is his second career, as he started in the business world as a computer systems analyst. His Bachelor's Degree was in management and computer science and his Master's Degree was in the field of education.

Katherine was an African American mother in her early thirties. Her educational background was very much ingrained in special education, having received a Bachelor's Degree in mental retardation and varying exceptionalities, a Master's Degree in reading and learning disabilities, and a Specialist Degree in early childhood education. Katherine was currently working as a reading specialist in an urban setting, serving as a mentor and coach, empowering teachers with instructional strategies for literacy.

The second set of participants was recruited from the population of doctoral special education students not in the CEM, specifically eight students comprised of six females and two males; 75% were Hispanic and 25% were Caucasian. Five possible participants were located from this population based on the fact that they are or have been enrolled in classes with students in the doctoral cohort. Invitation letters were provided to each of these students. Distribution procedures did not yield any participants. After having no success, a colleague served as a gatekeeper who recommended three potential participants, of which two agreed to participate in the study. Additionally another participant was referred, yielding a research sample of three female participants; two Hispanic, one White.

Kay was a very confident, soft-spoken "29 year old Cuban-American, married to a medical student" with a one year old daughter. Kay was a product of the public school system in which she had worked in various capacities for five years. She was an Educational Specialist in the District office where she wrote grants to fund adult education programs and had earned various degrees including an Associates Degree in psychology, a Bachelor's Degree in Exceptional Student Education and Teaching English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL). Kay represented two traditionally under-represented populations: Hispanics and women.

Carla was a sarcastically humorous educator who had taught in various private schools throughout her 11 year career. Carla was of Cuban descent, in her early thirties, and married. Like Kay, she had earned various degrees, including a Bachelor's Degree in education, a Master's Degree in secondary education, and a Specialist degree in special education. She represented two traditionally under-represented populations (Hispanics and women), just like Kay.

"I am slowly crawling my way toward a Doctoral Degree," explained Alexis, a thirty-seven year old wife and mother of a toddler and an infant. She taught in a self-contained classroom for students with varying exceptionalities in a local public elementary school. Alexis was a Caucasian educator with a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education, a Master's Degree in Varying Exceptionalities, and was working her way toward her comprehensive exams "one class at a time." During our introduction in the library media center in the school where she worked, red-haired Alexis affirmed, "I definitely come from underrepresented populations. I am a woman, I am a White person in a multicultural society, I speak only English in a multilingual community, and I teach varying exceptionalities, a rare position in the school system."

As mentioned previously, in order to broaden the perspective of the CEM, professors were also included. Three professors from the (COE) were chosen as the participants for the third strand of our study. These were professors who have either overseen cohort programs, or who have been in doctoral cohorts were recruited from this site, as well. The sample included three females, of which two were Caucasian (one member of a religious minority) and one was African American.

Dr. F was currently an associate professor in her sixth year at her current university. She had a background in special education, teaching English to speakers of other languages, and a Master's Degree in early childhood. Prior to her professorship, she worked in a large metropolitan multi-ethnic high school. In her current position, she had taught at the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral level. She had also written many grants, and currently managed four grants with cohorts in addition to her teaching responsibilities.

Dr. P had a Bachelor's Degree in specific learning disabilities, a Master's Degree in varying exceptionalities, a Specialist Degree in reading and learning disabilities, and a PhD in education with specialization in exceptional student education. She taught in the public school system for six year at the middle and high school levels before becoming an assistant professor for three years.

Dr. S. was from a traditional special education perspective with a doctorate degree in educational psychology and a Master's Degree in special education with a specialization in single subject design. She currently worked with local schools within the public school system, implementing field tests to demonstrate that classroom teachers, with support, could successfully integrate students with disabilities. In addition to her teaching responsibilities at the university, she served on several international boards that are working toward unifying special education with global education.

Each professor taught at the graduate or undergraduate level, and had experience in the Kindergarten through Grade 12 public school system at some time in their careers. Two interviews were conducted in the COE offices, and one participant agreed to engage in an interview in her home.

A consent form approved by the university institutional review board was provided and signed by each participant. Participants' privacy would be honored (personally identifying information would not be shared) and pseudonyms would be used in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. The consent form outlined the time commitment, and how the information would be used. Participants were informed that active participation in the study was required, their answers would be kept confidential, and that participation was completely voluntary with an option to withdraw at any time if they so desired.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Doctoral students and professors who directed, instructed, or participated in doctoral level programs were interviewed. Each participant engaged in a one-hour open ended interview session to gain insight into the cohort phenomenon. Each interview was tape-recorded to transcription purposes.

After audio tape-recording the interviews, we transcribed the interviews, and coded them for themes. "Transcripts are the main data of many interview studies" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 129). Transcripts were emailed to the participants for accuracy in what was stated and transcribed, as well as for permission for disclosure (Merriam, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Sharing transcriptions is one way to honor the informants' privacy, allowing them to delete any information they do not want revealed. Sharing transcriptions is also a way to demonstrate transparency and commitment as researchers by adhering to the terms of our agreement; the participants confirmed that the data had not been distorted in any way (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition, we peer reviewed each others' transcriptions to ensure accuracy (Merriam, 2002). Researchers maintained reflective journals throughout this process to supplement the interviews.

Grounded theory was used (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) to analyze the data and find emerging themes where "the concepts and themes must emerge from the data without the use of the literature" (p. 221-222). Through the use of "open coding, that is, coding as you go along," (p. 222) we developed the main themes as we went along, probing the next participant in the specific topics that arose from previous interviews. This approach involved looking for themes and concepts without using the literature, then making a list of what emerged (Rubin & Rubin, 2007). We created graphic organizers (Figures 1 and 2) of the themes that resulted from the coding categories in order to sort through the information, a critical step in data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Coding resulted in some duplication of themes that had emerged from the literature review, as well as an emergence of fresh themes unique to the participants.

Literature Review

Searching for relevant literature, we first conducted a keyword search for cohorts, cohorts in graduate studies and cohorts in education using WilsonWeb and American Psychological Association (APA) psychNET. Initial search results were too large; therefore we narrowed the scope to doctoral students in cohorts. Later searches within electronic ERIC archives and dissertation abstracts included keyword searches on cohorts and doctoral students. Articles that defined cohort as a large group of students not necessarily pursuing the same degree or those

that described cohorts in therapeutic or medical research were excluded from our literature review. Themes that emerged from the literature were compared to our coded themes that emerged from our analysis of the participants' interviews.

Findings

Presentation of our findings is divided into three sections: CEM member themes, non-member themes, and professors' view points.

CEM Members-"Within a cohort you have almost like a family type experience."
Huey, (as cited in Potthoff et al., 2001) stated that there were eight dimensions which define the CEM: (a) the social interaction; (b) the common mission; (c) the group and individual learning; (d) cohesiveness; (e) collaboration; (f) academic success; (g) interaction with professors; and (h) retention. This definition was evident in our conversations with John, Mily, and Katherine (pseudonyms for the CEM students who participated in the study). Their views illuminated and expanded Huey's definition. The three major themes that emerged from their conversations were (a) the CEM is a family and problems inherent in any family; (b) the facilitation of studies; and (c) the desire to incorporate the professors, themselves, into the notion of family.

First, social interaction, cohesiveness, common mission and collaboration are all commonalities among the interviewees. Group cohesiveness may be attributed to interdependence of students in the cohort to, in turn, meet their individual goals (Radin & Felds, 1985). The group of individuals is "coming together for a common goal," states Mily, a Hispanic member of the CEM. This common goal or "bond" as John calls it brings a new element, namely family, into Heuy's definition. The CEM becomes more than just a group; it is a collective of individuals that acts as a family to support each other's personal and academic needs. Inter-related into the notion of family is Vygotsky' second level of *zone of proximal development* where members accomplish goals by seeking help from more knowledgeable peers.

Prior research studies have found the term "family" as a sub theme in their research for describing this tighter bond (Potthoff et al., 2001; Wesson et al., 1996). However since all three participants in this portion of the study continually referred to each other as family members, we deemed it a major theme, not a sub theme. "Within a cohort you have almost like a family type experience," says Mily. Mily again refers to the cohort as a family stating, "I think you get a feel of closeness, like almost as if you have your own family within the cohort." Katherine, a Black doctoral student in the cohort, feels that cohorts allow you to have a "family bond that you can create knowing that you have someone there with you." In comparing the CEM to other models, Katherine feels "It's a little more close knit so it still is more of a family as opposed to you are just the recipient of this scholarship and you are in this group and you will take classes together."

Like all newly-formed families, members of this cohort have experienced an adjustment period, which had occurred during a time span where they were all still getting to know each other and did not want to say too much in order not to offend or enrage anyone. As Mily explained:

> In the beginning, everybody is tip-toeing around each other, and, you know. Somebody still doesn't want to say something because you don't want to offend somebody else. But, I think that once you have gotten to that point where maybe you have to duke it out with somebody in the sense that you have had words, you understand where they are coming from. Or once you understand who people are, you actually had that chance to build that bond with them.

Apart from the adjustment period, members in this cohort feel that their group is not as cohesive as they would like to see it. John points out that "forced integration is not necessarily, you know, happening." As Katherine stated:

> To a certain degree, I think smaller cliques have been created in the cohort. And what I mean by cliques is that, you know, you tend to get along better with some people based on whether it's where you live or who you work well with or, you know, just who you get along with in conversation. And, but. I think for the most part, everyone supports one another to a certain degree because we can be critical of one another but not get upset. We know we are all working toward the same goal. So, in the end, everyone is pretty much supportive.

The other two participants expressed similar views regarding cliques within the cohort, but stated that, in the end, all members provided support when necessary. Mily phrased it best by saying, "But even for those, I guess that I'm not as close to, you can still count on them. You're having a bad day, they will still encourage you on." Despite the adjustment periods and the cohort-within-a-cohort or clique phenomenon, the "family" pushes through and all help each other. "We all gotta be supporting each other to make it to the finish line," stated John. This concept is supported by the research of Miller and Irby (1999) who reported that cohort educational models provide empathy, support, and solidarity.

Academic success and student retention within the cohort are tied to motivation for these participants. All three participants have multiple academic degrees and attribute their success to intrinsic motivation. John sees it as "the improvement of the self and well, the intellectual conquest."

However, with all of the students holding full-time jobs and supporting themselves and their families, motivation to complete the degree is not accomplished alone. "Before it was just me, and I had the time to do it and I had the energy. But now with work and the kids and the family, the doc program, it is proving to be challenging," stated Katherine. Being in the cohort gives an extra push when they are feeling overwhelmed. Not wanting to let the group down or be last in the group helped motivate Katherine to finish tasks. This type of positive competition helped maintain the academic success. The family atmosphere also stopped many from quitting. Knowing that they were all going through the same process together allowed them to be mutually supportive.

Another theme mentioned by the CEM participants that was not mentioned in depth in the literature is the ease with which these doctoral students navigated the university system. The program offered many supports to a student in the CEM that were not offered to the non CEM students. The first support for the CEM student was that their schooling was for the most part funded by a federal grant and their programs of study followed a pre-determined course of study. Additionally a university staff member registered them for their classes and often their class materials were pre-prepared. Classes were scheduled around the student's work schedule and often the same professors taught multiple classes which created more familiarity with the faculty. If the CEM had classes with professors outside of their department, those professors were made aware that a cohort would be attending their class. By doing so, CEM students reported fewer worries about financing their education, registration and other clerical tasks, and thus could concentrate more on the programs of study.

Although all of the above does help to make their academic lives easier, the supports also restricted some possibilities for expansion and growth. For example, Mily had mentioned that being with the same group of students for all classes limits her interactions and stunts the growth of knowledge that one acquires from outside sources. Since all of the coursework is pre-planned, students in the CEM do not have the option to explore different paths in the minor cognate. This limits their individual learning and experiences to that is preset in the program of study.

Barnett et al. (2000) wrote about the positive impact that the professors of CEM have on its members as it relates to faculty advisement, teaching assignments and faculty-student relationships. When speaking to the participants, mixed feelings about their professors' active roles in their academic learning emerged. Katherine expressed a value for the ability to be able to mingle with other members of the cohort and the professors at the professors' homes. Katherine felt that the professors were there for them when it comes to help in their coursework:

> They will meet us outside of their normal office hours because of our work hours, schedule, children, all of that stuff. There are a lot of times that they will give us their cell numbers. So I think they are very flexible in meeting our needs as well.

However, as she felt the dissertation nearing, she believed that "that's an area where I don't feel that I've been trained. And I am hoping with our last few courses they nip that in the bud." Mily stated. "Yes. We are adults and yes, we have successful jobs and we have our family, but it doesn't feel like they are as involved and really care if we pass or not unless it starts to reflect on them."

Non-CEM Members—"I have to remind my advisor that I exist."
Conversations from three non-CEM participants (Kay, Carla, and Alexis) revealed different themes. Three themes emerged from the interviews of the three non CEM participants in this portion of the study. The themes

included (a) self motivation of doctoral students, (b) CEM privileges, (c) feelings of isolation as a result of not being in the CEM.

The first theme dealt with brief data which indicated that the participants view all students seeking a doctoral degree as self-motivated and prone to take initiative in different circumstances. Kay described how she took initiative and asked a professor to allow her to collaborate on a study: "That was something I showed interest in and the professors allowed me to become a part of. I was able to work with young adults and assist them with literacy skills." Carla proudly shared how she sought out academic support. She stated, "the academic support was … not necessarily readily offered … seeking support did not come easily to me. I had to hustle and learn to go and ask for the help I needed."

The second theme delineated what non CEM participants perceived as privileges gained by CEM students as a result of being part of the CEM. The participants' responses referred to attention and support from professors, which is directly in line with the reference to the group support and encouragement provided by CEMs (Dorn & Papkewis, 1997). Carla felt that if she were within a cohort like some of her friends, she would receive:

> … a lot of attention from the university professors. I've heard that they allow students to develop a support system while they pursue their studies … I would think that students would want to join a cohort in order to have others to collaborate with on projects and research, study groups. Students and professors know and help meet the needs of everyone in the cohort.

Kay added, "Every class I am in contains a cohort. They take classes together and get their hands held every step of the way," while Alexis interjects, "the faculty knows each student by name, what classes they are taking, and even what their areas of interest are."

Two of the doctoral students working independently commented on how the cohort was a closely knit group where all were working toward the same goal. This reflection echoed Miller and Irby (1999), who found that cohort models of learning provide empathy, support, and camaraderie to the students throughout their coursework. Kay felt that the students in the cohort "all seem to be best friends. In a cohort, when you encounter a problem or an injustice, you have a group of people to support you." Carla went even further when she commented on cliques within the cohort, which seemed to have an adverse effect by limiting the sense of cohesion within the cohort. "Although I only had one class with some of them, it's evident that there are several little cliques that monopolize discussion and are chosen to do everything." Kay added, "There are groups of people who think one way or another and continuously monopolize conversations or discussions."

Disadvantages of CEMs were also revealed by two of the three participants. Their ideas were aligned to those shared by Barnett et al. (2000), who stated that the CEM often burdens doctoral students with an inflexible program structure, requiring a full load of classes for students who are employed full-time, and limiting them to the points of view and dispositions of the small group comprised of the members of the cohort. Kay illustrates this idea with her statement:

> The people in the cohort have to take whatever they are registered to take. If the university registers them for 15 credits, it was never taking into account what the student needed or could handle. I have seen a couple of people leave the program or be constantly sick because of all this … The students in the cohort are at the mercy of the university and the grant for how many and what classes they take.

She added, "The cohorts do seem a bit whiney to me and I think I would get tired of hearing complaints from the same people if I were in one." Carla emphasized,
> I have one friend in the cohort and she explained that the program of study is already laid out. Courses are pre-determined and they have to adhere to that. I have more flexibility in what courses and areas of interest I pursue.

She delved into the idea of being limited by having the same peers throughout the course of study, when she stated:

It would be limiting in the way that I would be working with the same people course after course, so I already know what their philosophies are and I won't be hearing other points of views. I would only be exposed to the same points of views course after course by being exposed to only the same group of people.

The non-CEM participants' perspectives included the notion that CEM students benefit from clerical and registration responsibilities being taken care of for them by the university. In contrast non CEM students interviewed for this study experienced a lot of anxiety related to the university procedures, which as Miller and Irby (1999) pointed out, could have negative effects and increase anxiety on doctoral students. Demonstrating the frustration that non CEM students feel from not having the same type of support system as CEM students, Carla shared, "I've had a couple of friends in cohorts, and they've stated that they are guided in what they need to study. They are told exactly what courses they must take." Kay elaborates on this theme when she states that the students in the cohort "get walked through what they need to do."

In contrast, the non-CEM participants seemed to experience quite the opposite; drowning in frustration each time they were faced with registering for classes. Alexis clenched her fist and stated, "I get so mad. I have waited two semesters before to get a class I needed." "Not only has it been difficult to register for classes but I've been told to hold off on classes and then asked why didn't you take it? … I have to fight for things. I have to get overrides and beg professors to let me in," Kay pointed out.

The theme of having university supports was not experienced by the non CEM participants. In fact, their experiences were in complete contrast to that of the members of the CEM. The effects of the cohort on the participants in the study included faculty were perceived to be more concerned with CEM students, giving them preferential treatment, which resulted in a lack of professional opportunities for the non-CEM students. Kay describes an instance when she was able to guest lecture in classes, share presentations, and write collaborative papers for conferences simply because she sought out the collaboration of a member of the cohort. She stated:

I do see preferential treatment. The cohort gets picked to go to conferences and speak or to go work on a project. It's a bit unjust. I mean, I am paying my way. I am doing the same work. I am available, showing interest in these things. I push and push and push to get into a class to be able to give a lecture to get in to do presentations. I have become really close friends with some people in the cohort, which I would have done anyway. With them, I have been able to write papers, to go to conferences. I have even had to get information from students in the cohort that I never get … I do not get inside info on when conferences are coming up or when I should begin certain steps. I have to remind my advisor that I exist.

Kay revealed that sometimes, there is preferential treatment even within the cohort, sharing that some of her friends never get opportunities to engage in such leadership opportunities. Carla stated, "The teacher I work with that is in the cohort shared that she has never been asked to have these leadership experiences. She has asked and asked, but she is pigeon-holed into one of her areas of interest, so she is not taken into consideration for any opportunities. I really never did, either."

Alexis felt that she did not get any attention at all. "Getting someone in the college to connect me to my advisor so that I may ask a question is a mission, let alone getting an appointment to sit down with him." Kay's experiences follow the same vein:

Everyone is just so concerned about the grants and the cohorts that it is the paying isolated students that don't get much attention. I just think that the professors write grants for cohorts. Part of this type of university is the importance placed on the professors bringing in money through grants, awards. So naturally, I think they pay attention more to the cohorts and the programs that bring large amounts of money to the school. They are in their best interest … So they really don't pay much attention to me.

Another aspect of the perception of how the CEM impacts the participants in the study was a lack of attention and guidance from the university faculty. The non-CEM participants reveal this as being very evident, especially when it comes to advising. Kay felt like just another student because the faculty did not get to know her or her needs:

No one has been a guiding light for me in this. No one has been a real mentor like I expected. I do things on my own and make decisions based on my judgment. I just kind of plod through it. I find it negative that no one knows where I am in my program, and when I take a class out of order, they seem upset, but I had no choice because I feel that if I don't take something when it is offered, I may lose my chance for another year.

Carla added, "It was difficult to navigate these processes that were so new without support."

Students not in the cohort focused on the overwhelming feeling of neglect and isolation caused by the actions of the members of the cohort, as well as the faculty. Kay described one of her experiences this way:

…there are jealousies when students in the cohort befriend or partner up with non cohort students. Like I said, it's like a union or club and maybe they feel that other students from this union or club shouldn't interact with me. Overall they are very nice. Some treat me like I am a stranger or do not belong. I feel isolated sometimes … I am constantly being a stranger in an established group. I was already in classes and then the cohort comes in and I'm a minority or a stranger.

Alexis laughingly stated, "Since I am going at a snail's pace and take classes here and there, nobody knows I exist. I am not a familiar face, so I don't automatically get chosen as a partner and that type of thing." Barnett and Muse (1993) and Hill (1995) found that students not in the CEM felt as if they had a lower status than those in the CEM because they were not a part of the already established group (as cited in Barnett et al., 2000).

Professors' Viewpoints—"Each cohort takes on its own personality."
We held conversational interviews with three professors (Dr. P, Dr. F, and Dr. S). The interviews with university professors revealed two major themes: benefits and challenges. The benefit theme included the following sub-themes: (a) the cohort as an entity; (b) relationships in cohorts; (c) supports for CLD students and non-traditional learners; and (d) professor recommendations for students and faculty.

Often, because of the social dynamics at work in a cohort, "the cohort will develop a 'collective voice' that is significantly more powerful than a classroom made up of individual voices," (Potthoff et al., 2001, p. 40). During our conversation with Dr. P, we learned she had experienced a cohort model in her own doctoral preparation program. Dr. P spoke about the social dynamics and collective voice phenomenon in regard to an instructor that her cohort felt was inappropriate on racial issues and was ineffective in her instruction. She commented on this situation, reflecting on the power and voice present in her cohort:

So basically we wanted some change on who was in transitioning courses or something. And we felt she was unsatisfactory, and we thought she was inappropriate. The strategies were ineffective; we just had a litany of problems with the professor. And so it was based mainly I think, on our race and culture. So me and two other colleagues, and the cohort people of color went to the department chair. We garnered support from our other colleagues in the cohort and we expressed our dissatisfaction with the instructor. And so basically we wanted some changes and change did happen as a result. I don't know if that kind of thing would have happened with one student, you know…Because I trusted the people in the cohort, and I think because that people got directly involved, we had a common bond and it helped strengthen the ability to do something.

Dr. S spoke of her personal experience of unity and being in a cohort in her undergraduate degree:

I was with a very tightly knit group of dedicated faculty and students who wanted to prove that they could successfully pass all the classes … You learned to work and take classes with and from literally intensive study groups where we studied in the library together….

All of the professors described group dynamics and the unity of the CEMs. Each one alluded to the development of a personality unique to each CEM they encountered. Dr F commented:

…you just feel that each cohort kinda has a different personality. I've had groups that just seem to be better cohorts than others. I don't know if it's the quality of the students of the group, or the way that they form

their thoughts, or just ya know left it to not, it's almost like each produces a different personality. Each cohort takes on its own personality, well then of course within each cohort you have students that are stronger than others.

Describing the same experience, Dr. P stated:

Because the cohort is so strong, it's like they feed off each other its like sometimes if you're not even there it would probably be okay because they would just go. Like they have a rhythm about them and you would have to just jump in and see where you fit.

Frequently we are drawn to those with similar backgrounds and interests, how does this apply to the development of relationships in CEMs? The students' common goal of obtaining a specific degree or the purposeful planning of university administrators may be contributing factors to the formation of CEMs in graduate education (Culpepper, 2004; Potthoff, et al., 2001; Slater & Trowbridge, 2000; Wesson, et al., 1996). Relationship building and group development are non-linear processes which evolve over time (Toseland & Rivas, 1998). Each individual cohort member may experience different rates of relationship building as a result of their unique personal characteristics. Dr. S stated:

I think for me I've really grown because starting out in a cohort in my undergrad program just based on my experiences growing up, I was very weary of white students. I had a roommate, a white roommate, for my first time and her first time ever seeing a black person, so it was tough. So when I went to my first cohort I was very weary of my colleagues and not very trusting.

Dr. P mentioned that colleagues assisted each other on personal levels:

Ya know, saying stay in there, it's gonna be okay. I know some of our people [graduate students in CEM] will watch each others' children when they work on assignments. Or they'll get together and help each other, give them a ride, if their car is broken down. Ya know, all of these things, when you have students that are at risk for not being a typical college student who could easily stay in the program.

Abilities of students to develop relationships in cohorts may be influenced by their cultural identity and ability to negotiate cultures that may vary from their own. Two of the professors interviewed indicated that they believed that CEMs afforded non-traditional and CLD students supports that traditional educational models did not offer. Non-traditional students were characterized by Dr. F as "people who are going back to school after a few years you know …. The typical college student is not what it was twenty years ago, and that's why I think we need different approaches." Typical college students were recent high school graduates, whereas the non-traditional students were characterized as students who may be working full time with a family. CLD students differed from the "predominant European American, middle-class, 'mainstream' culture," (Ormrod, 2006, p. 105) in that they may originate from a different country, speak a language other than English, or be in a different socio-economic class (Ormrod, 2006).

Research has shown that these students, and many others in graduate education programs, benefit from the CEM in professional collaboration, academic supports, and developing personal relationships with peers (Potthoff, et al., 2001; Slater & Trowbridge, 2000; Teitel, 1997). Dr. F stated:

In this particular case, it has been found effective for culturally diverse learners that have other issues that might come up as they're going through their program. And that has been documented in their research, as well and certainly at [this institution] we have many students who would be considered culturally and linguistically diverse … And you know, getting to certain course content, so that's been shown to be effective. And also for people who aren't the typical college student. Like most of ours aren't, most of them are working full-time; maybe they're married have a family, [they have] lives outside of school.

CLD and non-traditional students may benefit from the CEM. The professors we interviewed said they benefited from this model as well. Dr F stated, "I think because they are in a cohort, we might meet them more in groups, in comparison to someone who's not part of the cohort, that come in one by one to take care of them." Programming and course scheduling are positively affected by the CEM (Barnett et al., 2000). Dr. P stated,

And also I think, from a kind of you know, administrative perspective, I think when you have cohorts, people come into your programs, it is easier to manage advising. It's easier to manage getting them services and resources because there all at the same place at the same time, so you can pretty much offer up all kinds of resources.

While the professors we interviewed enumerated a high number of items under the positive theme, they mentioned some challenges in regard to the CEM. The three sub-themes that represent challenges were: (a) difficulties for students and professors, (b) racial and cultural issues, and (c) cohort-within-a-cohort, or clique.

Norton (1995) reported that the CEM may amplify the advisement load a professor carries and create discord among those who are not involved in the cohort program (as cited in Barnett, et al., 2000). Only one of the professors we interviewed for the study mentioned concerns about workload. It was in no way presented as a criticism of any department or faculty, but merely referred to as a challenge.

The dilemma for the doctoral cohort is that there are a limited number of faculty members qualified to sit on dissertation committees. However there is a large group of students that will be completing their comprehensive exams at roughly the same time in need of dissertation committees. Here is how Dr. F described her experience of this challenge:

> Yeah, everybody needs to stretch a little bit. We're just going to have to figure out a way to bring in some other departments, to bring some urban education staff to become involved. And the expertise of people in other areas of the college. So we can't do it all ourselves and, up until this point, my partner and I have been doing it by ourselves for the cohort. It's probably not going to be an option when we get to that level. Now, the only negative thing about having those students together, is because the dissertation is so labor intensive, and it's wow, you know [giggle]. I wish we could take three each year.

Another challenge Dr. P experienced is the daunting task of teaching a cohort who had already established group norms and relationships among its members. One study noted that "some expressed the feeling of a family atmosphere; others stated they felt like there were all in it together on equal footing and that leaders evolved as the need for leadership developed" (Wesson, et al., 1996, p. 14). While this is seen as positive for the students in the cohort, those on the outside, like non CEM students and faculty, may feel somewhat uncomfortable encountering this initially. In our study, some professors expressed feeling like outsiders when teaching students in a CEM, reflecting what non CEM students have expressed (Barnett, et al. 2000). Dr P stated,

> It's really been difficult dealing with cohorts, especially coming in as an instructor and they're already in established groups. It's that they've already established norms; they've already established a rapport among each other. And you're coming in as the outsider. And so again, it takes time for them to feel you out and for them to accept you as a visitor into their cohort.

According to the professors we interviewed, another challenge is when a student in a cohort gets out of the course sequence from the group. "Inflexible structure may restrict students' options and their ability to enter and finish programs" (Barnett et al., 2000, p.273). This finding was echoed by two of the professors we interviewed for this study. The outlook on this type of inflexibility varied on whether it was perceived as affecting the students or the professors. Dr P felt that it was somewhat unjust to the students that they were not allowed to do anything out of sequence saying:

> One thing that I found in my undergrad program and my doctoral program with a cohort is that there is not a lot of flexibility for people who kind of want to do their own thing… For example in my doctoral program, there were courses that I had already taken in my specialist program. I would have had to take them again. I wanted to kind of do an independent study.

Looking at the same problem, Dr. F found students getting out of sequence to be somewhat difficult for her personally as a professor because of the pressures on her to have students perform, as per the requirements of the federal grants she was running. She described her experience this way:

Well, I mean it affects a few things when you're dealing with the grant. Because you have a student who's falling behind a cohort, and then you start to worry if the student is going to finish the program with the grant. And if not, it looks bad for me to go back and report back to the grant. And then also we have a student who we wasted all this money on, and were responsible for finishing this program, and if they don't finish I feel as if we should have wasted money on a student who could have actually finished the program…It shows bad on us as the project directors, trying to find another possible student to be a substitute. Especially at the doctoral level, when we don't offer all the same courses every semester. And even every year, it just becomes tricky.

Professors noted that in addition to the inflexibility of the CEM for those students who get out of sequence, there were sometimes issues of race and culture that if not addressed adequately, eat into the heart of a cohort. Since cohorts generally spend a few years together going through coursework, this type of educational model is ideal for the discussion of diversity issues, including but not limited to race, class, ethnicity, gender identity, and social class differences (Wesson, et al., 1996). Diverse groups generally take longer to develop group culture (Toseland & Rivas, 1998). Failure to address these issues could contribute to the development of cliques within a CEM. Two of the professors interviewed discussed this challenge.

One professor expressed concern that many professors in higher education are not aware of the fact that they may lack knowledge or experience in addressing cultural diversity. Another professor felt that in general, not by any mal-intent, but by sheer ignorance, professors might perpetuate institutional racism due to their ignorance regarding the matter. In response to a question on the cultural competency of faculty in higher education Dr. P stated,

So I think it's just something that we don't really address in terms of faculty development because it' so touchy. I think people are just not there yet. And I think it will have to come from administration, we are all starting an examination of where we are in terms of cultural competence whether you're an expert, or whether you're a novice, we are all going to go through this as a faculty because it's important.

Dr. S spoke about the self-segregation of colleagues in the university and the attitudes toward cultural competence:

It's almost like if you don't know that you are not inter-culturally competent, you aren't going to try to become culturally competent. If you don't know, what you don't know, you have to have somebody tell you, you have to have a confrontation, you have to kind of, even a transformational experience.

Dr. S mentioned the issue of cultural diversity and described an informal conversation with another professor of color who works at a prestigious university in the northwest part of the United States. Due to the hostile and indifferent environment students of color were experiencing at her university, a predominantly Anglo-dominated area, she was reluctant to even continue recruiting students of color. This was what Dr. P reported that a professor of color at another university told her:

I don't know if I can conscientiously recruit any more graduate students of color out to [northwest US town]. They're just being systematically excluded,' and Tom heard her say that and he said 'Well Lisa, let's figure out how to confront that with the faculty, that's a faculty problem, that's not a recruitment problem.' And she said, 'Well I just don't know how fair it is to bring people out to an environment that's going to be so, socially hostile.' And that therein, here she was, she was recruited to go out there and she was feeling lonely and isolated. So we don't know this unless people can tell us, and then how do we systematically set up processes that will allow us to change the dynamics that makes it less hostile?

Dr. P echoed similar feelings of isolation as well:

Because they had never had a black faculty member before, I was the first and I was young. Compared to other people in my programs, I was the youngest in my department … So things were very different….

Dr. P also shared that when she lived in a northern mid-western town, she found that the same cohort who had issues with her, later had a group of Native American students added to their cohort. The Native American students eventually complained to the department chair because they were being systematically excluded from

informal social activities within the cohort. The new students, in essence, resorted to forming a clique, which Dr. P referred to as a cohort-within-a-cohort. She describes her experience this way:

> My first cohort was all white, and the second semester we got Native American students who were all on the grant and it was like a cohort-within-a-cohort. They joined the cohort but they were still left to each other pretty much…That was the first time it had been done, so it was new…And the white students to me I mean having me as their instructor was big but having a group of Native Americans in our class to where they had talked about culture or race in class before it was always the case…I think that it kind of changed things…So there were some things we had to get used to; some social dynamics that were at play. So that put a different slant on cohorts, and always that outsider kind of thing I experienced, too.

Dr. P offered recommendations for increasing cultural competence and reducing the likelihood of the clique phenomenon from occurring.

> I think when I look back on the experience with my Native American students, I think that they could prepare cohorts in advance, like before you even take a class like on the first day. The emphasis is on getting to know each other, team building activities, which we typically don't do on the first day. We do ice breakers and what's your neighbor's, that kind of superficial stuff. I think it's also if you have a preexisting group to prepare them for the fact that, especially if they get a full another group within a group, prepare them for the fact that there are going to encounter differences. And what does that mean to you? And looking at the cultural backgrounds of the students and how that might change the dynamic of the class. Same thing we would do if we had a student with a disability going into a general ed class. You have to prepare the class. It's not like we're going to talk about the fact that this kid has Autism, but we're going to prepare you for the things that could happen, and what does that mean to you?

Quality and Credibility

In an effort to conduct this study in an ethical manner, internal validity and reliability were fortified through the use of peer review (Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and studying the CEM from different perspectives. The trustworthiness of the research was enhanced through the use of detailed descriptions, which are supported by participant quotes. No ethical dilemmas in regard to collection of data and the dissemination of findings emerged in this study. The description of the study revealed its purpose to the participants. Additionally, it described how we addressed consent and privacy protection; both of which are critical factors addressed by Merriam (2002).

Reciprocity (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) is evident in our research relationship with our participants which are described throughout our study in our openness and development of empathic attitudes toward our participants. Continuous member checking allowed opportunities for the participants to provide feedback on the content and interpretation of the data. The peer review process allowed us to do the same. Both processes increased validity. The discussion of the data is extensively corroborated and supported through the use of a number of quotes substantiating and providing examples of themes and ideas emerging from the study.

Conclusions

The findings suggest several conclusions regarding perceptions about CEMs: (a) organizational efficiency and benefits to student learning outweigh concerns; (b) the cohort structure definitely impacts students who are pursuing their doctoral degrees independently; (c) the cohort structure impacts professors. As shown in Table 1, and displayed in the overlapping Venn diagram in Figure 1, There are distinct advantages afforded to members of cohorts, as revealed by each of the nine subjects. The unity, or family type atmosphere, creates a positive learning environment where all are working toward achieving the same goal. In this regard, each CEM participant described how colleagues motivated them and provided support for studying, understanding material, and completing the doctoral degree program. Professors elaborated, explaining that benefits of a CEM included inter-student support, flexible learning model, support for CLD learners, opportunities for building trusting relationships, ease in class scheduling, and an opportunity for student maturation.
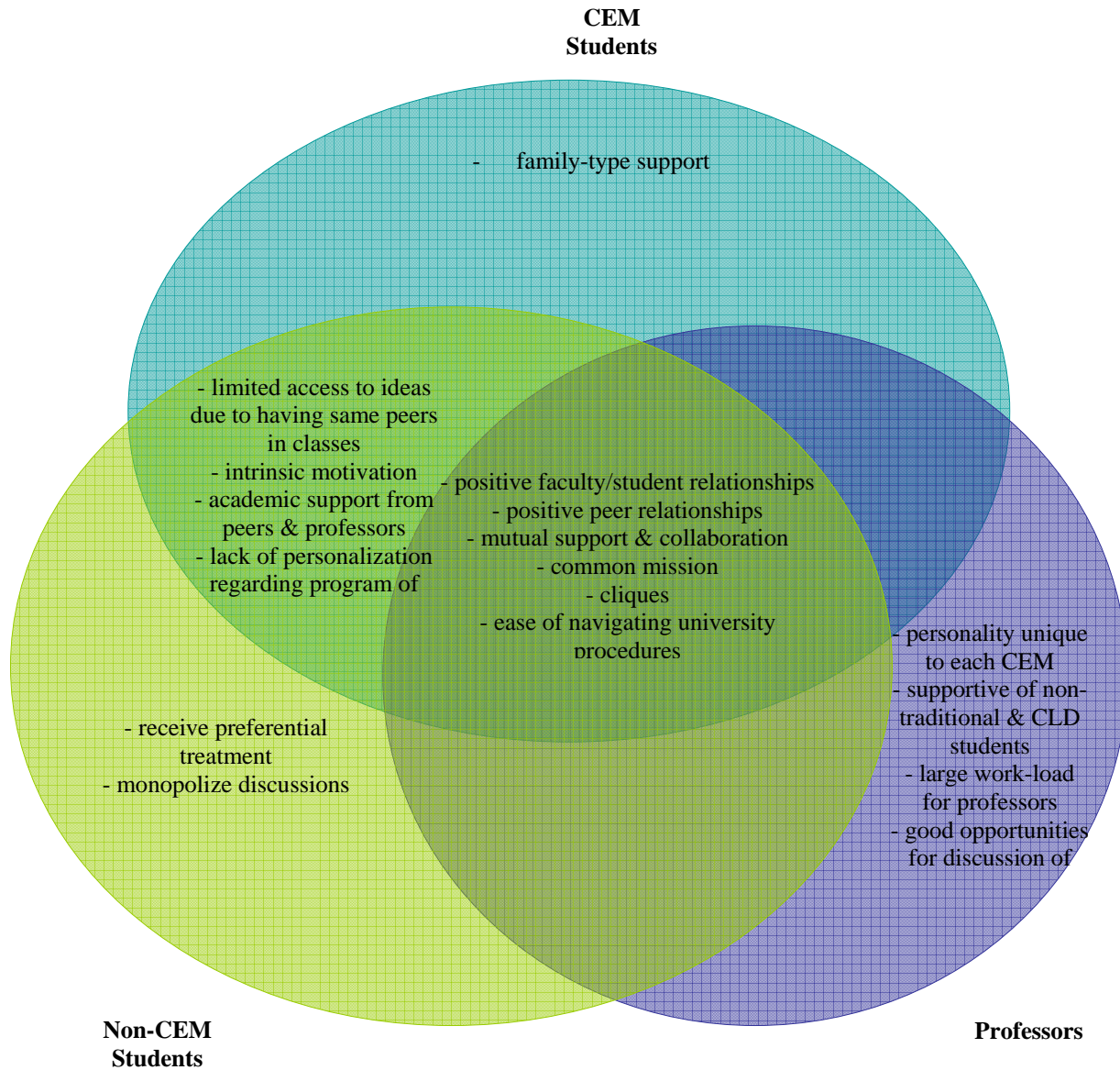
In contrast, the doctoral students not in the cohort supported this perception. They shared an overwhelming feeling of neglect, emphasized that the members of the cohort receive most of the university's attention. They realized that they did not have the academic opportunities to (a) pursue proposals for conference papers, (b) co-author manuscripts for publication, and (c) serve as guest lecturers for university courses. Taking this into account, the issue of preferential treatment, although evident in the differences between students in cohorts and those pursuing their degrees independently, is an issue that is shared by both groups of students.

Table 1: Effect of Cohorts on Doctoral Students and Professors

Professors' Experience:	CEM Students' Experience:	Non-CEM Students Experience:
• positive faculty – student relationships • mutual support • common mission • burden on work load and time • difficulty in scheduling courses & keeping students in the same sequence of classes • ease in accessing CEM students for dissemination of information or advising • opportunities for engaging in discussion about diversity issues	• positive faculty-student relationships (but some are less involved unless negatively reflected upon by students) • positive peer relationships • cohesiveness & solidarity • family-type support • cliques • intrinsic motivation • ease of navigating university procedures (registration, class scheduling, financing) • limited exposure to ideas due to sharing classes with same peers • learning limited by inflexible, pre-set classes (but is also a positive aspect of CEM (pre-determined classes)) • academic guidance	• isolation from CEM students • lack of attention from professors (due to time constraints and obligation (financial & otherwise) to CEM students) • lack of academic guidance & support • cliques • less opportunities for professional growth (presenting at conferences, co-teaching, co-authoring, etc.) than CEM students • intrinsic motivation • difficulty in navigating university procedures • more flexibility in guiding own program of study

Doctoral students outside the cohort perceived their educational experiences as being very different from that of students pursuing their degrees within a cohort. Figure 1 shows the similarities and differences in perceptions about cohorts among the three groups (CEM, non-CEM, and professors).

Figure 1: Similarities and Differences – Perceptions about Cohorts

**CEM
Students**

- family-type support

- limited access to ideas
due to having same peers
in classes
- intrinsic motivation
- academic support from
peers & professors
- lack of personalization
regarding program of

- positive faculty/student relationships
- positive peer relationships
- mutual support & collaboration
- common mission
- cliques
- ease of navigating university
procedures

- personality unique
to each CEM
- supportive of non-
traditional & CLD
students
- large work-load
for professors
- good opportunities
for discussion of

- receive preferential
treatment
- monopolize discussions

**Non-CEM
Students**

Professors

Doctoral students within a cohort reported benefits from organizational efficiency including pre-determined courses, pre-registration into classes, faculty guidance, and opportunities for leadership roles, even though some of these benefits were viewed as challenges at the same time. This study provides support for research based on the social notion that close collaboration and reinforcement that develops between doctoral students and faculty in CEMs improves task completion.

We emphasize that both the cohort and non-cohort doctoral students were motivated intrinsically to continue in the doctoral program in special education. They also shared motivating factors such as family support and goals to obtain a doctoral degree. A key notion is revealed here, though, emphasizing that, while cohorts

traditionally provide unity, a family type atmosphere, and a positive learning environment, students not in CEMs manage to achieve the same things by seeking our their own support networks with colleagues.

The data also points to the perception that the presence of the cohort affected the non-cohort doctoral students negatively in several ways. Each of the non-CEM participants elaborated on how they felt the university faculty attended to and guided the members of the cohort in more comprehensive ways than the faculty guided them. They reported perceptions that the university neglected them, and that, within the classrooms, their ideas were stifled. More specifically, the non-CEM students felt that CEM students received preferential treatment and were provided more opportunities. They felt that the CEM students monopolized discussions in classes. They often felt isolated.

Definite challenges for CEM students were also revealed. Challenges for CEM students included limited exposure to ideas due to being enrolled in courses with the same group of people repeatedly and stifling students who wish to pursue other areas of interest due to a predetermined program of study. Professor participants provided a completely unique perspective that is, in essence, a completely new dimension of this study. Aside from providing data that supports the benefits of CEMs, the professors shared how cohorts impacted their own lived experiences. Just as some students felt isolated by students in the CEM, many professors felt this way, as well, describing how they felt almost as outsiders when first instructing courses in which the cohort was enrolled. The cohort already has an established set of group norms and relationships among its members. While this is a positive aspect of CEMs, non-CEM students and professors felt challenged in encountering this dynamic. Penetrating the protective shell a cohort builds around itself is a challenge for both professors and students outside of the cohort.

Even though course scheduling and the provision of resources are more easily achieved for a cohort, this sometimes has a negative effect on the professors. Participants related that it is a much greater workload to be an advisor for such a large group of students (cohort) at one time, serving as an obstacle for one-on-one, personalized advising for students not members of the CEMs.

Implications for Further Study

Here to now, cohort studies have focused on the benefit to students in the cohort. Very little was known on the effect cohorts have on those students in the same major who are not a part of the cohort. The voices of the professors who develop the university cohort models have been relatively silent in the literature, as well. This study supports the findings that CEMs can serve as strong mechanisms for supporting all types of students. These models make the lives of all involved both easier and more difficult at times—easier when it comes to tasks such as studying, group projects, advising, and course planning and second, more difficult when it comes to allowing for flexibility in courses, development of cliques in the CEM, isolation of non CEM students and professors, finding dissertation committees and meeting the needs of dichotomous groups of students. Keeping this in mind, COEs should carefully consider the impact of CEMs on non CEM students and the professors who teach the CEMs.

As evidenced by the findings of this study, more investigation is warranted to identify the role of the professors in the CEM. This model of instruction calls for a different type of teaching from the professor, one that has not yet been clearly defined, but that must address the needs of CLD students. The needs of the cohort as a whole are different from the individual needs of doctoral students. This model of instruction calls for an awareness of group cohesion within cohorts to effectively engage the students in the academic process. Understanding this need could help address the retention problem of doctoral students and improve graduate studies programs. Based on the literature review conducted for this study, there appears to be sparse data on the perceptions of professors regarding the CEM.

Further studies should be conducted on the clique phenomenon. Is it the fact that the students in the cohort each tend to work within groups made up of people like themselves (minority, same ideas and philosophies, work habits), or is it just a coincidence that this particular cohort experienced the smaller groups from within not seen in other studies? Our contention is that increased knowledge on CLD students and biases must be addressed to adequately meet the needs of the CEM members at its inception to avoid cliques and negative interactions. Additionally, when it comes to addressing CLD we should ask: "What do professors perceive can be done to increase the success rate of CLD students in CEMs in graduate programs across the country?"

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol
**Interview Protocol: The Perspectives of Doctoral Students from Traditionally
Under-Represented Populations and Professors on Cohorts for Cohort Study**

Whitney Moores-Abdool
Caridad H.Unzueta
Dolores Vazquez Donet

Questions for Professors
- Please share a little bit about yourself, your educational background, and professional experience.
- Please describe your experiences with cohorts.
- What do you feel are positive aspects of cohorts for students?
- Please share with me what you perceive to be difficult or challenging aspects of a cohort for students.
- What are some of the challenges students in the cohort have expressed to you?
- How are the needs and professional goals of individual students in a cohort met?
- What do you feel may be the limitations of a cohort, if any?
- Is there anything else you would like to share that I did not ask?

Questions for Students in a Cohort
- Would you please tell me a little bit about yourself, your educational background, and professional experience?
- Would you define what a cohort means to you?
- Please tell me a bit about how you heard about the cohort you are part of and how you first became interested in it.
- Please describe your current educational experiences in a cohort.
- Please share what you feel the positive experiences are for you in the cohort.
- Please describe any negative experiences or limitations you have encountered as part of a cohort.
- What do you think makes students want to join a cohort?
- Describe how you think the cohort has supported you to continue your studies.
- What other factors motivate you to continue your program of study?
- Is the cohort program paying for your studies?
- How have your courses trained you for the dissertation process (formal IRB process, not just course projects)?
- How has the cohort program prepared you to meet your professional goals?
- Is there anything else you would like to share that I did not ask?

Questions for Students Not Participating in a Cohort
- Please tell me a little bit about yourself, your educational background, and professional experience.
- Please describe your current educational experiences in a doctoral program.
- What are some of the positive experiences you have had throughout your doctoral program?
- Please describe any negative experiences or limitations you have encountered in your program.
- Describe how you think the university has supported you to continue your studies.
- What other factors motivate you to continue your program of study?
- How have your courses trained you for the dissertation process (formal IRB process, not just course projects)?
- How has the program prepared you to meet your professional goals?
- How are you financing your studies?
- What have you heard about cohorts?
- What are your perceptions of what students receive as part of a cohort? What do you think makes students want to join a cohort?
- Please share some of your experiences in courses in which your colleagues are part of a cohort.
- Please share some of what you perceive are differences between you pursuing your degree independently and those pursuing theirs as part of a cohort.
- Is there anything else you would like to share that I did not ask?