The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Education Review
College of Education

Journal Homepage: Texas Education Review
Published online: May 2024
Submit your article to this journal

Hearing Their Stories: A Phenomenological Study in Understanding Ed.D. Completion

TRACY L. DEMCHUK
The University of Texas at Austin

ELIZABETH A. RAINEY
Loyola University New Orleans

To cite this article: Demchuk, T. L., & Rainey, E. A. (2024). Hearing their stories: A phenomenological study in understanding Ed.D. completion. *Texas Education Review, 12*(2), 111-131. https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/51991

Hearing Their Stories: A Phenomenological Study in Understanding Ed.D. Completion

TRACY L. DEMCHUK[1] & ELIZABETH A. RAINEY[2]
[1]The University of Texas at Austin & [2]Loyola University New Orleans

Abstract

This study illuminates the rich and unique experiences of alumni who successfully completed a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.). During two open-ended interview sessions, eight participants revealed the barriers they encountered and successfully navigated to complete their doctoral programs. Some findings align with previously known barriers from extant literature, such as competing demands and academic integration. Participants' stories also reveal that negative experiences from their habitus and self-sabotaging thoughts created additional factors to their completion. This study describes how these alumni overcame the barriers by using their social capital, relationships with their faculty and chairs, and self-awareness to persist. This study is important because scholarly research has traditionally focused on undergraduate (rather than graduate) persistence, yet, only half of all doctoral students in the United States complete their programs. We discuss implications for graduate student retention research and practice based on eight successful doctoral students.

Keywords: barriers, doctoral degree, Ed.D., graduate students, persistence, graduate persistence

Dedication

We owe our collaboration to Dr. Patricia (Pat) Ann Somers, our doctoral advisor, chair, and professor at the University of Texas at Austin while we were in the first cohort of the Executive Doctorate program in Higher Education. Pat believed deeply in our success as adult learners and college leaders. Pat and Tracy shared a passion for graduate student persistence and success. Pat's steadfast belief in Tracy's research interests powered her to graduation. Liz and Pat bonded over New Orleans, where Pat completed her doctorate and Liz lives. They first met for lunch at Gabriel's and talked neighborhoods, local weather celebrities, and education in the Crescent City. Pat often emailed at all hours of the night, so some mornings brought a new spark of wisdom. We dedicate this study to her and her love for collaboration, advocacy, reflection, and insightfulness. Thank you for bringing us together, Pat.

Introduction

In the United States, a doctorate is the highest degree a student can achieve (Labaree, 2017). Graduates who hold a doctorate play a fundamental role in the U.S. labor force as innovators, thinkers, and creators who drive the economy (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011; Seidman, 2012). While benefits vary in doctoral fields, in general a doctorate imparts individual benefits (e.g., higher salaries, low unemployment, social and professional mobility), societal benefits (e.g., economic development, increased civic engagement, knowledge dissemination), and furthers the missions of teaching and research in higher education (Boud et al., 2021; Jobe & Lenio, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005, 2016; Seidman, 2012; Wendler et al., 2012). Every year, however, a significant number of

students drop out of their doctoral programs without earning the terminal credential (Wollast et al., 2018).

Dropout rates in doctoral programs, including education fields, are estimated at 50% and higher (Benshoff et al., 2015; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Gittings et al., 2018) and have remained unchanged over the past four decades (DeAngelis, 1998; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Further, universities in the United States continue to focus more on graduate degree programs, including doctoral degrees, often in response to declining undergraduate student enrollment (Kelchen & Barrett, 2024).

This study aims to understand the factors that can negatively influence persistence to doctoral degree completion. In examining these factors, we gain new knowledge about graduate student persistence, with an emphasis on understanding how these doctoral students navigated and overcame a variety of obstacles on the path to graduation. To understand the lived experiences of eight Executive Doctor of Education alumni through a phenomenological framework, this study explored how these alumni successfully navigated obstacles they faced in their pursuit of a doctorate. The following research question guided this study: *What are the barriers and persistence strategies that influence or contribute to Ed.D. completion?*

Existing literature on the barriers to doctoral persistence is robust; however, there is limited understanding of how alumni of doctoral programs overcame these barriers to reach degree completion. Therefore, this study expands the scholarship of graduate persistence through the perspective of successful alumni.

Literature Review

This literature review examines previous studies on graduate student attrition, including the variables that affect doctoral persistence that fall into two overarching factors: individual/personal and institutional/organizational (Hardré et al., 2019). Successful transition to academic learning, which also correlates with degree completion (Graham & Kim, 2011), relies on how graduate students view, react, and overcome variables that impede persistence.

Graduate Student Persistence

Historical theories about adult learning assist in understanding graduate student persistence. These theories explore reasons for how institutional factors affect graduate student persistence. Lindeman's (1926) foundational research on adult learners theorized that adults learn best when learning is self-directed, the topics are related to life experiences, and the pace and modality of learning fit their personal needs. Knowles' (1990) theory of andragogy positioned that adults learn through self-direction, experience, readiness to learn, motivation, inner desire to know, and willingness to learn. Students' aspiration to persist fails when these factors are bombarded with continuous disruption.

There are congruent personal and institutional variables that affect graduate persistence. Personal variables include support, time and financial constraints, and emotional difficulties such as stress, guilt, and anxiety related to accommodating varying demands (Benshoff et al., 2015; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Institutional variables include integration, performance, and program

compatibility. Personal and institutional variables are incongruities of the higher education system and graduate students' degree completion realities (Brus, 2006).

Graduate students often are out of academic environments for some time before returning; therefore, age can affect persistence (Braxton et al., 2011). Palmer and Wright (1996) suggested age is a negative factor in academic performance due to weakened study skills from time away from educational settings. In addition to study skills, the added demands of work and personal obligations, and stress can lead to low persistence (Bergman et al., 2014; Brus, 2006; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011).

Men are less likely to persist than women, according to Hagedorn (1999), who studied women graduate students over thirty years of age. For women, the interaction between family and persistence correlated with the drive and urgency to complete a graduate degree. Taniguchi and Kaufman's (2005) quantitative study supported Hagedorn's (1999) position, reporting divorced women persisted at higher rates than divorced men. Women thrived in part-time enrollment, and women who possessed high-level professional positions persisted at a higher rate than their male counterparts. Hagedorn's (1999) study of 81 women, who were predominantly white and over the age of 30, found that being married increased the probability of persistence by 84%, and external pressures—socioeconomic status and family and professional responsibilities—were not conducive to degree completion.

Low persistence of minoritized groups due to low socioeconomic status (SES), social integration, psychosocial factors, and academic preparation of minority or marginalized and underrepresented populations of all educational levels are documented in numerous studies (Hagedorn, 1999; Manos et al., 2005; Naidoo, 2015; Posselt, 2018; Rogers-Shaw & Carr-Chellman, 2018; Tinto, 1993, 2006). Minority students from low socioeconomic statuses experienced more stress related to financial difficulties, health problems, and family and relationship issues, which affected their ability to remain in school (Karimshah et al., 2013). University cultures that are not diverse (e.g., faculty, staff, administration) or do not embrace diversity are reasons why minority students do not integrate successfully; therefore, it increases these populations' dropout rates (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014).

Epistemology

The epistemological stance that informed this study is constructionism. It is important to understand our approach to this study, given the phenomenological approach and our closeness to the topic, as graduates from a doctoral program similar to the ones our participants experienced. According to Crotty (1998), "there is no meaning without a mind" (p. 8); therefore, interaction with the realities of the world creates personal truth and meaning. Knowledge is constructed differently for persons who experience the same phenomenon through participation, exploration, and discovery. A person's curiosity and beliefs intervene with their environment to create knowledge through internal conflict and dominance or through the coincidence of shared values. "In short, the social – shape our conceptions of reality and influence its formation" (Burningham & Cooper, 1999, p. 299). Therefore, our approach to this study enabled us to co-construct knowledge. This study sought to understand how graduates from various Ed.D. programs constructed, perceived, and identified obstacles, as well as account for the culturally derived and historical constructs that enabled degree completion (Sipe & Constable, 1996).

Methodology

This study aligns with constructivism by gathering rich data from graduates of an Ed.D. program to understand the phenomena of Ed.D. persistence. To better understand how eight alumni engaged in their doctoral journey and were able to overcome the barriers they faced in their doctoral journey, we used a qualitative phenomenological approach. As Crotty (1998) noted, "interpretive understandings and analysis can point to the necessity of change" (p. 10).

We wanted to "discover the nature and meaning of phenomenon [persistence] through internal pathways of self, using the processes of self-reflection, exploration, and elucidation of the nature of phenomenon" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985) through the stories of the participants. Both an inductive and abductive qualitative approach by amalgamating the research methods with a reflective process to understand the phenomena (Hays & Singh, 2012). The following research questions served as a guide to the study to best understand the stories of eight Ed.D. alumni:

> RQ 1: What are the main variables that influence or contribute to Ed.D. completion?
>
> RQ 2: How do the lived experiences of Ed.D. alumni influence the researcher's understanding of Ed.D. completion?

Phenomenology

Human beings construct knowledge via mental modeling, using existing knowledge to extrapolate new knowledge. This data revealed how a person's habitus influences persistence through participation, exploration, and discovery. Through knowledge discovery, each person's experiences can create different realities from the same phenomenon. Individuals create their world through beliefs, personal history, experiences, and interactions with others. Burningham and Cooper (1999) stated that "ideas intervene between nature and its description, and that interests, values, conflict and power—in short, the social—shape our conceptions of reality and influence its formation" (p. 299).

An interpretive phenomenological theoretical perspective was used to gain a better understanding of how eight diverse Ed.D. students successfully navigated personal, professional, and academic demands to complete their Ed.D. program. A small sample size was used allowing deep involvement in the data to answer the research questions (Armour et al., 2009).

Theoretical Framework

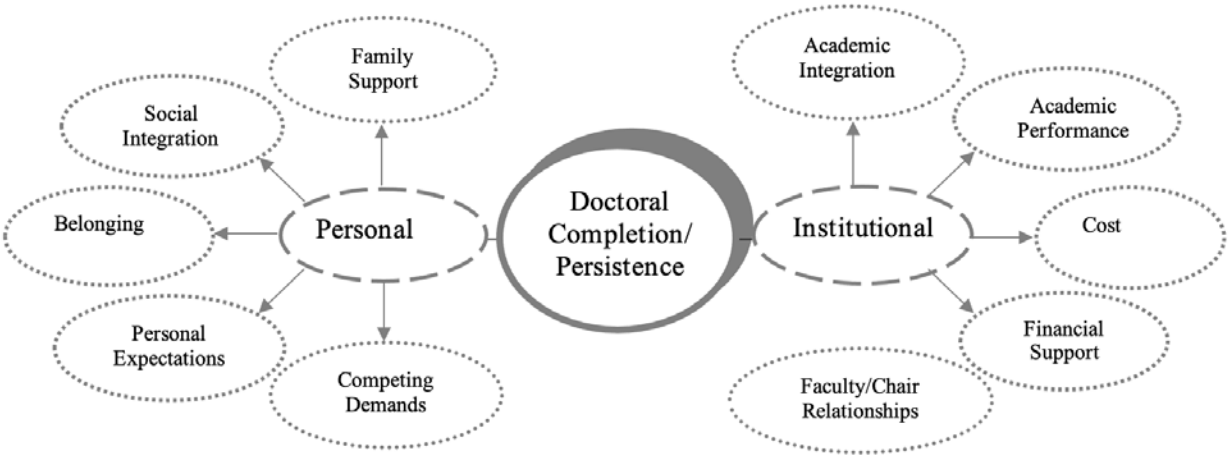
The theoretical framework used in this study pulled from existing persistence theories along with the concept that one's cultural capital or habitus influences actions, decisions, and dispositions. Thus, the habitus shapes the mind. However, congruent with Maxwell (2013), this research design was flexible and reflexive throughout each stage. The research plan was explicit, and the study's design informed the progression of the research. The professional experience of the first author as an admission and student service professional was used, along with personal experiences of obtaining two graduate degrees as a working adult. In addition, the second author's experiences also included

graduate work while working full-time with a family, and an in-depth knowledge of persistence theories and strategies.

This study blended several theories on persistence to develop a relational model of individual and institutional factors identified through the literature review and a relational diagram of factors (Figure 1) that affect doctoral persistence was developed based on empirical research on undergraduate, adult, and graduate student persistence. The factors presented were identified as components that impact persistence.

Figure 1

Factors of Doctoral Persistence from Empirical Research



Note. A relational diagram illustrating the factors that influence doctoral persistence that ultimately affect the decision of students to complete a doctoral program. The factors are divided into two main categories—Personal and Institutional. The arrows point to five specific components of personal and institutional factors identified from major scholarly persistence research.

The figure's main premise is that two overarching factors – personal and institutional –affect student persistence, personal and institutional, followed by five subcategories. Personal factors include family support, social integration, belonging, personal expectations, and competing demands. University factors include academic integration, faculty relationships, academic performance, cost, and financial support.

Table 1 illustrates the notable persistence models that correspond to the factors of persistence that guided this study. The complexity and phenomenon of doctoral persistence are represented by the existing empirical models, which explain persistence and the causes of persistence (Roland et al., 2016). Therefore, we noted the most identified factors of persistence using undergraduate, adult, and graduate persistence models. All three models were used because many of the earlier persistence models influenced or guided the later research of persistence. However, the complexity of persistence leads to the need for continued research to explore the intricacies of persistence and discover how students persist to degree completion.

Table 1

Factors Influencing Persistence and the Empirical Models of Persistence

Factors of Persistence		Persistence Models		
		Undergraduate Models	Adult Models	Graduate Models
Personal	Family support	Bean & Metzner (1985); Spady (1970)	Benshoff et al. (2015); Cohen & Greenberg (2011)	
	Social integration	Bean (1980); Bean & Metzner (1985); Pacarella & Terrenzini (1979); Spady (1970)	Bergman et al. (2014)	Golde (2000)
	Belonging	Spady (1970); Tinto (1975)		Golde (2000)
	Personal expectations	Bean (1980); Spady (1970)	Benshoff et al. (2015); Brus (2006); Cohen & Greenberg (2011); Gärling et al. (2016)	Girves & Wemmerus (1988) Golde (1998, 2005); Sowell et al. (2008)
	Competing demands	Tinto (1993)	Benshoff et al. (2015); Bergman et al. (2014); Cohen & Greenberg, (2011)	Golde (1998, 2005); Sowell et al. (2008)
Institutional	Academic integration	Tinto (1988)	Benshoff et al. (2015); Brus (2006); Cohen & Greenberg (2011); Meriwether (2016)	Lovitts (2001); Golde (2000); Tinto (1993)
	Academic performance	Bean (1980); Spady (1970)	Benshoff et al. (2015); Cohen & Greenberg (2011)	Girves & Wemmerus (1988)
	Cost		Benshoff et al. (2015); Cohen & Greenberg (2011)	DeAngelis (1998); Girves & Wemmerus (1988); Liseo (2005); Tinto (1993)
	Financial support	Tinto (1993)	Benshoff et al. (2015); Cohen & Greenberg (2011)	DeAngelis (1998); Girves & Wemmerus (1988); Liseo (2005); Tinto (1993)
	Faculty/Chair relationships	Bean (1980); Spady (1970)	Benshoff et al. (2015); Bergman et al. (2014); Cohen & Greenberg (2011)	Girves & Wemmerus (1988); Lovitts (2001); Tinto (1993)

Note. Undergraduate, adult, and graduate persistence models identified by factors of persistence the research represents.

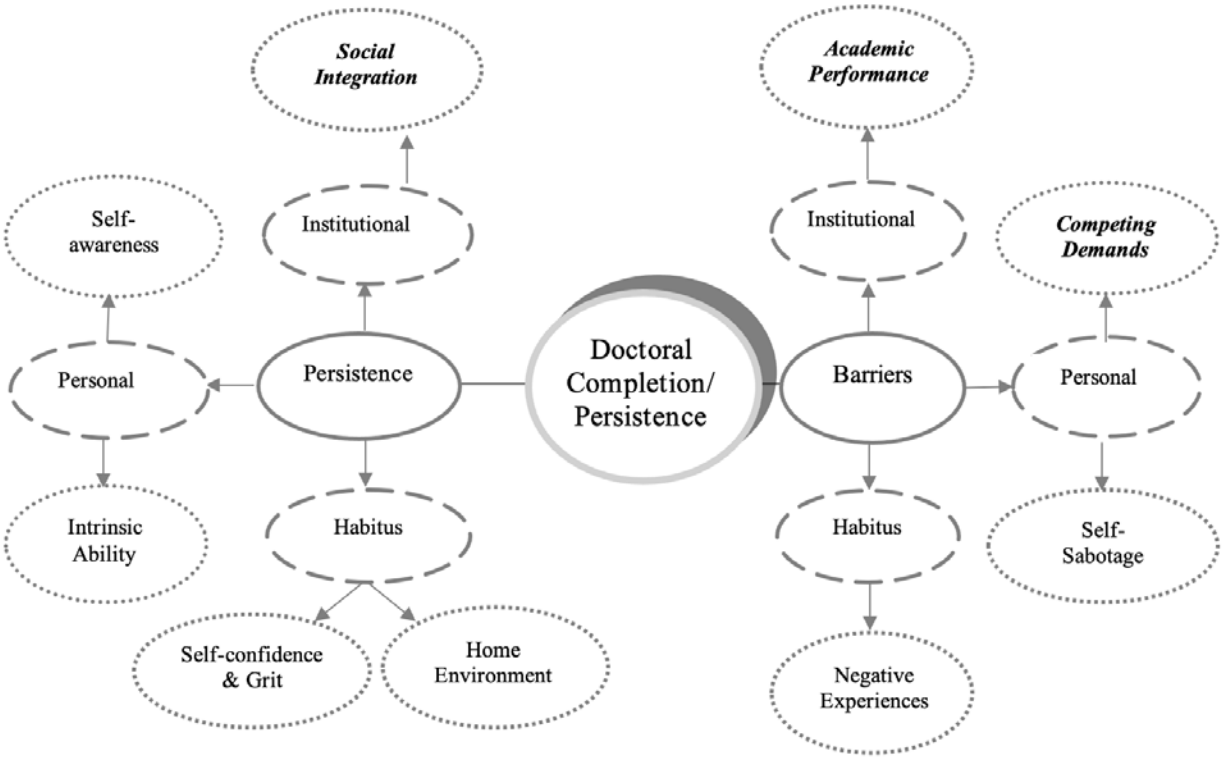
The first round of interview questions were designed to extract the barriers that each participant faced and to gain an understanding of what tactics, internal mechanisms, and strategies each participant used to ensure their doctoral success. The barriers and how they overcame the barriers

were analyzed in comparison to the existing models of persistence to confirm, refute, or discover new factors of persistence. Throughout the first round of interviews, habitus stood out as a contributing factor of persistence. Due to this revelation, questions added for the second round of interviews drew out the participant's habitus and how it positively affected persistence. Figure 2 discloses the four leading barriers (themes) the eight participants faced and the five persistence tactics (themes) of how they were able to complete the Ed.D. program. This disclosure resulted in the addition of habitus as a third overarching factor of persistence.

This study used phenomenology with heuristic inquiry to gather rich descriptions of personal experience to understand how students navigated factors that impede degree completion. Phenomenology seeks to describe human experiences scientifically and requires the researcher "to dwell intensely with subjective descriptions and to search for underlying themes or essences that illuminate the meaning of the phenomenon" (Casterline, 2009, p. 2). This framework uncovered how doctoral students persisted in comparison to the historical empirical studies by the researcher inserting themself in the data gathering to explore and discover the nuances of the phenomenon.

Figure 2

Factors Affecting Ed.D. Completion – Persistence and Barriers



Note. This is a relational diagram illustrating the barrier and persistence factors discovered through the stories of Ed.D. participants. Habitus is added as a third main category of factors that influence persistence in both persistence and barriers. Solid line ovals divide variables by persistence and barriers. Long-dashed ovals represent the three main persistence factors. Dotted ovals represent the themes discovered through the Ed.D. participant stories. Each theme reverts back to doctoral persistence/degree completion, with persistence themes overcoming the barriers. The three bolded themes support previous persistence models.

Method

Applying various persistence frameworks, this study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how eight alumni engaged in and were able to overcome the barriers they faced in their doctoral journey. Through two rounds of interviews, alumni's voices illuminated their stories, providing rich data about how doctoral students persist. This study was part of a larger phenomenological and heuristic study of doctoral students' journeys to graduation.

Participants

We used random purposeful sampling to identify participants who had graduated from an Ed.D. program (Hays & Singh, 2012). The programs were from medium to large public institutions and one large private-not-for-profit institution. The delivery method included hybrid, distance learning, and in-person learning. The Ed.D. programs focused on general educational leadership, higher education leadership, and organizational leadership. Participants volunteered through an announcement post on LinkedIn, a professional virtual network, and no incentives were offered. See Table 2 for participants' backgrounds. The diversity of the participant group enhanced the value of this research and its credibility. By providing a thorough description of students' voices, researchers and practitioners can gather implications in their work with student persistence.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Ed.D. Graduates Participating in this Study (n=8)

Pseudonym	*Gender*	*Race*	*Age Range*	*Marital Status*	*First Generation Status*
David	*Man*	*White*	*35-44*	*Single/Married*	*No*
Diana	*Woman*	*Black*	*25-34*	*Single*	*Yes*
Denise	*Woman*	*White*	*35-44*	*Married*	*Yes*
Susana	*Woman*	*Am. Indian/Latin*	*25-34*	*Married*	*No*
Henry	*Man*	*Black*	*35-44*	*Married*	*Yes*
Natalia	*Woman*	*Black/Latin*	*25-34*	*Married*	*Yes*
Lisa	*Woman*	*White/Latin*	*35-44*	*Married*	*Yes*
Simon	*Man*	*Black*	*35-44*	*Married*	*Yes*

Eight participants volunteered to participate and completed a Qualtrics[xm] survey, which provided additional demographic information and details about their Ed.D. program. Upon completing the demographic survey (Appendix A), the researcher scheduled and recorded the first round of interviews via Zoom. Participants answered questions regarding their Ed.D. program, including their program experience, barriers faced and the timing of the barrier, barrier navigation, and if their background aided in persistence. They also self-identified if they were first generation undergraduate students, as noted in the table. All of the participants were the first in their families to complete a graduate degree program. The second interview took place approximately 45 to 60 days later and

was used to clarify information from the first interview and dig deeper into their habitus through questions about their childhood, young adulthood, and current experiences. In total, the researcher conducted 16 interviews with eight graduates from various Ed.D. programs. Transcripts were checked for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began as the first researcher listened to interviews and cleaned transcripts for accuracy with their reflective journal and systematic memoing (Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher assigned manual codes during transcription review and then expanded those codes to categories and themes based on the research question. Barriers and persistence emerged as parent codes and child codes included personal and institutional. As the research progressed, the researchers added habitus. See Appendix B for the coding and theme schematic.

Once the codebook was established, analysis moved to coding in Quirkos, a secure software database to analyze and code the text data. Coding organized and labeled the data to identify the barriers and themes of persistence. This coding method reveals meaning in the subjective nature of the interviews including emotion and values coding (Miles et al., 2013). Emotion and value coding focus on perspectives, worldviews, culture, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, morals, and prejudice, along with exploring the participants' interpersonal and intrapersonal beliefs.

Trustworthiness

The first author was a full-time university practitioner and doctoral student at the time of this study. In her full-time job, she supported doctoral students during their journeys, so she was deeply connected to this topic. This study was part of her doctoral dissertation, which included a heuristic inquiry, further connecting her with her participants. This study, however, is limited to the phenomenological interview data, acknowledging her connection to the content. To ensure trustworthiness and fidelity, the first author maintained a reflective journal, used thick descriptions, and debriefed with a peer in the doctoral program (Hays & Singh, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The second author joined the research team to reexamine the data and to delimit this study to reveal findings about doctoral student persistence. The purpose of the second author was to add new perspectives to the data and to benefit from a collaborative approach to understand the experiences of students in doctoral programs. Both researchers graduated from the same doctoral program in higher education leadership. The researchers met frequently to discuss the themes and findings.

Findings

The data revealed several commonalities of doctoral persistence in response to the research question: *What are the barriers and persistence strategies that influence or contribute to Ed.D. completion?* Our data showed that the most important factors in their successful doctoral journeys were: family dynamics, academic integration, and overcoming self-sabotage. Participants relied on their habitus, a socially ingrained set of norms, expectations, and habits passed on throughout life (Bourdieu, 1977). While competing demands (Benshoff et al., 2015; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011) and academic integration (Girves and Wemmerus, 1988; Lovitts, 2001; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1993, 2006) are well documented in persistence literature, previous life experiences and self-sabotaging thoughts

are rarely noted as barriers. It was noteworthy that the role of finances did not emerge as a theme, even though it is discussed in the literature (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; DeAngelis, 1998; Liseo, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Theme One: Families of Origin

The participants were adult learners but their family histories were still influential in their journeys. Participants often described their family-home environment and the self-confidence and grit they developed in their childhood. They also carried habits, however, that did not always serve them well. The role of family was especially prominent for the six (of eight) participants (Diana, Denise, Henry, Natalie, Lisa, and Simon) who were first-generation undergraduate and graduate college students. Lisa's parents did not know how to help her with post-secondary education. As a result, she never asked for help and reflected her doctoral experience may have been different if she had just asked for help. Lisa stated, "I would not share what my progress was because I was so embarrassed," which was part of the reason the dissertation phase took six years. Henry, like Lisa, never asked for help as a child. He wanted to solve problems independently due to personal trauma as a child. Henry's doctoral journey took eight years. Diana described her conservative parents, who were not college-educated and did not understand the need for education past a bachelor's degree. Their desire for Diana to come home and live a conservative life resulted in high amounts of personal stress during her journey. Despite these challenges, participants believed postsecondary education provided a better life. Henry and Diana used negative experiences from their childhood to deduce higher education was a way out of poverty. David and Susana, second and third-generation college students, respectively, never questioned whether they would attend college—the only question was which college they would attend.

Family dynamics were also a factor for participants across generations. As Diana described her barriers, she immediately minimized them by realizing that several of her cohort peers faced more challenges than she did. She explained if her peers could persist while being married and raising children, she had no excuse for dropping out. Henry also experienced several obstacles that competed for his attention, including a family death, a critically ill mother located in another state, his marriage breaking up, and moving into a new home—all of which happened within a month. The culmination of this stress led to his ultimate barrier—a heart attack. He said:

> I was convinced it was stress-related and so I clearly at that point fell behind because in March was when you were supposed to have your dissertation done and reviewed with permission to defend. The defense would have been April, so that obviously took me off the grid, and I wasn't able to graduate.

Like two other participants, Simon experienced a death in the family, one being his mother. Simon took a leave of absence two different semesters for the birth of his children. Both of which, extended his time to completion.

A common theme of habitus for David, Denise, Simon, and Susana was to never settle and keep climbing to the next level. Their parents pushed them to complete their graduate degrees. Their parents instilled grit and commitment through their parenting, sometimes working more than one job to support the family. Pride and competition for Denise and Lisa came from their participation

in and coaching sports, as they both connected athletics with their doctoral persistence. In contrast, Henry and Natalie developed confidence, self-pride, and competitive nature in academic areas, using activities such as debate, cheerleading, and marching band to overcome shyness and develop a sense of drive.

Lisa, a Latina, also connected to her habitus to complete her Ed.D., which took eight years. As an "outward appearing white female," Lisa explained, she felt the deep-seated need to complete her degree to empower her underrepresented Latin community. This reason for persistence was inspiring and empowering for Lisa. Henry grew up with supportive parents but in a challenging environment, such as living in an apartment with rats and roaches. Henry's habitus inspired him to complete higher education to ensure he never lived in those conditions again. A survivor of domestic abuse, Denise was determined to complete her first degree and become a volleyball coach. All of the participants described events in their emerging adult years that encouraged a habitus of grit, determination, and self-awareness that connected to their ability to complete their Ed.D.

Theme Two: Academic Integration

The participants often expressed they felt supported by institutional faculty, advisors, and dissertation chairs. Each phase (coursework, candidacy, dissertation) presented unique situations of integration and persistence (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Tinto, 1993). Participants used words such as "amazing, awesome, understanding, and supportive" when describing their faculty, including their dissertation chair and committee members. They felt most of the faculty were sensitive to their working schedules and multiple demands, and accommodations would be provided as needed. However, each participant also expressed challenges.

Some students struggled in the coursework phase but most academic challenges emerged in the dissertation process. Natalie expressed the coursework she found challenging was "being in that space of truly not understanding, it's just a really vulnerable when you can't make it click or when something doesn't come naturally to you." Henry's struggles with sitting down to write added to his stress completing the program, and Denise felt large amounts of pressure and deadlines added to her stress throughout her doctoral journey.

Susana explained her cohort needed to apply to conduct research through the Institutional Research Board (IRB), but they were not given instructions. She took the initiative to call the IRB office and then relayed the message to her cohort. Denise experienced a mass exodus of leadership at her workplace, which exacerbated her workload as she began data collection. Denise realized she did not have the mental bandwidth or time to complete a qualitative study, so she changed her methodology to a quantitative study to complete it in the same timeline.

Some participants, however, encountered issues with faculty, dissertation committees, and how to write a dissertation. Natalie felt doctoral programs do not "help people understand what a dissertation is;" Lisa expressed the same concern. Lisa and Denise also described coursework that did not help them write their dissertations. Diana's committee was not knowledgeable about her topic. She felt the need to "defend her dissertation along the way." Despite this, she expressed her committee empowered her. All participants faced barriers throughout their doctoral journey, but

they possessed the acumen to overcome and resolve the barriers. Their intrinsic ability to push forward and persist was relentless.

Theme Three: Overcoming Self-Sabotage

All participants described competing demands during their program, including demanding work scenarios, changing jobs (with two of the participants changing up to three times), family deaths, relationship issues (including divorce), and health problems (one being a heart attack). These scenarios evoked stress, anxiety, and diminished mental bandwidth to concentrate on their program. Due to the demands of completing a doctoral program as a working adult, all eight alumni had self-sabotaging thoughts. These thoughts gave the students an "out," or a reason for not completing their degree, a defense mechanism to cope with stress. David's goal for his doctorate was a promotion from associate dean to dean of students or vice president of student affairs, roles that required a doctorate degree. During his program, he was promoted to assistant vice president dean of students, reaching his goal before completion. He noted that after the promotion, he thought, "why am I doing this to myself—I'm killing myself." He was at the "end" dealing with the stress. Lisa also had a prominent leadership role and rationalized a doctorate was superfluous when she felt stressed because they were already in a high-level position.

Family dynamics also lead to self-sabotaging thoughts. In response to her family's negativity, Diana felt her life would be better if she only worked and did not stay awake writing until early morning. A work promotion moved David away from his ailing father, so he feared "every time the phone rang," questioning the importance of his doctorate.

Imposter syndrome, a "sense of anxiety and self-doubt about the legitimacy" (Bothello & Roulet, 2019) of being a doctoral student, plagued all the participants. Contrary to self-sabotaging thoughts, the participants employed positive reasoning from their habitus to challenge this mental block. Natalie believed that trying to eliminate the imposter feeling was futile—the most productive method to manage it was accepting the feeling and using it as a form of humility. David and Denise used imposter syndrome as a motivator to not let any obstacle stand in their way of completing the program.

Discussion and Implications

All doctoral students face barriers in pursuit of their terminal degree. Often, these are adult students who are in relationships, possess professional positions, and juggle personal demands. They overcame negative experiences from their habitus, benefited from academic integration, and challenged self-sabotaging thoughts. This research supports extant literature, which attests competing demands and academic integration are barriers to degree completion (Bean, 1980, 1983; Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto 1975). Negative experiences from one's habitus and self-sabotaging thoughts are not common or well-defined in the literature, so this research defined these challenges and how students overcame them.

Our findings aligned with Tinto's (1993) framework, especially as students navigated barriers at each stage of the doctoral program: coursework, candidacy, and dissertation. Some students struggled with coursework, especially in writing, while others navigated bureaucratic data collection processes

independently. The majority of the participants struggled most during the dissertation process, which is not unique to students in Ed.D. programs (Golde, 2005). Early in the dissertation phase one participant experienced a disconnect from her chair and felt little support, which is why it took four years to complete her dissertation. Three other participants spent three to five years in the dissertation phase due to health, family, and careers. They felt disconnected from the community and lacked urgency to write the dissertation. These findings echo what Wollast et al. (2024) found in their study of Ph.D. candidates and their connection to their supervisors.

This study adds to the limited scholarship about different doctoral programs and students' experiences. Doran (2021) reflected on her scholarly identity as an Ed.D. graduate and scholar, often among graduates of Ph.D. programs. She explained the perceptions of an Ed.D. is that it is not as rigorous or perceived as "PhD-lite" (Doran, 2021, p. 111). However, she came to realize the value of her degree was not defined by others. Nuances among different graduate programs are important because their outcomes are different. Wollast et al. (2018), for example, found that graduate rates among 1,509 doctoral students in Belgium were lowest in the social sciences, followed by humanities, then health science. Doctoral students in sciences and technology had the highest graduation rates. Given these differences, it is important to learn from programs with higher completion rates as well as better understand those with more dropouts.

Further, the majority of the participants in this study were women, adding to previous literature that women in high-level positions, while pursuing their doctorate, excel in part-time programs (Hagedorn, 1999), an important finding since that study is 25 years old. The women in this study held director-level or higher positions and valued education as professional development (Bean, 1980). This study also supports Hagedorn's (1999) findings that married women persist at a higher rate. Over half of the women in this study were married.

Six of the eight participants were first generation graduate students and two of them were first generation undergraduate students. We defined first generation students whose parents did not graduate with a degree, so none of their parents had experiences beyond undergraduate degree programs, adding to the literature about students whose families have limited exposure to higher education. This is important because first generation students do not shed their identities, insecurities, or assets when they earn their first credential. Perhaps graduate programs should mirror some of the support networks and programs for first generation students often found at the undergraduate level (i.e., I'm First, First Gen Equity Program at the University of Texas at Austin; Proud to be First at the University of Buffalo).

This study is significant because a deeper understanding of how doctoral students navigate the barriers that impede completion can lead to more attentive retention and recruitment strategies, beyond the typical resources (e.g., assistantships, monetary awards, programmatic interventions). Advising, mental counseling (Benshoff et al., 2015), new student orientations (Gittings et al., 2018), and strategically planned resources (Manos et al., 2005; Sparkman et al., 2012) are mechanisms institutions can use to improve graduate persistence. Leveraging resources like learning management platforms (i.e., Canvas or Blackboard) can be a cost-effective approach to build an asynchronous orientation and resource for academic advising. Doctoral students may also benefit from more direct writing instruction, particularly scholarly writing, as well as clear instructions for university processes like IRB applications. Doctoral students need more than a link or a website to find help. Some may

not have the internal grit or habitus to overcome barriers and may need help to reframe their approach to school through tailored approaches that come from personalized advising and connections between institution officials (advisor, chair, faculty, student services) and the student.

Limitations and Delimitations

A study's limitations are characteristics of the methodology that influence research findings (Price & Merman, 2004). This study was limited by the number of participants (8) and the influence of the first author who collected the data as a doctoral student at the time of the study. Finding participants through LinkedIn meant some graduated more than eight years from the phenomena; therefore, they can experience recency bias. Their interview responses may have given greater importance to more recent memories.

This study was delimited to participants who were successful in their doctoral journey and, therefore, does not include the voices of those students who did not successfully navigate barriers. These findings, therefore, may or may not apply to other doctoral students and are not intended to be generalizable. This study was limited to a small sample to ensure ample time to conduct two rounds of interviews, allowing for rich descriptions of their life experiences and the phenomenon.

Conclusion

While half of those who commence doctoral programs depart before degree completion (Benshoff et al., 2015; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Gittings et al., 2018), half achieve degree completion. These rates reveal there are myriad factors that impede persistence or contribute to success (Lovitts, 2001). Historically, graduate student persistence research focused on obstacles, however, understanding the factors of persistence is also important (Lovitts, 2001). This study aimed to amplify the voices and descriptive journeys of eight students who completed their Ed.D. and gain an understanding of how they were able to overcome the obstacles revealed. Understanding how students succeed is critical to positively supporting students, leading to retention and, ultimately, degree completion.

Tracy Demchuk, Ed.D. is the Senior Director of Graduate Program Advising and Admissions at The University of Austin where she leads Graduate Admissions/Recruitment and Student Services for the School of Nursing. Her career in higher education started over 22 years ago in Canada working for various U.S.-based and Canadian institutions. Her diverse expertise includes admissions, recruitment, program advising, student retention and success, and faculty support. Her research focuses on graduate student persistence, particularly the barriers that interrupt persistence and how students successfully navigate barriers to completing the degree.

Elizabeth A. Rainey, Ed.D. is the Assistant Provost for Student Success at Loyola University New Orleans, where she leads the Student Success Center and university-wide retention strategies. She has worked in higher education for more than 20 years in roles spanning admissions, advising, faculty support, and student success. Her research focuses on students' experiences, retention outcomes, and financial aid policy.

References

Armour, M., Rivaux, S., & Bell, H. (2009). Using context to build rigor: Application in two hermeneutic phenomenological studies. *Qualitative Social Work*, 8(1), 101-122. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325008100424

Bean, J. P. (1980). Dropouts and turnover: The synthesis and test of a causal model of student attrition. *Research in Higher Education*, *12*(2), 155–187. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00976194

Bean, J. P. (1983). The application of a model of turnover in work organizations to the student attrition process. *The Review in Higher Education*, *6*(2), 129–148. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1983.0026

Benshoff, J. M., Cashwell, C. S., & Rowell, C. P. (2015). Graduate students on campus: Needs and implications for college counselors. *Journal of College Counseling*, *18*(1), 82–94. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2015.00070

Bergman, M., Gross, J. P., Berry, M., & Shuck, B. (2014). If life happened but a degree didn't: Examining factors that impact adult student persistence. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *62*(2), 91–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2014.915445

Boud, D., Costley, C., Marshall, S., & Sutton, B. (2021). Impacts of a professional practice doctorate: A collaborative enquiry, *Higher Education Research & Development, 40*(3), 431-445. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294630.2020.1765744

Bothello, J. and Roulet, T. J. (2019). The imposter syndrome, or the mis-representation of self in academic life. *Journal of Management Studies*, *56*,854-861. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12344

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Burningham, K., & Cooper, G. (1999). Being constructive: Social constructionism and the environment. *Sage Journals*, *33*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/S0038038599000280

Braxton, J. M., Hirschy, A. S., & McClendon, S. A. (2011). *Understanding and reducing college student departure*. John Wiley & Sons.

Brus, C. P. (2006). Seeking balance in graduate school: A realistic expectation or a dangerous dilemma? *New Directions for Student Services*, *2006*(115), 31–45. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.214

Casterline, G. L. (2009). Heuristic inquiry: Artistic science for nursing. *Southern Online Journal of Nursing Research*, *9*(1). https://www.snrs.org/qualitative-methods

Cohen, M. A., & Greenburg, S. (2011). The struggle to succeed: Factors associated with the persistence of part-time adult students seeking a master's degree. *Continuing Higher Education Review*, *75*. https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cher/home

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research*. Sage Publications.

DeAngelis, S. (1998). The influence of price and price subsidies on within-year persistence of graduate and professional students. *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, *28*(3), 41–57. https://doi.org/10.55504/0884-9153.1104

Doran, E. (2021). An EdD in PhD world. In E. Templeton, B.H. Love, & O. Johnson (Eds.), *Elevating marginalized voices in academe (pp. 111-114)*. Routledge. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/10.4324/9781003044338

Douglass, B. G., & Moustakas, C. (1985). Heuristic inquiry: The internal search to know. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 25*(3), 39–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167885253004

Fitzpatrick, K. R., Henninger, J., & Taylor, D. M. (2014). Access and retention of marginalized populations within undergraduate music education degree programs. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *62*(2), 105–127. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429414530760

Hagedorn, L. S. (1999). Factors related to the retention: Research, theory & practice of female graduate students over 30. *Journal of College Student Retention*, *1*(2), 99–114. https://doi.org/10.2190/LKWC-EJUB-V5KM-BRNQ

Hardre, P., Liao, L., Dorri, Y., & Beeson Stoesz, M. A. (2019). Modeling American graduate students' perceptions predicting dropout intentions perceptions predicting dropout intentions. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *14*, 105–132. https://doi.org/10.28945/4161

Gärling, T., Gamble, A., Fors, F., & Hjerm, M. (2016). Emotional well-being related to time pressure, impediment to goal progress, and stress-related symptoms. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *17*(5), 1789–1799. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-015-9670-4

Girves, J. E., & Wemmerus, V. (1988). Developing models of graduate student degree progress. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *59*(2), 163–189. https://doi.org/10.2307/1981691

Gittings, G., Bergman, M., Shuck, B., & Rose, K. (2018). The impact of student attributes and program characteristics on doctoral degree completion. *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development*, *30*(3), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20220

Golde, C. M. (1998). Beginning graduate school: explaining first-year doctoral attrition. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *1998*(101), 55–64. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.10105

Golde, C. M. (2000). Should I stay or should I go? Student descriptions of the doctoral attrition process. *The Review of Higher Education*, *23*(2), 199–227. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2000.004

Golde, C. M. (2005). The role of the department and discipline in doctoral student attrition: Lessons from four departments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *76*(6), 669–700. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2005.11772304

Graham, J. M., & Kim, Y. (2011). Predictors of doctoral student success in professional psychology: Characteristics of students, programs, and universities. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *67*(4), 340–354. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20767

Hagedorn, L. S. (1999). Factors related to the retention: Research, theory & practice of female graduate students over 30. *Journal of College Student Retention*, *1*(2), 99–114. https://doi.org/10.2190/LKWC-EJUB-V5KM-BRNQ

Hardré, P., Liao, L., Dorri, Y., & Beeson Stoesz, M. A. (2019). Modeling American graduate students' perceptions predicting dropout intentions perceptions predicting dropout intentions. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *14*, 105–132. https://doi.org/10.28945/4161

Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. The Guilford Press.

Ivankova, N. V., & Stick, S. L. (2007). Students' persistence in a distributed doctoral program in educational leadership in higher education: A mixed methods study. *Research in Higher Education*, *48*(1), 93–135. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-006-9025-4

Jobe, R. L., & Lenio, J. (2014). Common ground: Addressing attrition across diverse institutions in higher education. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, *4*(2), 11–17. https://doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v4i2.209

Karimshah, A., Wyder, M., Henman, P., Dwight, T., Capelin, E., & Short, P. (2013). Overcoming adversity among low SES students: A study of strategies for retention. *Australian Universities' Review, 55*(2), 5–14. https://www.nteu.org.au/library/aur

Kelchen, R. & Barrett, F. (2024, April). Exploring the growth of master's degree programs in the United States. *Postsecondary Equity & Economics Research Project.* https://peerresearchproject.org/peer/research/body/PEER_Masters-Degrees_B.pdf

Knowles, M. (1990). *The adult learner: A neglected species* (4th ed.). Gulf Publishing Company.

Labaree, D. F. (2017). *A perfect mess: The unlikely ascendancy of American higher education*. The University of Chicago Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

Lindeman, E. (1927). *The meaning of adult education*. New Republic

Liseo, P. A. (2005). *Graduate and professional student within-year persistence and financial aid* (Doctoral dissertation). http://search.proquest.com/docview/305389758/abstract/CD30BB4782A641B8PQ/1

Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Lovitts, B. E., & Nelson, C. (2000). The hidden crisis in graduate education: Attrition from Ph.D. programs. *Academe*, *86*(6), 44–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/40251951

Manos, A. B., McCoy, R. B., & Morgan, B. L. (2005). A case study of education Ph.D. cohort students: Factors related to stress. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *53*(2), 24–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377366.2005.10400066

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Meriwether, J. L. (2016). My unexpected learning about adult learners: Engaging adult learners through intentional advocacy. *About Campus*, *21*(2), 17–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.21204

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A., & Saldaña, J. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Naidoo, D. (2015). Understanding non-traditional PhD students' habitus – implications for PhD programmes. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *20*(3), 340–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1017457

Navarro, Z. (2006). In search of a cultural interpretation of power: The contribution of Pierre Bourdieu. *IDS Bulletin, 37*(6), 11-22. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2006.tb00319.x

Oreopoulos, P., & Salvanes, K. G. (2011). Priceless: The nonpecuniary benefits of schooling. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *25*(1), 159–184. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.25.1.159

Palmer, J. C., & Wright, R. E. (1996). Predicting academic performance in graduate business programs; when does age make a difference? *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, *38*(2), 72–80. https://www.learntechlib.org/j/ISSN-0011-8052/

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1980). Predicting freshman persistence and voluntary dropout decisions from a theoretical model. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *51*(1), 60–75. https://doi.org/10.2307/1981125

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students*. Jossey-Bass.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (Vol. 2). Jossey-Bass.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works* (Vol. 3). Jossey-Bass.

Posselt, J. (2018). Normalizing struggle: Dimensions of faculty support for doctoral students and implications for persistence and well-being. *Journal of Higher Education*, *89*(6), 988–1013. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1449080

Price, J. H., & Mernan, J. (2004). Research limitations and the necessity of reporting them. *American Journal of Health Education*, *35*(2), 66–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2004.10603611

Rogers-Shaw, C. A., & Carr-Chellman, D. J. (2018). Developing care and socio-emotional learning in first year doctoral students: Building capacity for success. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *13*, 233–252. https://doi.org/10.28945/4064

Roland, N., Frenay, M., & Bourdrenghien, G. (2016). Towards a better understanding of academic persistence among fresh-men: A qualitative approach. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, *4*(12), 175-188. https://doi.org/10.18260/1-2--16543

Ruud, C. M., Saclarides, E. S., George-Jackson, C. E., & Lubienski, S. T. (2018). Tipping points: Doctoral students and consideration of departure. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *20*(3), 286–307. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025116666082

Seidman, A. (2005). Minority student retention: Resources for practitioners. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, *2005*(125), 7–24. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.136

Seidman, A. (2012). Introduction. In Alan Seidman, *College student retention Formula for student success* (2nd ed., pp. 8-12). Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Sipe, L., & Constable, S. (1996). A chart of four contemporary research paradigms: Metaphors for the modes of inquiry. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education, 1*, 153–163. https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/

Sowell, R., Zhang, T., & Redd, K. (2008). *Analysis of baseline program data from the Ph.D. completion project*. https://cgsnet.org/sites/default/files/phd_completion_attrition_baseline_program_data.pdf

Spady, W. G. (1970). Dropouts from higher education: An interdisciplinary review and synthesis. *Interchange*, *1*(1), 64–85. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02214313

Sparkman, L. A., Maulding, W. A., & Roberts, J. G. (2012). Non-cognitive predictors of student success in college. *College Student Journal*, *46*(3), 642–652. https://projectinnovation.com/college-student-journal

Taniguchi, H., & Kaufman, G. (2005). Degree completion among nontraditional college students. *Social Science Quarterly*, *86*(4), 912–927. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0038-4941.2005.00363.x

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, *45*(1), 89–125. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089

Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *The Journal of Higher Education, 59*(4), 438-455. https://doi.org/10.2307/1981920

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.).The University Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What Next? *Journal of College Student Retention Research: Theory and Practice, 8*(1), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.2190/C0C4-EFT9-EG7W-PWP4

Wacquant, L. (2006). Habitus. In. J. Beckert & M. Zafirovski (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of economic sociology*) pp. 317-321). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824214

Wendler, C., Bridgeman, B., Markle, R., Cline, F., Bell, N., McAlister, P., & Kent, J. (2012). *Pathways through graduate school and into careers*. https://www.ets.org/c/19574/19089_PathwaysReptqp.pdf

Wollast, R., Aelenei, C., Chevalère, J., Van der Linden, N., Galand, B., Azzi, A., Frenay, A, & Klein, O. (2023). Facing the dropout crisis among PhD candidates: The role of supervisor support in emotional well-being and intended doctoral persistence among men and women. *Studies in Higher Education*, *48*(6), 813–828. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2172151

Wollast, R., Boudrenghien, G., Van Der Linden, N., Galand, B., Roland, N., Devos, C., DeClercq, M., Klein, O., Azzi, A., & Frenay, M. (2018). Who are the doctoral students who drop out? Factors associated with the rate of doctoral degree completion in universities. *International Journal of Higher Education, 7*(4), 143–156. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v7n4p143

Appendix A

Demographic Survey (Qualtrics^{XM})

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research. With 50% or less of doctoral students who begin their studies persist to graduation, the purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Higher Education students who successfully navigated individual and institutional variables that influence persistence.

Please complete the following demographic survey. In keeping with the guidelines of the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at the University of Texas at Austin, all information provided will be kept strictly confidential. A pseudonym will be used for each participant and institutions will not be identified except by size and status and demographic data will be aggregated.

Question 2: What is your name?
Question 3: What is your email?
Question 4: What pseudonym would you like to use for this study?
Question 5: What college or university did you complete your Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Higher Education?
Question 6: What is your gender?

- Drop down with options

Question 7: What was your age when you started the Ed.D. program?

- Drop-down of age ranges

Question 8: What month and year did you start your doctoral program?
Question 9: What month and year did you complete your doctoral program?
Question 10: Are you Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? Yes or No choices
Question11: How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply.

- Drop-down race/ethnicity choices

Question 12: Are you first generation college student? Yes or No choices
Question 13: What is the highest degree or level of school you completed prior to starting your doctoral program?

- Drop-down education level choices

Question 6: What was your marital status at the time of completing your Ed.D.
Question7: Did you have any children while completing your doctoral program? If yes, how many and were they a dependent completing your Ed.D.
Question 8: What was your employment status during your doctoral studies?

- Drop down employment status choices

Final page: Thank you for completing the demographic survey for this study. [The researcher] will contact you to set up the first interview conducted via zoom. The interview will take 60-90 minutes. In preparation, please begin to think about the tenure of your degree and the barriers you faced. The interview questions are intended to hear your story of how you persisted to degree completion.

Appendix B

Coding and Theme Schematic

Parent Codes	Child Codes	Major Themes
Persistence	Personal	1. Habitus: Home Environment 2. Habitus: Self-Confidence/Initiation 3. Personal: Self-Awareness 4. Institutional: Social Integration (Advisor/Chair/Faculty) 5. Personal: Intrinsic Ability
	Institutional	
	Habitus	
Barriers	Personal	1. Personal: Competing Demands 2. Habitus: Negative Experiences 3. Institutional: Academic Integration 4. Personal: Self-Sabotage
	Institutional	
	Habitus	

Note. Schematic illustrating the major theme's path of discovery.