**Understanding the Online Doctoral Learning Experience:**

**Factors that Contribute to Students' Sense of Community**

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## Abstract

As the number of students taking online courses continues to grow steadily, it is becoming increasingly important to inquire about the experiences of these students in order to understand the factors that contribute to their success. It is imperative that the social needs of students be understood, as interaction is an important aspect of the educational experience. *Sense of community*, which results from interaction, can make a significant impact on the success of online students. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of doctoral students who have taken courses online in an effort to illuminate the factors that contribute to their sense of community. To achieve a better understanding of these factors, in depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 12 doctoral students. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that the following four factors contributed to the sense of community felt amongst students enrolled in an online doctoral program: (a) a cohort experience, (b) a face to face, on campus orientation course, (c) faith, prayer, and spirituality, and (d) challenge and tragedy. The results of this study add to the existing literature on understanding the online student experience and sense of community within the context of online higher education, and the implications and recommendations made as a result of the findings in

this study can be used by faculty members and administrators to better facilitate sense of community in online courses and degree programs.

**Keywords:** Sense of community, online learning, higher education, online learning communities

## INTRODUCTION

Online learning is now an integral part of higher education (Allen and Seaman, 2013; Holmberg-Wright & Wright, 2012; Lin, Lin, & Laffey, 2008; Nguyen & Zhang, 2011). As a result, the traditional portrayal of doctoral students has been replaced with that of students who occasionally or rarely attend campus when or if at all (Offerman, 2011). Now that online doctoral degree programs are in higher demand than ever before (Fuller et al., 2014), additional investigations are needed to further understand the social aspects of the doctoral educational experience (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

Considering the recent developments in online education, it has become imperative to learn about the experiences of students who enroll in online courses (Blackmon & Major, 2012). More specifically, it is important that researchers continue to study the elements that lead to online student engagement (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Sense of community, which is developed through interaction (Rovai, 2002) and is closely related to student engagement (Young & Bruce, 2011), is a crucial element to online student success (Moore, 2014). This phenomenon plays a major role in social and academic integration, both of which affect the future enrollment decisions of students (Tinto, 1997).

Guidelines and strategies for developing and sustaining sense of community in the online educational setting have been proposed (Yuan & Kim, 2014); however, the problem remains that sense of community is often overlooked in higher education (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007;

Moore, 2014) while the effective facilitation of online learning communities is not fully understood (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). By examining the lived experiences of doctoral students, the researcher sought to contribute to the understanding of the factors that contribute to their sense of community in the online educational setting. Thus, the research question that guided this study was: How are the factors that contribute to the sense of community felt by online doctoral students perceived by these students?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sense of community has been studied in the traditional classroom setting (Tinto; 1997) and the online setting (Baturay, 2011; Exter, Korkmaz, Harlin, & Bichelmeyer, 2009; Liu, et al., 2007; Murdock & Williams, 2011; West, Jones, & Semon, 2012) with both undergraduate (Drouin, 2008) and graduate students (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). This phenomenon has received a great deal of recent attention, and many researchers have begun to use the theoretical framework developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) to describe sense of community. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9).

Consisting of four elements, i.e. membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection, sense of community is powerful within and applicable to virtually any environment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Though historically a topic studied in the field of community psychology (Bottom, Ferrari, Matteo, & Todd, 2013), many researchers have recently begun to apply the concept of community to the field of education. One of the most influential studies seeking to explain how sense of community affects student behaviors,

persistence, and perceptions of learning was conducted by Vincent Tinto.  Based upon his findings, Tinto (1997) theorized that classrooms, small communities where social and academic interactions take place, are central to the overall academic community of the institution. Memberships acquired in the classroom environment connect students to the overall academic community that exists outside the classroom.  The many communities that exist, however, should not be viewed as independent of each other.  Instead, they overlap and combine to create one large community.

### Sense of Community in Online Education

Although Tinto developed this theory prior to the exponential growth in distance learning, its implications hold true in the dynamic environment of online education.  When students connect with each other within an online course, it may lead them to identify with the larger social and academic communities of the institution.  As students connect with others in their online learning community and begin to feel a sense of belonging, they tend to become more willing to share and support one another and even feel responsible to the learning community (Chang, 2012).

Also in applying the concept of community to education, Rovai (2002) argued that strong feelings of sense of community could exist in an asynchronous online learning course when that course is designed with certain factors in mind.  Those factors include transactional distance, social presence, social equality, small group activities, group facilitation, teaching style and learning stage, and community size.  Rovai (2002) noted that existing literature suggested that a positive correlation exists between each of these factors and sense of community.  Thus, an

online instructor who takes each of these factors into consideration when designing his or her course can, in turn, develop a strong sense of community in the online learning environment.

Other researchers have asserted that sense of community can be created and felt by students in the online learning environment as well (Baturay, 2011; Chang, 2012; Deng & Tavares, 2013; Khoo & Forret, 2011; Moore, 2014; Murdock & Williams, 2011; Reinhart, 2010; Rakes & Dunn, 2010; West et al., 2012; Willis, Davis, & Chaplin, 2013; Young & Bruce, 2011; Yang, et al., 2011; Yuan & Kim, 2014).  Participation is an important key to overcoming the geographical gap present in online courses (Rakes & Dunn, 2010).  In online courses where student to student collaboration is facilitated students have expressed feelings similar to actually being together physically (Chang, 2012).

**The Importance of Studying Sense of Community**

Sense of community has been shown to make a significant positive impact on online student satisfaction (Baturay, 2011; Drouin, 2008; Liu et al., 2007; Moore, 2014; Ni & Aust, 2008) and student engagement (Willis et al., 2013; Yang, YoonJung, Mathew, & Worth, 2011). Interacting within an online learning community helps students overcome feelings of isolation (Yuan & Kim, 2014) and connect with their fellow students as well as with course content (Moore, 2014; Yang et al., 2011).  Further, when students feel connecting with the online learning community they tend to be more satisfied in their experience of taking an online course (Baturay, 2011).

Students feel a sense of self worth and importance when they interact and collaborate with other students in their online community (Chang, 2012).  Over time they even begin develop a sense of accountability to their peers and feel obligated to participate in their online

learning community (Willis et al., 2013).  Sense of community also affects student engagement and perceived learning (Liu et al., 2007), and social involvement can make a positive impact on the decisions of students to remain enrolled in college (Hu, 2011).  The learning community also provides students with an alternate method of obtaining information and accessing resources (Johansen & Ornelas, 2012).  Furthermore, community plays a major role in social and academic integration, both of which affect the future enrollment decisions of students (Tinto, 1997).

Researchers in the field of higher education have acknowledged the importance of social presence and interaction in the educational setting (Borup, West, & Graham, 2013; Exter, et al., 2009; Hunter, 2011; Kehrwald, 2010; Lear, Isernhagen, LaCost, & King, 2009; Petersen, Divitni, & Chabert, 2008; Tinto, 1997; Tucker, 2012; Wang, 2011).  Sense of community, which is developed through interaction (Rovai, 2002) and is closely related to student engagement (Young & Bruce, 2011), is a crucial element to online student success (Moore, 2014). Guidelines and strategies for developing and sustaining sense of community in the online educational setting have been proposed (Yuan & Kim, 2014); however, the problem remains that sense of community is often overlooked in higher education (Liu, et al., 2007; Moore, 2014) while the effective facilitation of online learning communities is not fully understood (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012).

It is imperative that researchers continue to examine the concept of sense of community within the various contexts in higher education (Harrison & West, 2014).  Through a rigorous exploration of the lived experiences of participants, this study adds to the understanding of the factors that contribute to their sense of community in an online doctoral degree program.  The assessments students make of their online learning environments are an important consideration

in the effort to improve the online learning experience (Okech, Barner, Segoshi, & Carney, 2014). Despite the growth in the acceptance rate of online education and the number of students taking online courses (Allen and Seaman, 2013), not enough is known about the online student experience in general (Blackmon & Major, 2012). Although research in distance education has recently shifted to focus much more on the experiences of students than in years past (Simonson, Schlosser, & Orella, 2011), additional investigations involving in depth interviews with doctoral students are needed to further understand the social aspects of their educational experience (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). It is especially important for the social needs of students to be understood (Petersen et al., 2008), and qualitative inquiry is crucial in such an undertaking (Jones, 2012).

## METHOD

### Participants

The study population consisted of doctoral students enrolled in an online degree program within the School of Human Services at Amridge University. By utilizing a purposive sample of 12 students, the researcher was able to select a research site and participants most appropriate for the purpose of the study (Cozby & Bates, 2012; Creswell, 2009). Although the number of participants was relatively small, the abundance of detailed information resulting from the examination of their experiences was ideal for the purposes of strengthening the validity of the study and developing a comprehensive understanding of their experiences with the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). All of the participants that made up the sample had been enrolled as an online doctoral student for at least three years, or nine semesters; thus, each had adequate time and opportunities to develop and experience sense of community with their peers.

The sample consisted of two males and 10 females with ages ranging from 30 to 57. Eight of the participants were enrolled in the doctor of philosophy in marriage and family therapy degree program, and four were enrolled in the doctor of philosophy in professional counseling degree program

## Design

The researcher utilized a phenomenological design in order to understand the factors that contribute to the sense of community felt by students enrolled in an online doctoral degree program. According to Popkewitz (2014), "epistemology is to consider the rules and standards that order and classify what is seen and acted on" (p. 4). Epistemology, then, is major influence on how a researcher approaches the study of a phenomenon (Groenwald, 2004). The epistemological position the researcher held toward this study was that valuable data regarding sense of community within the context of online courses at Amridge University reside within the perspectives of students who enroll in online courses at the University.

The researcher sought to examine sense of community just as was experienced and perceived by participants; thus a transcendental phenomenological approach was chosen (Moustakas, 1994). The interpretations of the participants themselves were the focus of the investigation (Patton, 2002); therefore, the researcher detached from his own biases and presumptions of sense of community throughout the study in order to view the phenomenon sense of community with freshness and openness (Moustakas, 1994).

## Materials

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, potential participants were identified with the assistance of administration of Amridge University. Once identified, potential participant were

sent a formal email invitation to participate in the study. The body of the email served as a cover letter informing potential participants of the purpose and nature of the study, and an informed consent form was attached to the email. During the recruitment process, potential participants were informed that the information they provided would remain confidential, and that they would have the option to cancel their participation at any time. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect his or her identify, and the final report has been written in a manner so that readers are not able to identify participants.

**Procedure**

Each participant was interviewed via telephone, as face to face meetings were not feasible due to differences in geographic location. The researcher followed an interview guide consisting of open ended questions. All participants were asked the same basic interview questions; however, the researcher had flexibility as to the order in which questions were asked (Moustakas, 1994; Shank, 2006). The researcher detached from his worldview and entered a phenomenological attitude; he became like a bystander, or onlooker, while examining the perceptions of participants (Sokolowski, 2000). The interview questions were intended to draw out the views and opinions participants had of sense of community (Creswell, 2009), and their broad nature of allowed the researcher to obtain rich descriptions from participants (Moustakas, 1994). The interview questions were open ended by design so that participants would be able to respond with their own perspectives and descriptions of their experiences with this phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The researcher paid close attention to emerging concepts during the interview process and asked additional open ended questions in order to elicit further details surrounding

the experiences the participants had with sense of community while enrolled in an online doctoral degree program.

The telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher, and the analysis began with the researcher reading through each of the interview transcriptions while paying attention to only general ideas and the tone of the participants (Creswell, 2009). In the early stages, the researcher *horizonalized* the data (Moustakas, 1994); equal value was given to each element and perspective of sense of community (Patton, 2002) and only general notes were made. The horizonalized statements were then organized into distinct meaning units, or clusters, and all extraneous and repetitive data were eliminated (Patton, 2002). Invariant constituents and themes were synthesized to create a composite description (Moustakas, 1994) encompassing each of the individual experiences and providing meaningful insight into the lived experiences of participants (Patton, 2002). A summary of the themes was emailed to each of the participants, who were then asked to review the themes for accuracy and respond with feedback. No modifications were made as a result of the member checking process.

## FINDINGS

The results of this study were heavily dependent upon the information that the participants were willing to share during the interview process. The following themes were developed based upon the data collected during the interview process: (a) a cohort experience, (b) a face to face, on campus orientation course, (c) faith, prayer, and spirituality, and (d) challenge and tragedy.

## A Cohort Experience

A cohort is a group of students who begin a degree program at the same time.  Students in a cohort enroll in the same courses and progress through the program at the same pace (Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005; Santicola, 2013).  At Amridge University, students who are new to the doctoral degree programs in the School of Human Services typically begin their enrollment during a Fall semester and follow a course sequence over the following four years.  All 12 participants indicated that progressing through the degree program in a cohort contributed to the sense of community they felt with other students.

Robin (pseudonyms used) indicated that being in a cohort provided her with a sense of security and helped her overcome her initial emotions: "Knowing that we would get through it together, knowing that I would have people that I could connect with if I ran into trouble, that we would work together helped to reduce some of that anxiety."  Although she had not thought about it much previously, Maria believed being in a cohort became more and more important over time:

> For me initially I really had not thought about that.  You know, [I was] more concerned about what my outcome would be.  But as it progressed and as I, you know, went farther into the program, establishing those relationships was important.  And, you know, being able to have that support with one another. . . . I felt like as the program continued and we stayed with kind of the same group of people within my particular cohort, that became more important and more salient.  It became more important as time went on.

When discussing their progression through the doctoral degree program, Nancy and Amy also referred to the ways in which students supported one another. Nancy stated: "Just to know that we were there for each other, I think that helps you say 'Yes, you can do this. We got this. We got this.' So I think that was really a good support system." Amy indicated that motivation resulted: "In my cohort we were of the iron sharpens iron nature, so we pushed each other. We weren't critical, but we challenged."

One half of the participants compared the support system of the cohort to being a part of a family. When asked to describe what it was like being in a cohort, Kelly responded: "Family. Being in my cohort is like being a part of a family." When Mary was asked to describe how she feels about the others in her cohort, she professed:

> Oh, I love them. I just love them. Seriously, they're like my little sisters. We joke a lot, but we know it's true, we're family . . . cohort to us equals family at this point. You help out your family members, and you want them to be with you and successful while you're successful.

Dawn recalled growing up in a large family and noted the similarities:

> I had lots of brothers and lots of sisters . . . so whatever language I need to speak with folks, whether it's a man or woman, I can do it. So I would hang with the guys sometimes just because they're going to watch sports and talk about football or talk about basketball or shoot the breeze or whatever. And I have seven brothers, so I can do that too. So that's why I would say family.

Patricia stated that her experience was like "meeting family that you never knew you had." She continued: "I would say it's like meeting distant relatives and having the common goal

and common foundation that kind of urges you to develop these relationships and friendships that come with that." Michael held the image of family as well; however, he also compared other students to distance relatives rather than close siblings:

> My image still goes back to a family, but more of that extended kind of family that gets together for Christmas and holidays and weddings and funerals. Comes together, then but spends most of their time in different parts of the country or world or whatever . . . there is an overall connection, but each family member has their own unique kind of aspect to the family.

At first, Robin compared her experience to being part of a team; however, she later retracted and compared her cohort to family:

> I would probably normally be inclined to answer that it was a team. And I think that's a good way to look at it from maybe a tolerance perspective, but sometimes the best case scenario is that you agree to be a team and that you tolerate each other, and you know that you're going to be stronger as an individual if the team is strong. But in our circumstances there were some unique factors. . . . I think what I would compare to because of those unique experiences and because of the particular program we were in, [it] is more like family, and I know that we'll continue our relationships beyond graduation.

Being in a cohort contributed to the sense of community felt by participants and lowered the level of anxiety they felt, and as time passed, the importance of being a member of a cohort became more apparent. Participants indicated feeling connected to the group as a whole, and they confided in each other and found comfort in knowing they would not be separated

throughout their journey. The relationships described by participants were open and supportive, much like what may be found in a family.  Participants found support from one another and wanted each other to be successful.  The relationships that have been established as a result of a cohort experience are indeed strong will likely outlast their time as doctoral students.

## A Face to Face Orientation Course

Even though the participants in this study took their courses online, they were required to attend a five day seminar on the Amridge University campus in Montgomery, AL, during their first Fall semester.  During the interview process, it became clear that this time spent together made a significant contribution to the togetherness felt by students, both with individuals they would develop special relationships with and the cohort as a whole.  The timing of the face to face component was important as well; the fact that it was held during the first week of their first semester in the doctoral program seemed essential to participants.  All 12 participants indicated that the time they spent face to face with one another during the orientation course contributed to the sense of community they felt with other students.

According to Amy, being on campus with the other members of her cohort was the most important factor in establishing sense of community: "It was the most solidifying thing for helping me feel anchored.  It was a more of a realistic measure for where I was in relationship to where everyone else was.  It was more concrete."  She also added: "It made me have a sense of actually belonging to and having a vested part in [the cohort]."  Two others made comments similar to those made by Amy when asked if they believed the face to face component contributed most to sense of community.  Kelly avowed: "Yes, I do.  I think the week on campus really did help, being able to see them face to face and talk with them."  Laura also confirmed

that component was most important in establishing a sense of community for her: "I think really it was that one week of being in person together."

Seeing what others looked like in person contributed to the sense of community felt by participants and supported bonding. According to Kimberly: "It helped out. That really helped out. It allowed me to really see who all the people were . . . [it was] a chance to build a bond and relationship not only for then, but a lifetime relationship." Patricia responded: "I think it definitely helped just knowing what they looked like not only just from a picture, but in person, like, their mannerisms and things about them." John also felt strongly about how important it was for students to spend time with one another in person and doubted whether students would the same connections with one another without such an opportunity:

I think it was critical for building that identity and community. . . . We were there for, like, the whole day. It was a whole week, and we're there from like 9:00 to 5:00 every day. And so I think I'm not sure that we would have the same level of, you know, that community period. . . . I'm not sure that we would have had as much cohesion as we did without that.

Michael indicated that if he had it to do all over again and it was up to him, he would never change that aspect of the program: "I would include that residency week and have that residency week to start the program out." According to Michael, building relationships with other members of his cohort at a distance would have come with limitations:

Let's spend some time on campus being connected in a human way. There's a lot, like even on your discussion boards and even on Facebook and even with emailing and all that stuff, there's so much that is missed that we're able to get on that campus visit.

Dawn also noted that the early timing of the orientation course was important in her experience:

> We were required to come out to the campus for that first week. And so that really just kind of put, I think, into being a really much more positive perspective because we were kind of able to start off meeting each other. And so there really was a sense of community really early . . . I do think that part of that had to do with the ability to kind of see each other before we really got engrossed into the online curriculum.

When discussing the face to face orientation course, Robin also believed having the orientation during the first week was important: "I definitely think that it had a big impact on reinforcing that sense of community and collaboration because we worked together for that first week."

> The timing of the orientation course signified the start of the program for Patricia:
> And then it also just felt like the start, like, the real start. Yeah, I think if we started the semester a month before and it was all online and then we go to meet, you know, the beginning of the semester wouldn't really have felt like the beginning. We probably would have all have been looking forward to being on campus and felt like that was the real start.
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> For Mary and Kelly, an important aspect of the week on campus was the ability to come together and build relationships quickly. According to Mary, she and others realized rather quickly that they would need each other. While on campus, she indicated having thought to herself: "Yeah, I'm starting to depend on these people, and it's only the second day." She went on to indicate that others had the same realization while on campus as well. For instance, Kelly stated: "When I met them when we all met for the residency for the first week, it was an instant

jelling."  Michael also had a similar outlook: "So the bond was, to a sense, established there on campus and then was able to be maintained once we got back online."

The face to face, on campus orientation course was an important factor in establishing rapport and the sense of community participants felt with other students, and participants doubted whether their connections with one another would have been as strong without this component.  The early timing of the orientation course was important in establishing relationships early on, and it represented the start of the program.  Participants felt like the opportunity for collaboration and interaction in person was critical to building relationships. Participants longed to spend more time with one another at the end of the week, yet they returned home motivated.  The time spent with one another on campus led to early feelings of togetherness and camaraderie for participants, and according to participants, this being face to face with other students could not be replicated in the online environment.

### Faith, Prayer, and Spirituality

Amridge University is a faith based institution, and according to its website the University is "firmly committed to furthering the teaching and practice of Christianity" (Statement of a Positive, n.d.).  This commitment is evident in the mission and purpose statements of the institution, both of which impact all aspects of the student experience.  Faith provided an underpinning for the convergence of a group of like minded individuals who, once together, found a commonality in addition that of learning.  Eleven of the participants expressed that this factor contributed to the sense of community they felt with other students in the program.

According to Michael put it, faith gave him and other students "a starting point" to which they could build their relationships upon. That held true for Patricia as well:

> I think at the beginning, even when we weren't really quite sure where everybody had kind of come from, you know, I think just having that knowing that everyone was spiritual in some way. You know, like, we had some sort of spiritual foundation between all of us. . . . I don't know if we would have made it without it honestly.

When asked if she believed faith contributed to the sense of community she felt, Dawn she responded: "I do. . . . There's that foundation. I think that part of it also holds true." When asked if she believed faith and prayer contributed to the sense of community, Maria responded: "Absolutely! Yes!" For Kelly, faith serving as a "starting point" ensured students would be like minded, which contributed to the openness amongst students and the feelings of togetherness she felt:

> It has helped a lot knowing that we do have the same value system. . . . We don't have to wonder what the other person thinks or believes because we pretty much always already know. So the information, the encouragement, the advice, all of those sorts of things is more forthcoming.

During the interview process, John also noted the strength of spirituality and its role in bringing people together:

> Spirituality is a huge part of life, you know and [a] huge part of people's identity. And when you share that with someone else, that part of your identity, that part of what's a sole priority in your values, that's going to increase you know cohesion and connection with another individual. So I definitely think that increases [the sense of community].

Kelly noted that the implications of faith on students outside the learning environment even strengthened their connection within:

> It has been supportive to know that everyone there has like beliefs. . . . And then, you know, we all are not shy on incorporating our faith and our belief into our work, and so it just kind of so we're all on the same page with respect to that.
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> She also added that students were "more forthcoming" as a result of having similar religious beliefs.
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> It is important to note that students who did not have strong religious beliefs were still very much a part of the group. Kimberly added that no one in her cohort was ever excluded because of their beliefs:
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> The ones that were not as religious or spiritual, we respected that, as well. It's all about respect; not pushing what you believe on [others] because whatever you believe in will help get you over to the next level, the next place, or whatever. That's what we encouraged you to do.

Michael had the same beliefs and a similar experience in his cohort. According to him, those who may have had dissimilar beliefs were "still very much welcomed into the part of the group." Michael indicated that all students were open to learning about the perspectives of others.

When students faced difficult times, it was common for them to rely on their faith to help them through. Further, prayer was perceived as a way to support one another. As a result, this practice became quite common. When Nancy struggled, sometimes all she needed was "a simple prayer" from another student to help her get through. Patricia affirmed: "You could just at any time reach out and say, "I really need prayer from you guys. I've got a lot going on."" Mary

recalled receiving prayer requests from other students. Someone may come to her and say: "I'm struggling to get this assignment done. Will you pray for me?" And her response was always: "Absolutely. I will." Maria also recalled that students in her cohort prayed for one another when they faced academic challenges: "[When it] came up to test time . . . 'You know I'm praying for you. Good luck!'" Mary recalled the ability to request prayer from others at any time. "In turn, if I was to have a problem, then I know that I could go to one of the two people that I was very close with. And they would do the same for me."

When asked if she and others prayed for one another often, Nancy responded: "Exactly!" When the same question was posed to Amy, her response was "Oh, definitely!" She also recounted a difficult time she faced and affirmed: "I definitely think they were praying for me. . . I hope they're still praying." When asked if students prayed for one another often, Dawn responded: "Oh, definitely . . . we would send out a text for prayer requests or emails for prayer requests often, yes." Patricia confirmed that students were always seeking out reasons to pray for one another and recalled a specific time when another student was struggling with the demands and expectations of doctoral level coursework: "We were always wanting to see how we could pray for her and reach out."

Upon their enrollment, participants expected to be surrounded by fellow students who had similar religious beliefs and were comforted by this aspect. Several participants indicated that their faith served as a foundation for the relationships they developed with others, and a common values system was believed to contribute to the sense of community amongst participants. Participants recounted their reliance on faith and prayer while progressing through the doctoral program. Prayer served as a prominent support mechanism; participants sent and

received requests for prayer quite often as they faced difficulties. Students who did not have strong religious beliefs were not excluded; the beliefs of those students were respected as well.

## Challenge and Tragedy

The final factor that contributed to the sense of community felt amongst participants was that when they encountered challenging and adverse situations together, the bond between them was strengthened. Nancy summed up her experience with challenging situations: "I think as we grew and we found ourselves in difficult situations, I think we started relying on each other a little bit more. And we realized that we can get through it better together than apart."

Two types of challenges emerged during the interview process: various academic challenges and the challenge of overcoming the untimely death of an instructor. Maria commented that students would "look to each other" for support when facing academic challenges. Patricia reflected on the level of support she received: "I could share more, feel more support from them than I could even [from] people that are very close to me in my day to day life." Kimberly recalled: "This is a challenge, and this is what it's all about . . . [there were] people believing in me and encouraging me to come to stick it out. . . . I would definitely not give that up."

According to Mary, each course posed a new challenge for her cohort. She recalled how challenging presentations were and how students would support one another: "We would be each other's little cheerleader before and afterwards, and things like that." She again recalled how support from others made an impact on her when facing challenges: "We have been each other's cheerleaders. We really have. So that has made things a lot more manageable for me."

For Robin, facing academic challenges alongside other students allowed her to assess who she

may be able to reach out and help along the way:

> With respect to the curriculum, there certainly were challenges . . . you then quickly
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> become aware of the group's strengths and weaknesses and individual strengths and
>
> weaknesses.  And so at that point, because we were all studying that kind of curriculum,
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> we became more aware of who might need help in certain areas.

Laura recalled a time when she had to take an overload of courses and remembered the

support another student provided for her during that semester:

> She would tell me, "I was stressed out in the same class, but, you know, you had a lot
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> going on.  Don't beat yourself up over it. We'll make it through.  We're going to finish
>
> this together" . . . . She's been awesome. . . . I really couldn't have [made it without her].
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> I even publicly put that out there, like, on Facebook.  I did it, and I had to tag her.  "You
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> are, like, you're the woman!"  Because, you know, we all had those moments.

Kelly also recalled the overwhelming support she received from others when she faced an

academic challenge:

> You get a response from everybody and the message continues and continues and you
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> have, like, a hundred and something threads in the email.  Everybody's participating.  It's
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> not just one or two people, but everybody's, like, "I understand.  I know how you feel."
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> Or "This is the information that I received, and if I get any more information I'll be glad
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> to pass it along to you guys."

For the six participants who began in the Fall of 2011, the death of their very first

instructor was remembered as a time when students bonded together in spite of uncertainty.  This

instructor taught the face to face orientation course and was instrumental in establishing the sense of community students felt upon their enrollment. Michael recalled receiving the news of his passing: "Immediately we were reaching out to each other [with] emails and phone calls and different things like that." Amy remembered it as a "traumatic" time and found it difficult to describe beyond that: "Even as tragic as it was, it was a shared experience that you kind of had to be there to get." Michael looked back on his experience during that time: "We went through some tumultuous times at Amridge, and so I think that probably created some of that [togetherness] as well."

Nancy stated that the news of the death was "a shock" and remembers students depending on each other:

> We still had to deal with, you know, the things that we had to do in school. And so picking back up the pieces, I think we all felt connected because of that death, picking up the pieces . . . we were kind of relying on each other.

Robin commented that students "had to rely on supporting and building each other up" during that time. She also noted that prior to his death, their first instructor was very influential in creating the sense of community within in cohort:

> He had a hand in developing that community very, very strongly right out of the gate and pledged his contribution to that group, as well. So that was very, very powerful and then ended up being extremely poignant when we lost him the week after we had been on campus together.

Dawn also confirmed his role in establishing a sense of community in the beginning:

He said to all of us, "You need to look around the room and pay attention to the person that's sitting on your left and on your right because this is not about a competition. When you finish this road you can say without a shadow of a doubt that you have the ability to complete any long and enduring goal that you could possibly ever put your mind to." That was so very powerful for all of us.

For the participants in this study, the presence of adversity was associated with students supporting one another and resulted in increased feelings of togetherness. When facing academic challenges, participants cheered in support for one another and offered encouraging words. They also reached out to others who might be struggling. During the time following the passing of an influential instructor, participants remembered relying on one another for the support needed to make it through. In spite of the difficulty and uncertainly, their sense of community was strengthened.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are important in the effort to understand the experiences of students who take courses online. The findings clearly indicated that sense of community can influence the online doctoral experience in a positive way. Moreover, the data highlight the importance of relationships between students in the online educational experience. The findings fit well within the existing literature surrounding sense of community in the context of higher education. Not only did the findings support the assertions of other researchers who stressed the importance of sense of community in the quest for student success (Moore, 2014; Tinto, 1997; Yang et al., 2011; Yuan & Kim, 2014), they confirmed the power of sense of community in the online student experience (Willis et al., 2013). Sense of community helped participants

overcome anxiety and adverse situations, and they attributed their success to this phenomenon. Further, the results of this study can be used to support the assertions by numerous researchers (Borup, et al., 2013; Exter, et al., 2009; Grosso, Smith, & Grosso, 2012; Hunter, 2011; Kehrwald, 2010; Lear, Isernhagen, LaCost, & King 2009; Petersen, Divitini, & Chabert, 2008; Tinto, 1997; Tucker, 2012; Wang, 2011) that social presence and interaction are very important elements of the educational experiences of students.

The findings also magnified the importance of social interaction in the effort to engage online students. Understanding the factors that lead to student engagement has become increasingly important for educators (King, 2014). Participants described their learning experience as one in which they engaged one another and learned from their interactions. Further, they seemed to exhibit higher levels of engagement as a result of their sense of community, which supports the assertion made by Boling et al. (2012) that social exchanges make a significant impact on student engagement. This finding also strengthens the argument made by Young and Bruce (2011) that the concepts of sense of community and student engagement are closely related. The findings lend additional support for the existence of a link between these two phenomena.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It is imperative that researchers continue to examine the concept of sense of community within the various contexts in higher education (Harrison & West, 2014). Limitations were present in this study; thus, there is a considerable amount of opportunity for future research in this area. First, only 12 doctoral students participated in this study; therefore, the implications and recommendations that result from this project represent the experiences of a relatively small

group of participants. It is recommended that future research be conducted using a similar methodology but with larger samples of doctoral students. There may be additional factors that contribute to sense of community but were not identified due to the relatively small number participants in this study.

Second, the participants were enrolled in the same doctoral degree program at the same institution. Many of the unique characteristics of the degree program in which participants are enrolled may have caused limitations within the findings. Therefore, it is recommended that future research involving the lived experiences of doctoral students be conducted with participants from multiple departments at multiple institutions. Studying the various experiences of students enrolled at a large number of institutions will likely lead to common concepts for educators and administrators to consider when attempting to facilitate online learning environments where the sense of community is strong amongst students. Additionally, the researcher recommends that a longitudinal study be conducted with a similar sample of doctoral students in order to determine which, if any, factors that contribute to sense of community evolve over time. Determining which factors are most important at each stage of the doctoral course of study will allow administrators and educators to place an emphasis on each individual factor accordingly, which would likely lead to increased student engagement and success. It could be possible that some factors are more important in the early stages of the doctoral student experience, for example, and if such is the case, it would be beneficial for faculty members who teach online courses to know and understand the impact those factors have on the experience of incoming doctoral students.

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