First Semester Experiences of Professionals Transitioning to Full-time Doctoral Study

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of full-time doctoral students transitioning from professional employment. Interview data were interpreted through a student transition and socialization conceptual framework. Five themes emerged: identity, integration, support systems, perseverance, and success vs. challenges. The results can be used to develop policies and programs aimed at reducing doctoral student attrition.

Introduction

Di Pierro (2007) argues that the preservation of our nation's doctoral students "will have significant bearing as we embrace a more technologically complex world that must avail itself of the research, creativity, and talents of a diverse body of scholars" (p. 368). However, many students who begin a Ph.D. program do not finish. A recent study, the Ph.D. Completion Project conducted by the Council of Graduate Schools (2007), found that 57% of students complete the Ph.D. within 10 years. This number is slightly higher than what has been considered the norm of a 50 percent completion rate since the 1970's. This recent study still leaves an alarming attrition rate for doctoral students at 43%. Another study found that 58.8% of attrition occurs within the first two years of doctoral study (Di Pierro, 2007). The findings of Ph.D. Completion Project and other similar studies (Di Pierro, 2007; Lovitts, 2001) are a reminder that enhancing graduate education must be a priority for administrators, faculty, accrediting bodies, and legislators.

Understanding the factors that contribute to a student's progress towards the completion of a degree has served as the source of inquiry for much of the research that has been focused on student persistence. The undergraduate population has been the focal point for the majority of the student persistence literature, without much regard to graduate education. But, mounting internal and external pressures associated with institutional accountability will force higher education administrators to take a closer look at doctoral student attrition and retention (Malone, Nelson & Nelson, 2001).

Tinto's (1993) seminal work on undergraduate student departure serves as the impetus for his three-stage theory of graduate persistence: transition and adjustment, the development of competence (attaining candidacy), and completion of the dissertation. The process of graduate persistence is longitudinal in nature. Similar to the undergraduate departure framework, graduate student persistence is influenced by "the personal and intellectual

interactions that occur within and between students and faculty and the various communities that make up the academic and social systems of the institution" (Tinto, 1993, p. 231). The transition and adjustment phase, as described by Tinto (1993), typically occurs during the first year and focuses on the academic and social integration of the student into the university communities. Successful transition during year one is critical to retention; "Good beginnings . . . help students to make informed decisions in response to socialization challenges they face" (Golde, 1998, p. 64). Socialization theories also speak to the phenomenon of transition and adjustment. Golde (1998) maintained that graduate student socialization is unique in that not only does the new student have to transition into their role as student, but they must also be socialized into the profession.

There is no single reason that explains why doctoral students depart prior to graduation. Departmental culture and incompatibility with the field of study, program, and institution have been cited as possible reasons for high attrition rates (Bair & Haworth, 1999). Inadequate preparation for research and difficulty with the dissertation process (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Malone, Nelson & Nelson, 2001), along with advisor and department mismatch, the realities of faculty life, and instability of the job market also contribute to doctoral attrition (Golde, 1998). While many of the reasons for departure are complex in nature, practitioners can intentionally structure experiences to circumvent socialization barriers (Golde, 1998), resulting in higher retention and graduation rates.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to gain an understanding of how first semesters doctoral students experience the transition from full-time professionals to full-time doctoral students. We explored the following research questions:

1.   What is the nature of transition experiences for professionals returning to doctoral studies full time?

2.   What are the challenges and successes that doctoral students experience during their first semester transition?

The personal experiences shared by the students in this study provide valuable insight into the transition experience of first semester doctoral students. This study contributes to existing literature to develop best practices in graduate education that may lead to higher Ph.D. completion rates.

Transition to Graduate Study

Transition is defined by Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (p. 27)." To understand the meaning that a transition has for a particular individual, one needs to consider the type, context, and impact of the transition. Transition may begin with a single event (graduation,

divorce, loss of loved one) but it is a process that extends over a period of time and varies among individuals (Evans et. al, 1998). Ballard and Clanchy (1997) defined transition as a process of socialization into the university culture where rules are not explicitly stated. Hellsten (2002) and Ryan and Twibell (2000) all refer to transition of candidates specifically as adjustments to a new, unfamiliar environment and learning context.

The vast majority of graduate students enter into graduate school because of a desire for knowledge in the field and a desire to conduct research in the field (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). Greene and Minton (1989) identified three basic reasons to go to graduate school: it is essential for a profession, it advances a career and it fulfills a need for personal satisfaction. Bell (1986) found that education doctoral students entered into graduate study with certain goals and benefits they believed they would receive and that upon completion students had generally acquired these benefits.

Brandt (1995) indicated that 31.7% of students from education drop out and do not complete their graduate studies. This dropout rate indicates that although transition to graduate studies is perceived as a successful step in life, various influencing factors occur during this phase. Nerad and Miller (1996) found that students who left graduate school early did so primarily because of a mismatch between their own interests and their program's, a feeling of alienation and not having a "calling" for research. Those who left graduate school late in their education did so because of a lack of financial support, because of an advisor relationship, for a lack of a professional goal, or the departmental climate. Students are far more likely to leave before their doctoral candidacy than after.

Hughes and Kleist (2005) interviewed four first-semester doctoral students in counselor education. One issue that came to light in the interviews was doctoral students' doubted their ability to succeed in the program and their suitability towards it. However, there is evidence that these students had opportunities to gain a better understanding of what they were supposed to do in their program as they were involved in various departmental gatherings and social events. This allowed students to gain knowledge from more senior doctoral students and professors. By the end of their first semester, participants expressed confirmation in their decision to be in doctoral study. This indicates that socialization may facilitate transition to graduate study. By being involved with and socialized into one's department "…future doctoral students benefit from knowing what to expect (Hughes & Kleist, 2005, p. 107)."

One of the challenges of transition is the mismatch between individual personal interest and that of the graduate program (Flaga, 2006; Golde, 1998; Nerad & Miller, 1996). Students facing this challenge might be divided between

learning about the profession and having trouble integrating into their department. Difficulty integrating into one's department may cause an alienated feeling, which has been identified as a cause of graduate attrition (Flaga, 2006; Nerad & Miller, 1996).

Simpson (2003) found that minority graduate students were more satisfied with academics than social experiences in graduate school. Ultimately, transition affects all students especially the first year as it is stressful, socially isolating and sometimes disappointing (Ying, 2002). According to Lovitts (2001), social and emotional experiences play a greater role in lack of persistence rather than academic ability.

Graduate Student Socialization

Bragg (1976) stated it is the aim of higher education to facilitate the socialization of the individual student so they internalize the values and norms of academia.   This sense of identity includes "…a sense of intellectual competence based on the development of critical thinking abilities, a sense of autonomy derived from rational judgment, and a sense of commitment to continued cognitive learning and to the tolerance of diversity necessary in a pluralistic social system (p. 11)." Bragg (1976) discussed this provision of identity for both undergraduate and graduate students.

Conducting interviews with doctoral students who did not complete their dissertation, Meyers (1999) confirmed the need for a socialization process. Doctoral candidates stated that family was a main factor in their decision for not completing their dissertation. Additionally, advisors' lack of support contributed to the majority of unfinished dissertations. However, other faculty on their committee also influenced doctoral candidates' decisions. Confirming the need for positive social experiences, Ryan and Twibell (2000) found that out of 476 students who studied abroad, social integration was one of the top concerns for students. Though these students were not doctoral students in their first semester, the similarities of entering a new and different environment should be noted.

Austin and McDaniels (2006) describe various stages in the socialization process of doctoral students into faculty positions. Doctoral students move sequentially through the following stages: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. The anticipatory stage typically occurs when students enter into graduate study. The formal stage occurs after a level of experience is gained that allows for the environment and roles portrayed by the individual to become normalized.   The informal stage facilitates the individual's understanding of informal expectations and roles that faculty must play out. Both the formal and informal stages are facilitated by interactions with faculty and other doctoral students. The personal stage, the roles presented and adhered to in previous stages become internalized and valued by the individual.

According to Austin and McDaniels (2006) there are certain skills necessary for graduate students that are best learned through socialization (i.e. knowledge of one's discipline and its norms, interpersonal skills, and professional habits and attitudes). The manner in which these skills are learned is consistently iterated as one of interaction between the individuals, the faculty in their department, and their peer doctoral students.

Gardner (2008) further discussed the need for faculty support by describing the process of doctoral education as one where the student eventually becomes an independent researcher. This transition is facilitated by advisor support. Gardner (2008) argued that faculty support should vary according to the student and the student's progress towards independence. Gardner (2008) also found that socialization with peer students was important to graduate students interviewed as it helped these students integrate into the graduate school. Specifically with doctoral students, building relationships with faculty is considered equally important as they will eventually also become their colleagues. Some students voiced a need for more interaction with faculty as it aids in building positive views and feelings about their education and educational environment. These socialization factors contribute to the student's ability to manage the many tasks of a graduate student. Socialization of graduate students by faculty "…has to do with the extent to which students feel accepted and respected by members of the faculty, the degree to which the students are able to relate to members of the faculty as friends and colleagues rather than as unapproachable superiors. In essence, this dimension reflects "the amount of psychological distance that separates the lives of the graduate students and the faculty" (Katz & Hartnett, 1976, p. 59).

When comparing the relationships with faculty between two top ten and two lower ranked graduate schools, Katz and Harnett (1976) found that higher ranked graduate schools had higher rated relationships between graduate students and faculty. Faculty were identified as being more friendly, more likely to treat students as adults, being more helpful, as more likely to encourage academic work outside of class assignments, and having the respect of their students. These faculty members were also identified as giving more constructive feedback. These qualities are supported by later studies and practical guides on graduate advisement (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Lipschutz, 1993; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008; Whisker, 2005).

Another recommendation (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Lipschutz, 1993; Walker et al., 2008) is that faculty should describe from the outset the program expectations and central goals as well as discuss ways in which the student's goals and interests can be facilitated in conjunction with departmental and discipline goals. This facilitates internalization of departmental objectives as well as allowing students to assess "…their own values and talents and the extent to which their interests and goals match with what they observe of their

graduate programs. Creating a diverse faculty will require newcomers of all backgrounds to feel welcome from the start and to see that their contributions, values, and passions are respected and have a place within academy" (Austin & McDaniels, 2006, p. 440).

Beyond faculty support is the need for a sense of community (Katz & Hartnett, 1976). This factor is related in part to the relationship with faculty but also includes a consensus of goals within the department, how much of a social network extends from the professional one within the department, and how much cooperation is present within the department. In some departments there are coherent social relationships whereas in other departments "…graduate students rarely have the opportunity to observe members of the faculty in other than academic roles and seldom learn much about how the faculty members think about anything except issues in their discipline" (Katz & Harnett, 1976, p. 73). Walker et al. (2008) also described the importance of the academic social environment. They identify the need to incorporate students into the department as well as involving them in research within and outside of their disciplines.

Even when faculty and departmental support are met, graduate students must have relationships with their peer students (Katz & Hartnett, 1976). These types of friendships are seen as extremely beneficial to the graduate experience. However, there are other students who suggest a lack of time keeps them from having a healthy amount of social experiences. Academic work load and the time it consumes is cited as one reason why social relationships are limited for many graduate students. These time constraints can also affect romantic relationships of individuals. Students cite either not having time to develop such relationships or finding difficulty maintaining them because of pressures associated with school. "Most married couples are childless with both partners occupied with work of school-related tasks. One spouse may be working to help support the other's schooling" (Katz & Hartnett, 1976, p. 147). This can have the potential to help marriages by creating an equal partnership between the two and providing needed support for one another. Yet about five percent of graduate students were found to be divorced and upon investigation many cited academic pressures as leading to the divorce. There is also evidence that graduate students have limited opportunities to meet others and can often deal with a great degree of loneliness (Katz & Hartnett, 1976).

 "Graduate students coming into the academic program experience its culture and are socialized into their chosen professional fields through learning, interaction with faculty and peers, and integration into its activities" (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001, p. 38). It is an overlapping socialization of personal communities and professional communities. The values of the professional community must be incorporated and integrated with the values held from the personal community of the graduate student. If students do not or can not

integrate prior values with values held by their program, department, or advisor, then it is likely they may leave a program in which they are enrolled. Additionally, faculty advisors who fail to provide sufficient support or structure for their graduate students create a level of dissonance. Advisors have the difficult but critical task of providing just the right amount of autonomy and support for each of their advisees and this can only be done with a great deal of conversation and interaction between the two. The presence or lack of peer relationships also factors into the success of the graduate student.

Golde (1998) conducted research focusing on reasons why first year doctoral students left graduate school. In doing this, she took the view that becoming a doctoral student is a process of socialization.   She further describes this socialization (or transition) of doctoral students in four different tasks or components. The first focuses on intellectual mastery or the essential question of "Can I do this?" (p. 56) asked by students of themselves. Second is that of looking at life as a graduate student and the struggles inherent therein, "Do I want to be a graduate student?" (p. 56). The third task looks at whether they match up to the work that is being asked of them, "Do I want to do this work?" (p. 56). Fourth is looking at integrating oneself into the department, "Do I belong here?" (p. 56). Golde found that many students answering 'no' to any of these questions decided to leave school. When focusing on the humanities, Golde (1998) found that many students discovered a mismatch between their expectations of what graduate study would be like, based on their undergraduate experiences, and what it actually was like. Some students identified problems with a particular school they entered as not meeting expectations. Golde (1998) suggested that much of the attrition that can be controlled by departments, those reasons other than personal, can be done so by better facilitating the socialization of graduate students.

In a later study, Golde (2005) outlined four possible reasons for doctoral attrition: a mismatch between personal goals and that of the discipline, a mismatch of departmental goals and personal goals, isolation within the discipline, and isolation from the departmental community. She found that financial and intellectual limiters were not primary reasons for many of those who left doctoral study. Many participants identified that they simply did not want to have the life of a researcher as well as a mismatch in their expectations of what it was like to be a graduate student. Some students described that they were not prepared to think like a doctoral student—that they weren't prepared to be as analytical as they were expected to be. This often was one factor that led to their leaving of the program. Poor relationships with advisors were also a contributing factor to attrition. There also appeared to be an idealized vision of what a professor did and many students did not understand the extensive amount of research and time and effort needed to conduct research. This led many students to realize that the career path was not for them and they left

doctoral study. However, Golde (2005) suggested that attrition due to student realizations of a mismatch in what they value and what the doctoral degree and lifestyle is about may be seen as positive in some regards. She noted that the earlier these students become aware of this mismatch the better as later means a greater waste of human resources and time. Using Golde's (1998) socialization theory as the theoretical framework we sought to examine how first semester doctoral students experience the transition from a full-time professional to a full-time doctoral student.

Methods

Our research was developed to fill the gap in the existing literature exploring the essence of a graduate student's first semester lived experience. We used a phenomenological anaylsis to elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of the phenomenon for doctoral students. Specifically, individual face-to-face interviews were carried out with seven participants to identify and describe the first semester transition experience of full-time doctoral students who were returning to college after leaving full-time employment. The findings provided information that portrayed a description of transition. The literature review helped in framing open-ended interview questions and in interpreting the results. Our own experiences as professionals turned doctoral students led to a desire to describe the experiences of those in transition between the two lifestyles.

Procedure

We employed a purposeful sampling approach by focusing on a specific criterion; full-time professional's transitioning to a doctoral students in their first semester of study. Potential participants who had held professional jobs and had returned to school to begin doctoral study were identified within our respective departments and associations. Participants were selected to achieve a wide range of experience types and to improve transferability. All participants were in their first semester of their first year of full-time doctoral study. Participants ranged from age 25-48, there were a total of seven participants of which five were female and two were male. The participants had between three and 25 years of full-time work experience and came from diverse ethnic groups (see Table 1). Each participant had been employed full-time in a professional career before deciding to attend graduate school. At the time of the study, participants attended a Southeastern Research 1 University.

Information about the research study was orally disseminated through researcher contact with potential participiants. After being informed about the study, individuals who verbally indicated interest in particpating were given an invitation letter to participate. An interview between one researcher and each participant was scheduled and written consent from each participant was

obtained. This process took place prior to the interview in order to give the participant the opportunity to ask additional questions regarding the study.

All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Interview tapes were transcribed then analyzed. Each transcript was coded seven times. We identified themes emerging from the transcripts. Once themes were identified we discussed and identified common threads emerging across all seven interviews.

Data Analysis

The first step in the anaylsis involved transcribing the recorded interviews. Next we each read and re-read the interview transcripts several times using reflexivity and acknowledging our own transitioning experience from a professional job to a doctoral student. This enabled us to focus on the participants experiences and analyze the data by identifying important statements to gain a deeper understanding of the participants experiences as recommended by Creswell (1998). Once the data were coded and critical statements were identified, the data were organized into meaningful clusters (Creswell, 1998; Lindseth, 2004; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This was followed by the elimination of irrelevant, repetitive or overlapping data. We then identified the "invariant themes" (Creswell, 1998, p. 55) that are the essence of the lived experience, within the data in order to "[describe] what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 107). As a result, we were able to illustrate the experience of professionals returning to full-time doctoral education in an education department (see Table 2). During all phases of coding and anaylsis, we maintained field notes adressing the data and personal reactions to the participants' responses to increase reflexivity.

Limitations of the Study

Researchers that seek to investigate the transition experiences of doctoral students should consider the following limitations. Homogeniety with respect to academic discipline (all education majors), enrollment status (full-time), and background prior to enrollment in a doctoral program (professional status) were established as criteria for participation and are recognized limitations. Another limitation was the small number of informants (seven) interviewed. Accordingly, the findings identified may not be generalizable to doctoral students in all disciplines.

Participants were asked to take part in a single interview. The limited amount of time allotted for data collection may have reduced our ability to explore participant responses in greater depth. As such, this constraint may not have given us enough time to engage the participants fully. In addition, due to time constraints, we each interviewed one participant. Even though we followed the

same interview protocol, differences in interviewing techniques were present – such as the use of follow-up probes – and may have affected participants' responses.

Results

The data collected from this study are consistent with research findings that examined the transition experiences of other doctoral students (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Flaga, 2006; Greene & Minton, 1989; Golde, 1998; Hiestand, 1971; Nerad & Miller, 1996; Ziolowski, 1990). However, additional themes emerged from the data that had not been previously discussed. It is also important to note the sub-themes identified (see Figure 1), which also informed our interpretation of the overarching categories.

This study is unique in that we conducted interviews while the informants' were matriculating through their first semester as full-time doctoral students. As such, we were able to gain a more in-depth understanding of the journey of these students from a fresh perspective. We classified the data from the seven informants using five broad themes. The first theme, identity, spoke to the challenges an individual may face in transitioning from professional to student. The relinquishment of professional identity and issues of control seemed to contribute to the students' acceptance, or lack thereof, of their new roles. The second theme spoke to this notion of integration. Broadly depicted, this area focused on the students' acclimation to the new environment and what types of avenues or resources were helping to facilitate this change. Third – perseverance – the informants spoke passionately about why they made the decision to return to school; however, some questioned if they have the intellectual capability and emotional/mental fortitude necessary to obtain the degree.

Two themes that have not been discussed as much in the literature are the values placed on support systems and success vs. challenge. Whether supported by family, friends, faculty/administrators, or peers, there seemed to be an association between the success of the students interviewed and the types of networks readily available to them. While informants acknowledged the value and importance of social and familial systems of support, they also highlighted the complexity of fostering new and maintaining established relationships when academic demands were present. The final theme is this notion of success vs. challenge. Even when participants were successful in fulfilling their academic obligations feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and doubt were still pervasive. Using the five themes identified the information that follows will provide more insight into our interpretation of the transition experiences of the seven informants.

Identity – Who am I?

A strong theme that emerged with all the interviewees was that the students had experienced a loss of professional identity. The interviewees shared how returning to graduate school full time had affected their roles of spouse, parent, friend, church member, community volunteer, but the greatest loss was related to professional identity. All of the participants had left full time employment to attend graduate school full time. Most of the participants were still struggling with integrating their new identity as a student and graduate assistant. It was as if they were still trying to answer the question – who am I? What does being a 'student' mean? In response, one student stated,

"My life has changed also with respect to my professional identity that I had… now (as a graduate assistant) just kind of figuring out where you fit." Donovan

"It (life before school) was just different, I kind of felt like I was the expert, you know. People asked me questions. I was in charge of my classroom, I knew the information, how to handle my class and now I don't really feel that I'm the expert at all." Ashley

Many of the students had professional careers in which they were seen as the expert and were well respected with their peers. Students expressed that in their professional lives, they had much more autonomy and more control over their professional and personal lives.

"I had a lot of control over myself, at both…on my job and in my personal life. I mean I still have control over my personal life here, but on the job I wasn't really questioned about my decisions, I was left to my own devices to do what I needed to do, and what I thought needed to be done. I was seen as the expert on residential/transition issues for first year students on campus. Anytime they were thinking about things involving first year programming, they always came to me." Anthony

Students expressed that even though they had been very successful in their previous role(s), they did not yet know if they would be successful in their role as a student. Some expressed that they felt that they had to leave their professional identities behind and now had to prove themselves in their new roles as a students.

 "I have to prove myself all over again. I left a professional career where I was highly appreciated and valued and now I am in a positions where I feel like that everyday I have to prove that I am not an idiot." Sarah

"For me it's treating different students with respect and appreciating all their experiences…they should be allowed to contribute based on that not asked to act like your 20 years old with no experience." Amy

Integration - Do I belong?

The interview findings indicate that there are various forms of integration. Integration occurs with faculty, department, students, university community activities, friends, family and community at large.

The participants of this study have shown that integration with faculty members varies. Some of the findings indicated that integration does occur while others indicate it does not. Students working as graduate assistants have daily interaction with faculty members, department coworkers and other students and thus they feel more integrated and connected to the academic environment than those who do not have assistantships.

The graduate students have expressed that they tend to have more connection with their faculty advisors and instructors due to the fact that they interact with the faculty on a continuous basis. Some of the graduate students in the study indicated that they perceive integration as very crucial for academic achievements and they personally take the first step in scheduling appointments with faculty members.

"And so I found out too that you know, once you make them aware of what your interests are that they can help you position and align you with the opportunities.. my experience with the faculty has been very positive." Donovan

Our results showed that integration with other classmates usually occurs only during class meetings and due to various reasons like not being from the same discipline or not having similar work schedules, some graduate students do not have time to establish a more concrete relationship with other students.

The study has also shown that graduate students who had previously lived in the university town during their undergraduate degree or who are originally from that town feel very integrated to the community at large.

"I feel connected to the town. I used to live here for a long time. I don't live here now. Now I'm only here a few days a week. But…no, I do not feel that connected to the institution community really. But the community in town I do more." Amy

Most of the graduate students felt connected to the institution community as well as the activities taking place.

"I do not know how other colleges are really, But I went to undergrad at another institution and I notice it felt a lot like this institution in that people are school spirited and not just about sports, but people wear the institution T-shirts, you feel like a bond with everybody." Brandy

"I feel very integrated with the community. And I think that it's really helped because I came here as an undergrad. So I already felt like part of the community." Ashley

The findings also indicated students involve themselves in activities like joining organizations and going to homecomings, which provided them with an opportunity to connect with students outside their discipline and form relationships.

"I'm happy to, you know, attend student organization meetings and things of that nature. I think, you know with increased participation maybe hopefully at some point maybe assuming a leadership role in the student organization would kind of help to facilitate that as well." Donovan

On the other hand, new comers to the area, feel not as integrated, due to the fact that the environment itself is different from their own. Several participants commented that being part of the university community activities is a major means of integrating with university community at large.

"There's not really a connection you know, um, this is a southern school so football reigns supreme and I have yet to go to a game because I have yet to get a ticket, so you know there's not even that draw in as a sports pull or anything like that, to kind of make you feel part of the community." Anthony

Some of the students strived to make friends within their discipline or outside their discipline. Having personal relationships with other graduate students for many provides them with the opportunity to dialogue, work together on projects, exchange advice and share with each other's graduate experiences.

"I feel I am getting more connected making friends and other students and getting to know people." Sarah

"I think I have been very fortunate to start establishing relationships with other doctoral students. You know I will send an email you know just checking in you know, this is what's going on or just talk about, you know, today was not so good." Donovan

In addition, integration with family members is typically through phone calls, emails or visits during national holidays. Far distances have made integration with family members a concern for many.

"I used to drive to my parents house in like four hours. And now I'm like ten hours away or nine. Like I do not know, I have not done it yet. So that's different. I would have been home probably once to visit in the fall normally but I haven't done it yet." Brandy

Support Systems: Who and What Can I Rely On?

Systems or sources of support emerged from the participants' responses in the interviews. Participants described what and who they gained academic, financial, emotional, or social support. They also talked about where they did not get support from or where this support was sometimes lagging. All participants spoke of their need for support and the variety of sources this support came from. One source of support was participants' academic peers.

" …it's so nice to have…[other student] who's had some of my classes before just to tell the relationship piece with other people in the doctoral program…has just really been key just in terms of…helping put things in perspective." Donovan

While there are very positive comments about support from peer students from most participants, some expressed a disconnection with others in their program. Others did not talk much about other students in terms of support whatsoever. Some who spoke highly of other students still cited that not every doctoral student is willing to connect with others.

The level of faculty support varied dramatically within the span of our participants. While some identified advisors and other faculty members as being helpful and friendly, others felt demeaned and disrespected.

"…and I was hoping it would be more of a collaborative thing to work with the faculty than it is…telling me what I have to take, no flexibility, even based on all my experience." Amy

"And it's nice because I feel like, that you're, that we're respected…the relationships…are personal…" Brandy

Though there was much variance in the level of support from faculty and students, every participant spoke of support from family or friends. However, much of this depended on the amount of time participants had to receive such support. Ashley stated: "…pretty much one day a week I get to have a social life."

Yet even with the time constraints evidently felt by our participants, some time for friends and family is incorporated. Participants often expressed that it is at a much lower level, but it was still ever present and ever needed.

"…I've been really good about staying in touch with people…I'm always on the phone with them, instant messaging, emailing, or text messaging…" Anthony

There appeared to be many challenges for some participants in obtaining support. Some experienced small but frustrating experiences in becoming familiar with the university environment, registering for classes, or trouble

obtaining student tickets to a sporting event. Others discussed difficulty in adapting to a different social environment. Three participants discussed transitioning to a less urban environment and its effects on their social life. One participant discussed a feeling of alienation due to his sexuality while an international student talked of the language barrier doing the same.

An overall view of the participants shows that each described a need for support. Each participant voiced some level of support, but they also expressed some lacking elements in their social lives too. Even what can be called the most positive voice of our participants felt the pressure stating, "[social relationships] are few and far between (Ashley)."

Perseverance - I don't know if I can do this, but I will!

Perseverance to complete the Ph.D. program was important to all the participants. Participants came to their Ph.D. program with varied goals and expectations. They experienced multiple levels of satisfaction and some were even questioning their fit with the program. All participants stated that they were planning to finish their studies and graduate.

Each of the participants entered into their doctoral studies to obtain the Ph.D. degree and better situate themselves for advancement in the workforce. Anthony stated, "I kind of saw the Ph.D. as the next step … to make myself more marketable I felt I had to do it."

Brandy believed it was the best time to begin her advanced graduate studies, "I knew eventually I wanted to get a Ph.D. I guess I just started thinking about long term goals."

Although all the participants wanted to obtain their Ph.D. degree to advance in the workforce, each participant had different expectations of what the experience would be. Several participants had no expectations, others experienced disappointments from their expectations, and a few felt their expectations had been met. One participant said:

"For me I had no frame of reference. I really didn't know what I was getting into. Although I've heard stories from others I really had no idea what the experience was going to be like." Donovan

A student with disappointing expectations noted:

 "I think that some of my expectations have been met and many haven't. Which I guess is to a certain extent my own fault. Maybe putting my expectations too high, and I should learn, to expect less and when more happens to be excited." Anthony

Regardless of met or unmet expectations, Ashley summarized it best when she stated, "Overall it's been good. Stressful, but good."

One participant felt that his interests did not match his current program of study. He stated:

"In particular, recently thinking about the coursework that I am taking here, and my research interest, and how they don't align very well. They probably do but I can't see it and I just need someone to sit down and show me how they could." Anthony

However, most of the participants believed they were in a program that met their research needs and career objectives. Jenn noted, "I believe I made the right decision for my career and my future."

Regardless of disappointed expectations or an interest mismatch to the program all participants indicated they were determined to complete their studies and obtain their degree. Ashley noted, "I just feel like I'm crazy, this is crazy, I'm never going to finish. I'm never going to be able to do these things they're talking about, but it's just a day at a time." Donovan summarized this feeling best by saying, "I'm in here for the long haul."

Success vs. Challenges - I did well but…

In this section participants discussed the successes and challenges they experienced. When discussing their successes participants thought they had been able to do well so far in their academic studies. It was interesting to note how younger participants immediately referred to their course work and older participants referred to their family when asked about the successes they have had.

"I've made good grades on everything that I've done." Brandy (age 26)

 "I think I have had some good academic successes and I think that I am just learning to live by myself after 27 years of marriage and I am very proud of the fact that I feel independent living by myself during the week, that is my biggest success." Sarah (age 48)

Another success has been their ability to multi-task and stay on top of things. Ashley referred to this quite a bit in her interview:

"But just like my time management skills you know, really making the most of every single moment you know, I got my car inspected today, the whole time I was on the computer, I went home and I did something, like I had an hour, I never used to use an hour of time to do something. I would watch TV or fill it with junk. Now I really, if I have any free time, I'm filling it with something so that I have that free moment in another time when I want it. I really try to get as much done as I can in like the time I have so that I can swap the time with nothing to do."

Jenn, the international student in our study, mentioned the language barrier as being a challenge she needed to overcome. She stated, "I have a problem understand my professor's lecture in class."

A challenge mentioned by most of the participants was getting used to being students again and using their time effectively.

"Finding my groove, has been a challenge." Donovan

"When you go back to graduate school … you are studying full-time, work 20 hour week job, you are in class probably 10 or 12 hours a week, you learn how to approach life in a totally different way." Amy

Participants mentioned having to cope with stress as another one of the challenges they needed to deal with. A couple mentioned stress as a result of having two major assignments due on the same week.

"Especially, a few weeks ago, with everything, between papers and exams being due, not even big papers, which are all coming up, but just little papers and busy work, and getting mid-term grades in for the class that I teach, and that I wasn't eating and I wasn't sleeping." Anthony

Even though all of the participants had experienced challenges, they all have been successful so far in their first semester. Despite this fact, they are still unsure about their performance. Donovan reflected this feeling by saying, "It's just one day at a time."

Discussion and Conclusion

We sought to provide a portrait of the lived experiences of professionals transitioning into first semester doctoral students. We identified five themes within this transition experience: identity, integration, support systems, perseverance, and success vs. challenges.

Similar to Golde (1998), we found that perseverance (intellectual mastery), and integration are important aspects of a doctoral student's transition process. First-semester doctoral students have a need to feel integrated in the department and the university community. First-semester doctoral students also tend to feel uncertain about their abilities to complete a doctoral degree yet are determined to find a way to succeed and earn their doctorate.

Zilokowski (1990) found that time management and personal and social responsibility were contributing factors to doctoral students not completing their degree. These factors were expressed as concerns by the participants in this study even though none stated they planned on leaving graduate school. Time management and social responsibility were categorized into our success vs. challenges and support systems themes respectively. While doctoral students may face challenges personally and academically within their first

semester affecting their transition into graduate study, these students also experience successes. Regardless the level of success or challenges experienced, it is important for first semester doctoral students to have support systems. The support can come from family, friends, organizations, faculty, or other students. These support systems are important to help the first-semester doctoral student through the transition process.

We also found that doctoral students returning to higher education from a professional career struggle with a sense of identity. While identity had not been previously discussed in the related literature, our participants commented throughout their interviews that transitioning from the "expert" or person in control to the "learner" or person being told what to do was difficult. This relates to other studies (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Baird, 1993) that showed a large lack of respect by faculty for doctoral students.

Implications for Practice

Prospective doctoral students, current doctoral students, student affairs administrators, and faculty members can use the results of this study to better understand the experiences of first semester doctoral students. Prospective graduate students can benefit by a better understanding of the types of experiences they may encounter when pursuing doctoral study. In addition, prospective graduate students may also use the results to set their personal expectations more in line with the realities of doctoral study.

Current doctoral students would benefit from the study results to give meaning to their graduate experiences, if they have completed their first semester of doctoral study or to better understand their current experiences, if they are still in the first semester of study. In addition, doctoral students could see from these results that integration and friend support systems are important during the first semester transition experience. Providing opportunities for new students to interact with other students further along in the doctoral study experience can assist in the transition experience for new doctoral students.

Student affairs administrators and faculty members can use the results of this study to improve recruiting, orientation, and the doctoral study experience of their graduate students. Knowing more about the first semester experience of doctoral students can assist administrators and faculty in providing realistic information during recruiting activities on what students can expect during their first semester. Once students have enrolled, administrators and faculty can create comprehensive orientation programs to help new students integrate into the college community and the department, thus resulting in an increase in retention numbers. Similar suggestions have been made by prior research (Nerad & Miller, 1996) but had a broader focus rather than targeting first year doctoral students.

Implications for Research

This study begins to fill the gap in the literature on first semester doctoral student experience. A researcher could continue this study by conducting additional interviews with participants to obtain a more detailed description of the first-semester experience. Additional research could also be established to explore each of the themes identified in the study results.

The current study focused on doctoral students in education departments. Future studies could be conducted across disciplines or institution types to determine if the first semester experience differs by the discipline a student is in or by the type of institution the student is attending. Further, this study centered on full-time students. Other researchers could compare and contrast the experiences of part-time versus full-time students. Finally, one of our participants – an international student – noted that the language barrier affected her transition experience. The transition experiences among international and domestic students can also be investigated.

Overall, this paper presents a discussion of a phenomenological study completed to describe the lived experiences of seven first semester full-time doctoral students who had returned to academia from professional careers. Five themes were identified in describing the transition process from professional career to full-time doctoral study during the first semester experience. The results of this study should be used to by students, administrators and faculty members in understanding the experiences of first semester doctoral students in order to develop policies and programs aimed at reducing doctoral student attrition.

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