

# Pressing On: Persistence Through A Doctoral Cohort Program In Education

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## ABSTRACT

*The focus of this research was to investigate the characteristics that led to persistence in a doctoral cohort program of study. The significance of this study is to provide insights into the specific aspects of the individuals that made them successful in an intensive program. A phenomenological case study approach, utilizing a comprehensive interview format, was used to gain a profound understanding of the phenomenon. The case for this study was the three-year Instructional Management and Leadership (IML) research doctoral cohort program at Robert Morris University. Nine graduates from Cohort I, II, and III served as participants. The four characteristics that were revealed in this study were Commitment/Discipline, Putting the Doctorate First, Prefer to Work Independently and Research Alone, and Full-time Employment.*

**Keywords:** Intrinsic Motivation; Extrinsic Motivation; Characteristics; Cohort Model

## INTRODUCTION

In the United States the pursuit of higher education is held in high regard, most notably doctoral study. However, doctoral attrition in American higher education continues to be a significant problem with attrition rates ranging anywhere from 30% to 50% for doctoral study. This serious problem in the academic world approaches 50% in some disciplines (McAlpine and Norton, 2006, p. 3). When a student decides not to continue in the program, not only is it a poor allocation of resources for the university, but it is a loss of time and money for the student. A variety of both personal and professional reasons related to the academic experience may have led to students either dropping out of the program or becoming designated as All-But-Dissertation (ABD), meaning that the student has completed all the required coursework but never finished his/her dissertation. Burnett (1999) notes possible reasons for students not completing a program - personality factors, motivational factors, financial burden, family obligations, and feelings of isolation. This has led to the current examination of various aspects of doctoral programs, including the designing of the cohort model. While it is important to look at the varying models of education that universities have developed to meet the needs of the student, it is also essential to examine the specific aspects of the adult learners that enable them to persist in doctoral study.

The cohort model is the more recent delivery method of doctoral education. This type of academic program enables students to progress through their studies as a collective group. Cohort programs are designed where the members have the same series of classes and are taught by the same faculty members. In general, cohorts consist of a small group of students with the goal of working together and providing support to one another throughout this process. While a change in the formatting of doctoral study has occurred by moving to a cohort model, Erickson, Howard, Borland Jr., and Baker (2004) argue that even though cohort models are more accessible to the students, completion rates are possibly worse than the traditional model because changing only the delivery strategies alone does not address student needs. By uncovering the characteristics of graduates within this study, the researcher will be able to determine the specific qualities of individuals that were successful in a doctoral cohort study. The rationale is that the university can use these findings as criteria when considering applicants for admission into a doctoral cohort program in education. Matching the traits of the graduates that made them successful with those of potential candidates of the doctoral program may meet the goal of reducing attrition.

A key aspect of this research focuses on adult learning. Andragogy refers to the strategies used to help adults learn. Knowles (1973) stresses the difference in needs and motivations specific to adult learners. A more

recent addition of Knowles' text focused on six principles of andragogy: "1) the need to know, 2) the learner's self-concept, 3) the role of the learner's experience, 4) readiness to learn, 5) orientation to learning, and 6) motivation" (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2005, p. 64). The strength of these core principles is that they apply to all adult learning situations and when andragogy is adapted to the uniqueness of the learners, it works best (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 1998, p. 3). The theory of andragogy is essential in this research because adults' persistence to learn, specifically in doctoral study, will be affected if the learning is not consistent with these six principles.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

When the concept that adults and children learn differently was introduced in the United States in the 1970's, this was not only considered a groundbreaking idea but was very controversial and resulted in much research on the topic (Knowles; Holton, III; and Swanson, 2005). At the time, much of the research in the field of education centered on instruction as it related to adolescents, but having the attention drawn to studying adults was new. The exploration of adult learning as a separate entity brought about a fresh segment of research. In this literature review, research on aspects of the learner will be discussed and an overview of the cohort model of education will be provided.

### **Key Facets of the Adult Learner**

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) focused on three key areas that distinguish adult learning - the learner, the context, and the learning process. When referring to the learner, "the experiences of adults have always been viewed as a critical component of learning in adulthood" (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). This common aspect of the literature incorporates the fact that adults, due to age, have more lived experiences than children and these experiences can be integrated into their learning and education. Consistent with this is Knowles; Holton, III; and Swanson's (2005) third assumption of the learner - the role of the learners' experience. However, one critical piece is that educators must assist adult learners to learn from and utilize their experiences - a concept known as reflective practice (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Reflective practice helps learners use their experience to make judgments about complex and indistinct problems (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). While adults' experiences are a major factor in their learning, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) recognize that past experiences can be an obstacle for new learning in that adults may have to unlearn negative attitudes about learning and old ways of doing things, as well as prejudicial views. While past experiences provide a basis for learning, these aspects may also hinder it.

The importance of context is relevant to learning because it relates to the circumstances surrounding a situation. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) specify two dimensions of context - interactive and structural. The interactive dimension recognizes that learning occurs through interaction within a context and that an adult's life situations are vastly different than children's (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). These differences have a direct effect on learning. Adults generally have full-time roles and responsibilities and voluntarily add the role of learner, whereas learning for children is compulsory (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

The second dimension of context - structural - makes reference to factors such as race, class, power, gender, and diversity as playing a role in adult learning (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). It is important to know about adult learners, specifically "we need to know the background and experiences of our learners, as individual learners, but also as members of social and culturally constructed groups, such as women and men; poor, middle-class, and rich; and black, white, and brown" (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

The last focus area of the learner mentioned by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) is the learning process which refers to how one acquires skills and knowledge. There are a variety of different methods of learning, some examples of which are visual, kinesthetic, and auditory. Visual learners learn best when given written material or pictures and images. Kinesthetic learners need hands-on experiences with touch or movement, while auditory learners gain knowledge through listening and group discussions. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) note two factors in processing that affect adult learning, speed and meaningfulness. Speed focuses on the time it takes to examine and respond to a problem, while meaningfulness refers to something having significance or value to an individual (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). According to Merriam and Cafferella (1999), "adults are not inclined to engage in learning unless it is meaningful." This idea of meaningfulness is consistent with Knowles; Holton, III; and

Swanson's (2005) concept of adult learners' "need to know." Adults want to know that what they will be learning will be beneficial in meeting a need prior to investing energy into learning.

Merriam (2001) sums the approaches to adult learning by stating that adult learners are seen as holistic and the adults' experiences, memories, and conscious and sub-conscious worlds interact with learning; the learning process is seen as making sense of our lives; and the context of learning has a profound impact on learning.

### **Benefits and Barriers in Adult Education**

Ritt (2008) argues that one key benefit of a college education is the long-term earning potential but notes other benefits, such as increased productivity, contributions to a professional field or discipline, community service activities, and involvement in political issues. While these benefits are widely accepted as contributing to one's well-being, progress still has not been made in educating more citizens and developing the intellectual assets to invigorate the nation's workforce (Ritt, 2008, p. 12).

According to Ritt (2008), "barriers that exist for adult students that make returning to college difficult or impossible to pursue may come in the form of personal, professional, and institutional" (Ritt, 2008, p. 14). Also noted is that at least one of these barriers will have to be overcome by a majority of the students (Ritt, 2008, p. 14).

Personal barriers relate to an adult's personal life and financial ability. Ritt details the following personal barriers: geography, family commitments, work schedules, family schedules, previous experience with education that imposed fear, childcare and financial limitations (Ritt, 2008, p. 14).

Professional barriers are related to the workplace (Ritt, 2008, p. 14). Examples of professional barriers would be individuals not receiving release time to attend school, no financial assistance from the workplace, and difficulty justifying schooling if it is not required for one's position at work (Ritt, 2008, p. 14).

Obstacles that occur from the school itself are deemed institutional barriers. The high cost of continuing education and limited or no access to schools diminishes an adult's ability to attend college (Ritt, 2008, p. 14). These barriers are considered outside the adult educator's influence (Ritt, 2008, p. 14). "From 1995 to 2005, average tuition and fees at private four-year colleges and universities rose 36% after adjustment for inflation" (Ritt, 2008, p. 14). Lovitts and Nelson (2000) state that the lowest participation levels are students who receive no financial support and these students also have the greatest risk of withdrawing if they do decide to participate in a program of study. In addition to adults' responsibilities to their families, the significant increases in tuition and fees have led many to reconsider their financial ability to continue their education.

### **Recommendations for Overcoming Obstacles**

While there are a substantial number of barriers that prevent adults from seeking higher education, suggestions to overcome these hindrances have been implemented. Ritt (2008) details six recommendations for addressing the barriers to adult education: 1) policymaking initiatives, 2) financial considerations, 3) web site strategies, 4) degree mapping, 5) credit transfer policies, and 6) credit for prior learning. Initiatives, such as allowing veterans a greater period of time to complete a degree, the Lifelong Learning Accounts Act, which enables adults to save monies for their education, deferred employer tuition reimbursement, and creating clear course paths that encourages degree completion, would be examples of the possible recommendations to address the barriers to adult higher education (Ritt, 2008, p. 15).

Specific to doctoral students, Lovitts and Nelson's (2000) research shows "a high correlation between integration into a department's social and professional life (becoming part of a community) and successful completion of the Ph.D." Therefore, by adult students assimilating into the graduate community, this may be one possibility for overcoming barriers. It is also noted that graduate faculty play a substantial role in student persistence and departure and "the single most important factor in student decisions to continue or withdraw is the relationship with a faculty advisor" (Lovitts and Nelson, 2000, p. 48).

In relation to this research, it is imperative to remember these various facets of adult learning because it will play a large role when discussing the characteristics that enabled one to persist in doctoral study. Though the focus of this study is on adult learning and motivation, it is specifically concerned with adults who were members of a cohort model of doctoral study.

### **Cohort Model**

Doctoral students do not persist to complete their degrees for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons mentioned in the literature focuses on the feeling of isolation that students have while in a program. While some of these reasons are out of the control of the university, Burnett (1999) believes that the feeling of isolation, especially during the dissertation phase of a doctoral program, may be minimized by a provision of support through a cohort model. A cohort is a small group of learners who complete a program of study as a single unit (Lawrence, 2002, p. 83). According to Wisker, Robinson, and Shacham (2007):

*The use of cohorts enables group-work, sharing of ideas, and supportive development. This is built into the workshops and continued throughout the period of the research and afterwards. Self-help groups and critical friendships are bonded during the workshop program and remain supportive during and after the research. Specifically, cohorts help participants in relation to motivation, maintaining momentum, commenting on work in progress, providing critiques of developing and final drafts of writing, and providing support toward vivas. (p. 309)*

The thought behind the cohort model for a doctoral program is that students can work together and create a supportive network. This network enables students to generate ideas collectively and collaborate with one another with the hopes of reducing the feeling of isolation. According to Bentley, Zhao, Reames, and Reed (2004), the philosophy of a cohort is dissimilar when compared to a traditional program in that there are no defined roles such as teacher, student, and mentor, but all members of the cohort fill these roles at different times. Not only is the philosophy different from a traditional program, the concept of a cohort is, at times, hard to express. Just as one would expect in society regarding the establishment of a community, Lawrence (2002) believes this occurs within a cohort in that a group with a common goal does not automatically produce a community; it needs to develop over time where people get to know one another and develop respect for other's skills. "Once the community has formed, strong bonds develop." (Lawrence, 2002, p. 84) After this occurs, collaborative learning will take place where students and teachers engage in joint inquiry by sharing ideas and experiences which fosters dialogue from multiple perspectives (Lawrence, 2002, p. 85). This idea of a community is one way to visualize a cohort. Another view of a cohort can be summed up as "the cohort is not just a class, it is a relationship" (Bentley, Zhao, Reames, and Reed, 2004, p. 44).

### **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of doctoral cohorts by discovering the unique characteristics of the individuals who have graduated from a doctoral cohort model in the field of education. The guiding question for this research was, "What are the characteristics of doctoral cohort graduates in education?"

#### **Research Design**

The methodology for this study was qualitative, with the design being a phenomenological case study. This qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the subjects and the traits that led them to persist in a doctoral cohort program. The case was Robert Morris University's Instructional Management and Leadership (IML) doctoral cohort program in the field of education.

#### **Research Sample**

The total population was 27 graduates, with a sample population of nine participants from Cohorts I, II, and III. These specific individuals were chosen as key informants due to their intimate knowledge of the doctoral cohort and potential willingness to share this information with the researcher. The director and several faculty members of the program were asked to narrow the total population based on their knowledge of the individuals, thus ensuring

consistency with the impetuses for this study. This was accomplished by the researcher meeting with IML faculty and discussing each of the members of the total population in detail to determine the participants. The demographics of the participants were seven females and two males, ranging in age from 31 to 55 years old, and three of the informants were African American while six were Caucasian.

### **Interview Protocol**

Data for this study were collected through an interview protocol which was conducted via face-to-face and phone interviews. This protocol was used for a larger study; however, the specific data related to the characteristics of the individuals was used for this article.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The interviews were recorded in addition to the researcher taking notes during the interview. All interviews were then typed into separate documents. The transcription was read through while being compared to the Audacity recording of the interviews to ensure that no pieces were missed during transcription and to hear emergent threads not visible in the reading. In order to validate the data, the researcher hand-coded all of the information using attribute, descriptive, In Vivo, and pattern coding methods. In Vivo coding involves reading through the interview transcripts and searching for key words/phrases that have been emphasized vocally by the participant; the researcher then applies a code to these terms, thus making it stand out (Saldana, 2009). Reliability of the data was attained by having a peer-debriefer review all typed transcripts. For this study, major themes constituted participant responses of 67% or greater. The researcher believes that this percentage represents a significant portion of responses in order to be considered a major theme of the data.

## **RESULTS**

This study examined the phenomenon of doctoral cohorts by uncovering the unique characteristics of individuals who have graduated from this model within the field of education. The specific research question used for this study was, “What are the characteristics of doctoral cohort graduates in education?” The four emergent themes were: 1) Commitment/Discipline, 2) Putting the Doctorate First, 3) Prefer to Work Independently and Research Alone, and 4) Full-time Employment.

### **Commitment/Discipline**

Of all the characteristics discussed by the participants, the concepts of commitment and discipline were the most widely discovered in the results. A variety of terms, such as determined, focused, and a slang term - “stick-with-it-ness” - were used interchangeably by the informants, along with commitment and discipline. These characteristics imply that an individual needs to have the ability to continue with the doctoral program even when it proves highly challenging. According to this study’s data, these two characteristics of an individual work in tandem in order for students to be successful in finishing the doctoral program and that various obstacles need to be overcome to be successful. Examples of such obstacles would be practicum requirement and the comprehensive exam, in addition to the required coursework, leading to the pinnacle dissertation:

*I would say that of some personal traits that you would have to have, number one - you would have to be dedicated. This is a commitment. I think that it’s really important that you read over what the program is going to require. And that dedication, you have to make a plan. If you tell yourself “I want to pursue a PhD”, then you have to sit down and you really have to make a plan. I have to make a plan, and I’m a person who likes to plan, so I would plan well ahead of every activity that we had to do. (Participant D)*

These statements by Participant D are very telling. This respondent mentioned planning several times throughout the interview, thus showing the discipline to sit down and plan one’s future. Planning is required not just at the initial stage of applying to a doctoral program, but throughout the program, as mentioned regarding the coursework.

The ability of the cohort members not to quit the program under the challenging conditions was deemed as a requirement of a person who wants to pursue and accomplish this degree. Participants noted these traits during the interview. Participant F stressed:

*I believe you have to be really disciplined; that is, you really have to have that 'stick-to-it-ness.' You have to be determined to not quit regardless. You have to put in the effort you need to put in as far as keeping up with the work. That's one of the things that I think makes people fall out - not keeping up with the work; not liking a challenge.*

A fellow participant expanded on the idea of passion by stating that it needs to be a component when choosing one's preference in the type of program. The Instructional Management and Leadership program encompasses aspects from the fields of education and business, implying that in order for one to be committed and disciplined, the individual must be passionate about the program in which he/she had chosen to participate in for their studies.

### **Putting the Doctorate First**

The notion of setting priorities was a common theme among the respondents - in particular, the ability to make the doctoral program one's top priority. This required much understanding from family members and friends due to the time constraints of being a doctoral student. Participant F stated:

*You have to take this on when you can focus, and if you have a family, you have to make sure they are supportive and on board. My husband was fantastic for three years because whenever... I'm not cooking today, I'm not able to do this, he was for it, and he went to Plan B. So if you've got other external factors that would affect your success here, I would suggest don't do it until that's all cleared.*

These sentiments illustrate that one must be able to set aside current commitments and make the doctorate one's primary focus. This is also a positive example of support; however, some did not have this type of support and it affected their personal relationships. "I found I would have to say 80% of my family and friends were against what I was doing", one respondent disclosed. This finding exposes the fact that even though this informant did not have the support she would have liked, she still had the ability to place the doctoral program as a top priority amongst the adversity. This ability can also be referenced back to the previous theme of commitment and discipline.

In addition to support, the sadness felt from missing their children's events and distance in marital bonds were mentioned as a strain that occurred for some participants due to the long hours and time commitment required for the doctoral program. "While I was working on my doctorate, I missed a lot of important events with my kids...broke my heart that I missed the event", was a regret mentioned by one informant.

From the various responses, it was evident to the researcher that pursuing the doctorate took precedence over all aspects of one's personal and professional life in order to be successful in completing the degree. The data showed that sacrifices were made in order for the participants to accomplish this goal, including long hours and time away from family.

### **Prefer to Work Independently and Research Alone**

Considering that the Instructional Management and Leadership doctoral program is structured as a cohort-model, it was surprising to discover that the majority of participants' preference is to work independently and perform research by themselves. One would assume that since the graduates chose to be members of a cohort, which focuses on collaboration and creating a sense of community with ideas being fostered collectively, the respondents would prefer to work as a team; but this was not the case. It is important to note that the data revealed that this was the respondents' preference; however, they have the capacity to work in a group if required; it is just when given a choice that they prefer working alone. As confirmed by a respondent, "I am a person who works alone; not that I can't work on a team."

Participant A concurred:

*I'm a person who prefers somewhat of a tight control. I would rather do it on my own or under the guidance perhaps of one other more experienced person or with one other person as opposed to a group - just a personal preference. Truthfully, I'm a little bit more of a lone wolf person.*

The findings showed that there was not much elaboration on the interview responses regarding working independently. It was just a personal preference of the respondents to be on their own when conducting research. The respondents seemed to not be able to directly pinpoint a reason. However, the ability to complete the task and go in the direction that he/she preferred was given as a reason to work alone by one informant: "On my own because I go off on tangents; so I prefer, I can do it faster and more in depth by myself."

It is apparent that while the cohort members liked to have their classmates to rely on if needed, the preference regarding conducting research would be for it to be a solo endeavor. It appears as though the cohort members can act as a safety net to one another. These findings show that the members became a source of encouragement and a reliable sounding board if there was an area of confusion; however, a large portion of the respondents noted their preference of working alone.

### **Full-time Employment**

The final characteristic discovered during this research was that the majority of respondents were employed full-time while pursuing the doctorate. One individual was unemployed due to a layoff during the first course in the program. This revealed that the IML program is structured such that students can attend school while continuing with their current employment. This aspect was very important to the participants due to the fact that they had already established lives and could not enroll in a program that was consistent with the structure of a traditional doctoral program. Traditional programs generally require full-time enrollment and attendance during regular business hours. By being employed full-time, this added another dynamic to the participant's obligations because not only were they a full-time employee, they would couple this with doctoral study. This requires the individual to be able to manage a balance between work and school in addition to family commitments. Participant G relayed:

*That was another factor - I wasn't willing to give up my day job, if you will, to complete my educational goal at the time; so basically, those were the things that really influenced my decision. I also wanted to look at what type of opportunity was out there for me in terms of earning a PhD. What would that mean for me? What is the return on my investment?*

The results reveal a few of the reasons for cohort members enrolling in a program where they could remain employed full-time - financial reasons, such as supporting their families and paying for the doctorate, and not wanting to lose their current achieved positions. One participant discussed other programs she had reviewed prior to deciding on the IML program - "They would give you a stipend except that it was not enough to cover my living expenses; so that was out of the question." These results convey the fact that while many wanted to acquire the doctorate in order to move to higher-level positions, they did not want to leave their present career which they had worked hard to attain. To be successful, these informants were able to find a balance between working full-time, having family responsibilities, and completing a rigorous course load.

### **DISCUSSION**

Humans are complex beings with a variety of different traits. In turn, it is important to determine which characteristics made the students persist in doctoral study. The four themes revealed in this study that answer the research question, "What are the characteristics of doctoral cohort graduates in education?" are: 1) Commitment/Discipline, 2) Putting the Doctorate First, 3) Prefer to Work Independently and Research Alone, and 4) Full-time Employment.

**Commitment/Discipline**

When respondents were given the scenario to pretend that they were talking with someone who was considering pursuing doctoral study, they were asked what personal characteristics were most important to their success. The responses of commitment and discipline were intertwined as a key characteristic for doctoral students. Interpreting the meaning of these responses revealed that having these traits - commitment and discipline - was integral to overcome various obstacles. From the research, one significant obstacle noted by Ali and Kohun was isolation. According to Ali and Kohun (2006), isolation is considered a contributing factor to the high attrition rate within doctoral programs; students can get confused by the requirements and have insufficient communication. This concept of isolation may occur throughout doctoral study, especially during the dissertation phase. This is due to the fact that, even though students will have a dissertation committee to discuss ideas and receive recommendations, the individuals must complete the writing and the research as a solo project. Lovitts and Nelson (2000) express that the relationship between the student and the faculty advisor plays a significant role in a student's decision to persist or withdrawal from a program. However, even though one can get support from an advisor, the dissertation phase can take months or sometimes years to complete, which amounts to a substantial amount of time alone. The researcher concludes that commitment and discipline are imperative for overcoming the feeling of isolation for several reasons.

First, the individual must be able to commit to this journey and be disciplined enough to stay on course without having anyone to keep the momentum going. Isolation will occur; one has to be able to move beyond it. Second, during the dissertation phase, students have different topics making it difficult to relate to one another. Additionally, the Instructional Management and Leadership Program is an accelerated three-year program, so there is a time factor issue where cohort members do not have a substantial amount of free time to discuss with fellow members. These reasons may cause isolation, as Ali and Kohun (2006) mentioned, and be key factors of attrition.

Lovitts and Nelson (2000) state that more than one-third of those who exit doctoral programs do so during the first year, mostly because they have been decisively disillusioned. This is in reference to the lack of clarity of expectations and requirements, similar to Ali and Kohun (2006) thoughts on insufficient communication. McAlpine and Norton (2006) concur by stating that the solitariness may be a factor contributing to the lack of clarity regarding doctoral expectations. This particular finding of commitment and discipline compels the researcher to conclude that these factors are necessary to prevail over obstacles, such as isolation within doctoral study, in order to be successful and persist to completion.

**Putting the Doctorate First**

The second emergent theme - putting the doctorate first - focuses on the notion that an individual has the ability to prioritize both personal and professional commitments so that all facets associated with doctoral study are placed first in one's life. The facets of doctoral study would include time spent in class, writing, researching, and meeting with cohort members or faculty. These various facets relate to Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, and Abel's (2006) discussion of how individuals who already have families experience stress due to guilt and the lack of time spent on family responsibilities. This statement is referring to the time commitment required for doctoral study - in turn, time away from one's family. According to Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, and Abel (2006), "time and guilt are two factors associated with managing family responsibilities and doctoral studies." The conclusions from this study, in combination with the research, revealed that, in truth, the students must make a choice. While the decision is difficult, it must be made. Either students are going to make the doctorate a top priority and experience the potential guilt or they are not going to put it first in their life, which has the possible side effect of not completing it.

Burnett (1999) mentioned that having a support system was very beneficial, especially during the dissertation phase. Burnett (1999) details one of the advantages of the cohort model is that students are more likely to complete their dissertation. However, the dissertation phase still remains a solo endeavor. The cohort members in this study stated that they had to put the program first and proceeded to detail specific instances where they felt guilty. These statements speak to Ritt's (2008) research which details the personal barriers of family commitments, childcare limitations, and family schedules. In essence, the meaning revealed is that time is a valuable commodity, especially in a condensed program of study, and it must be apportioned correctly in order to be successful in completing the program.



### **Prefer to Work Independently and Research Alone**

The third characteristic - preference to work independently and to research alone - was one of the most surprising findings of this research. The reason for this is because the IML doctoral program in which the respondents had chosen to participate is a cohort model and the nature of the program is in opposition with working independently; this need for independence is more consistent with a traditional program.

The cohort model is designed to be a network that fosters collaboration with one another, which is consistent with Wisker, Robinson, and Shacham's (2007) research which details the use of cohorts for group-work, sharing of ideas, and supportive development. In looking at this definition, it is then ironic that members of a cohort would prefer working by themselves. The interpretation made is that while the participants enjoyed the idea of having the cohort members to rely on, if required, according to this current theme, they didn't necessarily need to work with them. This finding indicates a link between this study's results and Deci and Ryan's Self-determination theory (1994), specifically the concept of autonomy. Autonomy refers to the freedom to choose and govern one's actions. What is being revealed is that by the informants stating that they prefer to research and work alone, they are expressing their need for autonomy. They wanted the ability to choose their own dissertation topics based on their personal interests. The opportunity to design the entire study by deciding on the research method, such as the participants and how to collect the data, are a few of the decisions that the autonomy of working alone provided the respondents. The conclusion is that if the participants had been required to work with others on these issues, the environmental factors would have affected them, thus their need for autonomy would not have been met. When working with others, one has to be able to compromise and not necessarily get the opportunity to choose the course of action.

The synthesis of being in a cohort model, while at the same time wanting autonomy, creates a notion of the need for balance. There needs to be a balance between time spent in working with others and by oneself. This balance can be created by having students complete their research alone, but then come together in small groups to discuss progress during the class sessions. In the study by McPhail, Robinson, and Scott (2008), participants stated that the cohort provided members the ability to share knowledge, dialogue with one another, and gain new information. Erickson; Howard; Borland, Jr.; and Baker (2004) concur by stating that well-functioning cohorts create opportunities to network and create a sense of community, as well as increased performance. It is gathered from the data that the preference to work independently and research alone provided the students the autonomy needed to persist in completing doctoral study.

### **Full-time Employment**

Wlodkowski (1985) discusses the concept of a human need as "a condition experienced by the individual as an internal force that leads the person to move in the direction of a goal". Wlodkowski (1985) further explains that individuals "can feel driven to acquire food, money, or knowledge - just a few of the many compelling needs that seem to motivate human beings". All participants in this study were employed full-time, except one informant who lost her job at the beginning of the program. Integrating this with the research speaks to the fact that while the participants had the desire to acquire knowledge, the more basic needs of food and money had to be obtained at the same time, thus full-time employment was necessary and is the fourth characteristic that emerged from the data. These basic needs are consistent with DeLong and Winter's (2009) definition of extrinsic motivators, whereby factors outside the individual drive the person to complete a task or accomplish a goal. However, in addition to meeting one's essential needs, by considering full-time employment as a theme from this research, there are also a variety of characteristics common to individuals who are able to continue working full-time while completing the doctoral degree. Interpreting the meaning of this theme basically references the fact that one needs to be able to juggle multiple roles; for instance, employee, employer, and possibly parent, in addition to the role of student. It requires good time-management skills to accomplish a variety of tasks and commitment and discipline. This is consistent with Miller and Irby's (1999) research stating that doctoral students need to have time management skills and the ability to prioritize. Organization would also be a key component for someone to be successful.

Full-time employment builds upon Knowles; Holton, III; and Swanson's six assumptions of the adult learner - in particular, the concept of readiness to learn. According to Knowles; Holton, III; and Swanson (2005),

readiness to learn refers to adults being ready to learn and cope effectively with their real-life situation. The researcher deduced from the findings that individuals cannot stop their lives in order to pursue a doctoral degree. Adults must be at a point in their life where they feel prepared to take on the challenge of intense learning and be able to manage their lives at the same time. The Instructional Management and Leadership program provides participants the ability to continue working full-time and complete the program by taking classes one evening per week and one Saturday per month. There is also an additional two weeks in the summer for classes. This characteristic is an apparent indication to the researcher of how attractive this proposition is for individuals who are unable to attend school full-time due to financial reasons, as well as other personal and professional reasons. Full-time employment is a theme that was revealed in the data; however, it is the noted underlying characteristics of the individual associated with this theme of being employed full-time which helped respondents in persisting through the program.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the four characteristics that were revealed in this study were Commitment/Discipline, Putting the Doctorate First, Prefer to Work Independently and Research Alone, and Full-time Employment. These characteristics contributed to persistence in a doctoral cohort program in the field of education.

In order to further this study, it is recommended to analyze reasons why the informants preferred to work independently. This theme is counter to the basic principles of the cohort model of study that the respondents had chosen to participate. Based on this contradiction, further exploration as to the reasons behind the respondents' preferences would additionally assist in determining any additional characteristics of the graduates. Additionally, it would be beneficial to investigate those that did not complete the program of study.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

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**NOTES**