

**The Privilege and the Challenge:  
Storytelling and the Doctoral Experience**

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**Felice D. Billups, Ed.D.  
Johnson & Wales University**

### **Purpose of the Study**

Doctoral students comprise a unique population with special needs and concerns, both academically and personally. Minimal research has, however, been conducted regarding the nature of the educational experience for doctoral students, which ultimately affects their academic and personal success. The purpose of this study was to explore doctoral student perceptions of their Ed.D. experience at a small university in southern New England. This qualitative narrative study comprised depth interviews and subsequent reflective journals with  $N=9$  purposefully selected participants to develop a rich, detailed, and holistic picture of doctoral student perspectives (Chase, 2005; Cortazzi, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Reissman, 2008).

### **Background of the Study**

Considerable research has been conducted regarding graduate and professional students, focusing largely on the reasons for attrition and departure (Ladik, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 2004), reasons to pursue a doctoral degree (Antony, 2002; Golde, 1998), and the ways in which graduate students assimilate into the university, i.e. student experiences in and out of the classroom (Forney & Davis, 2002; Tinto, 2004; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Fewer studies, however, have been conducted to explore the doctoral student experience regarding their educational experience and their perspective on the programs, services and support needed to manage the work-life balance. While this struggle may seem incidental to the graduate student experience, a thoughtful and intentional understanding of their experience may positively

influence student satisfaction, persistence, success, and a greater sense of connectedness with the institution (Elliott, 2003; Poock, 2004). Additionally, graduate students (and especially doctoral students) exhibit significantly different characteristics and needs compared with their undergraduate counterparts; yet much of the research fails to distinguish their unique profile (Ladik, 2005; Polson, 2003).

### **Graduate Student Persistence**

Graduate students, and doctoral students in particular, tend to withdraw at three distinct enrollment points; 1) within the first month, 2) at the end of the first year, and 3) after the completion of course work, prior to beginning the dissertation phase (Bowen & Rudenstein, 1992). While some institutions attempt to mitigate this trend by enrolling students with a better “fit” (Lovitts, 2001), other institutions attribute poor programming or mediocre classroom experiences as the impetus for student departures (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Tinto (1987) suggests, however, that a lack of integration into the organizational culture and the co-curricular opportunities is the underlying reason for student dissatisfaction and isolation.

### **Pursuing the Doctoral Degree**

Golde (1998) investigated doctoral student motivations for pursuing terminal degrees. The study found that many doctoral students held unrealistic expectations about the scope, purpose, and time demands of their degree program. These frustrations were compounded by the lack of personal and academic support services that might have offset student withdrawals. While this

particular study did not delve into the possible benefits of a stronger support structure, other researchers highlight the importance of graduate student programming to strengthen persistence towards degree completion (Brandes, 2006; Lehker & Furlong, 2006; Polson, 2003; Poock, 2004).

### **Graduate Student Communities**

Brandes (2006) suggests that graduate students strongly seek community, but find it superficial or elusive. Caple (1995) and Lovitts (2001) support this sentiment by emphasizing the graduate students' need for community due to the isolation of their educational experience, i.e. their specialization within an academic discipline and the increasing solitude of the conducting and completing their research. Due to the limited opportunities for doctoral students to gather and interact, compounded by the lack of dedicated programming and facilities, doctoral students typically find themselves on the "fringes" of the campus community. This isolation lessens their affiliation and connection with the institution, overall, and with each other, in particular (Golde & Dore, 2001). The resulting effect of this lack of integration is a lack of cohesion as a group and a fragmented sense of belonging (Brandes, 2006). This isolation is further aggravated by the doctoral student's narrow focus in a specialized discipline, in those instances where their course work and research may take up to ten years to complete (Golde & Dore, 2001).

### **Socialization to Academic Norms**

The primary purpose of doctoral education extends beyond the discipline-based specialization; the goal is to prepare the student for the scholar role

(Weidman & Stein, 2003). This socialization to academic norms of research and scholarship affects doctoral students' perceptions of fellow students, ultimately affecting their relationships and integration with the community, as a whole (2003). Using Weidman's framework for undergraduate socialization (1989), doctoral students have been found to need the same academic-peer culture assimilation. The framework identifies three distinct socialization constructs: 1) interaction with others, 2) integration into the expectations of faculty and peers, and 3) learning the necessary knowledge and skills for professional scholarship (Weidman, 1989). The research finds that doctoral students become socialized differently than other graduate students or undergraduate students and seek different levels of engagement with faculty, peers, and their institutions. The most important elements of socialization for doctoral students include 1) student scholarly engagement, 2) departmental/program affiliation, and 3) student-faculty interactions (Weidman & Stein, 2003). These findings, and the application of the socialization framework, resonate with Tinto's (1987) integration framework that confirms these elements as essential to a student's sense of connection, belonging, and ultimate success.

### **Assimilation into University Culture**

Several researchers offer perspectives on how doctoral and professional students assimilate to a new campus culture, which is especially challenging if they are enrolled as part-time students (Brandes, 2006; Golde, 1998; Lawson & Fuehrer, 1989). Students must navigate the university bureaucracy, the processes for registration and financial arrangements, the departmental norms,

program requirements, and scheduling logistics. Adults who have returned to graduate school after a hiatus find this scenario particularly daunting and crave a corresponding support structure (Polson, 2003).

Some researchers have found that customized graduate support programs may reduce first-year stress and isolation (Antony, 2002; Lawson & Fuehrer, 1989). Examples of these support programs typically include orientation programs, peer-to-peer counseling, specialized academic advising, financial assistance, student support groups, and increased faculty-student interaction, (both formal and informal). Streeter (1985) was one of the first researchers to explore the relationship between first-year graduate student anxiety levels and the extent of faculty-student interactions. The importance of the faculty-student interaction is highlighted by other researchers, as well (Kim, Rhoades, & Woodard, 2003).

### **The Graduate Student of Today**

Today's graduate student population comprises adult students who are often enrolled on a part-time basis, and who struggle to maintain a work-life balance with their careers, their civic and community obligations, and most importantly, their families. Many of these students have returned to education after a period of years; they are focused on pursuing advancement in their current career or in changing professions altogether (Zigmond, 1998). Additionally, their personal time and their finances are strained as a result of seeking a degree while preparing for new professional roles. These students demand a different mix of student services, requiring the collaboration and creativity of graduate school

faculty and administrators. More extensive research is needed to better understand the needs and interests of graduate and professional students in order to ensure their satisfaction and academic success.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Tinto's (1987) academic integration theory forms the basis for this study, emphasizing the relationship between student success and institutional commitment. Tinto measured student integration across six transformative dimensions, from growth and development to self-actualization. The dimensions include: 1) educational experience, 2) development of skills and knowledge, 3) faculty contact, 4) personal and social growth, 5) sense of community, and 6) overall commitment to and satisfaction with the college. Additionally, Elliott's (2003) emphasis on "student-centeredness" supplements Tinto's research, further emphasizing the relationship between student satisfaction and the extent to which an institution supports students during their educational tenure. The dimensions include:

Educational experience: The extent to which student expectations are met relative to course content, rigor, quality, and challenge;

Development of skills & knowledge: The extent to which students are able to learn, to think critically, develop problem-solving skills, synthesize material, and analyze information;

Faculty contact: The extent to which students are satisfied with academic advising, accessibility of faculty, and the extent of the interaction with faculty acting as advisors/mentors;

Personal and social growth: The extent to which personal and/or social growth is experienced and developed by the student (personal growth defined as private, individually-directed development, while social growth is defined as involvement in planned group activities and interactions, usually sponsored by the institution);

Sense of community: The extent to which students feel a sense of belonging and being welcomed by the institution, both broadly and within their individual departments; in addition to personal relationships, students may form a relationship with the institution's organizational identity and culture (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995);

Overall commitment to and satisfaction with college: The extent to which students feel they have selected the right institution for their aspirations, the sense that they would select the same institution again, and the confirmation that they would recommend the institution to a classmate or friend.

### **Research Questions**

Q1: How do doctoral students and graduates ascribe meaning to their Ed.D. experience?

Q1a: What do doctoral students and graduates perceive to be their greatest opportunities for growth - academically, professionally and personally - as a result of their doctoral program experience?

Q1b: What do doctoral students and graduates perceive to be their greatest challenges - academically, professionally, and personally - as a result of their doctoral program experience?

Q1c: Which pivotal events or incidents do doctoral students and graduates identify as significant during their doctoral program experience?

## Methodology

### Design

This qualitative, narrative design explored and probed student perceptions about their experience through  $N=9$  individual depth interviews and  $N=9$  journal reflections with current students in all phases of course work and dissertation, and alumni. This exploration was intended to develop a detailed and richly descriptive holistic picture of their doctoral experience by developing cumulative themes, essence meanings, and stories.

Numerous strategies exist for eliciting stories from participants in narrative interviews; Gee's approach (1991) was the strategy employed for this study, using the model of listening first to *how* the story was told, identifying the participant-selected *emphasis* of word choices and details, and analyzing the *changes* in pitch, pauses, speech, language, and nonverbal associated with the stories in process (Gee, 1991). Further supporting this storytelling device is Reissman's (1993) perspective that "narratives are a type of cultural envelope into which participants pour their experience and signify its importance to others" (p. 34). By asking doctoral students and alumni to share their perspectives through richly descriptive stories, their experiences are made tangible and accessible, thereby allowing for others to 'partake' of the experience more intimately.

### Participants

Participants for this exploratory study consisted of students and alumni from a small Ed.D. doctoral program located in Southern New England. The program

comprises a cohort structure where all students travel through two years of coursework and then complete the dissertation (within four years, six years total). Purposefully selected students who were currently enrolled in coursework (years one and two) ( $N=3$ ), students in the dissertation phase ( $N=3$ ), and alumni ( $N=3$ ) comprised the final sample. These participants were purposefully chosen for their 'information-rich' capacities to provide detailed responses and thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

This study employed semi-structured interviews and participant journal reflections to collect the primary data. Current students and alumni were queried regarding the details of their perceptions and experiences about their doctoral program. Depth interviewing is useful in developing first-hand descriptions of the "lived" experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001); in this instance, 'storytelling' was the device employed to secure a better understanding of their experiences. As Denzin (1989) points out, narrative strategies allow participants to relate 'turning points' as part of their perspective, giving the researcher an intimate view of how the participant attached meaning to the incident or event in question.

The interview protocol included questions that mirrored Tinto's (1987) framework; probes were included to obtain details and descriptions that would expand on participant stories. The protocol was piloted with two doctoral students from a comparable program; changes were made to several questions where timing or redundancy appeared problematic.

Following each interview, peer debriefing was employed to check the accuracy and consistency of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore,

the initial findings were sent to the participants for member checking in order to correct errors, assess the intention of participant words, and add meaning to the findings that may have been stimulated from reading the transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participant journal reflections were also employed to further secure participant feelings and observations about their experiences, capitalizing on their own words and phrases to describe their personal stories. Journaling is used to solicit participant expressive verbalization of specific questions that follow depth interviews or focus groups (Krueger, 1998). This method was intended to refine and extend the self-identified nuances and discourse inherent in face-to-face interviewing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reflective question used to supplement this interview data queried participants on a particular aspect of their experience that they would consider transformative, and how that particular story or incident might be representative of their unique perspective.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview and journal data were transcribed following each interview session and coded using Riessman's (2008) method of data analysis. Interview transcriptions were treated holistically at the completion of the interview sessions; a combination of two of Riessman's typologies for narrative analysis included the thematic strategy (when the researcher analyzes what was spoken during the interview) and the structural approach (how the participant told his or her story). Coding of the data employed 1) descriptive coding, 2) interpretative coding, and 3) pattern coding in order to ascertain the meaning and interpretations of the participants' experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coded data were

subsequently transformed into themes and categories in order to present the findings, and used participants' words and expressions to illustrate their meaning essence.

## **Findings**

The theoretical framework for this study was rooted in Tinto's (1987) academic integration theory. While Tinto's framework was originally designed to identify the relationship between undergraduate student success and institutional commitment/response, his theory holds promise for adaptation to other student populations. By merging Tinto's lens (1987) with Elliotts's (2003) 'student-centeredness' approach, the focus on the holistic experience of doctoral students can be more clearly understood. These findings are reported according to the six transformative dimensions of growth and development, and give voice to participants' unique perspectives, answering the following research questions:

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### **Dimension #1:**

#### **The Educational Experience: "Surprising challenges..."**

When reflecting on the courses in the program, participants sought a curriculum relevant to their professional experiences and positions, serving as a

link with recent developments in their fields. Participants also sought more peer-to-peer learning, more content in specific fields of practice, and guest speakers who could speak to current events and issues. As students in a practitioner-focused program, students wanted to share their experiences more substantially in their classes.

Participants further expressed appreciation for the range and extent of intellectual challenges inherent in the doctoral curriculum. Many expected the doctoral program to be a faster paced version of their masters' degree programs; in fact, they found that the course work caused them to struggle with many assignments and ways of seeing issues that were unexpected. As one interviewee stated, "The program forced me to look at my profession from a different perspective because the course work challenged me to think about theory and issues in a new way...it was an entirely different type of graduate education for me". Participants also found that while some courses needed updating, most courses supported their work in their respective fields in meaningful ways. One graduate said that "...every part of the curriculum has been relevant to my career, and I have used many elements in my job ..". Another graduate emphasized that "the courses I initially thought would be irrelevant have proved to be just the opposite and most courses provided the latitude to take key topics and weave them into something useful in my every day professional practice".

Participants demanded increased peer-to-peer learning in and out of the classroom, a theme that was emphasized repeatedly. As one current student

expressed, "...the class discussions with my peers have made this experience so much better, and I often seek out my classmates after class to continue our conversations...". One alumna concurred and noted "... I would have enjoyed considerably more peer-to-peer learning – the debate and the challenge of struggling with current issues as fellow practitioners is a valuable asset in this program."

Overall, comments from individual interviews and journals indicated that the educational challenges of the doctoral program exceeded participant expectations, even though they offered suggestions for future improvements. As a third-year student emphasized, "I find myself constantly driving myself into new areas of inquiry....", while a graduate offered a more nostalgic perspective: "I crave the intellectual experience of the doctoral program and miss it, even today, eight years after graduating..."

**Dimension #2:  
Development of Skills and Knowledge: "APA, ANOVAs, and angst...!"**

Participants identified the development of research skills and the need to expand research strategy assistance as essential to their success. They also requested year-long courses in research, summer clinics, and a research 'help' center. While many students and alumni felt that there was not enough emphasis on developing practical skills to conduct their research, findings revealed that students found that the existing assistance was very helpful but just not offered frequently enough. They wanted more individual, focused help in certain areas, and suggested other areas, as well (i.e. conference presentation tips and publishing guidelines).

When asked about scaffolding of the dissertation process, many stated that this process was very helpful; however, it was suggested that while dissertation development should be incorporated into all courses, it was revealed that not all courses covered the dissertation process, per se. Dissertation development could take the form of topic discussion, literature review, and problem statement skills during class sessions. Students expressed concern that during those terms when there was no focus on the dissertation, they felt that they lost valuable time working towards completion of their research. As one student noted, “More direction early on in the program would have made it possible for me to focus on the research strategies and techniques that I would need later on...”, while another student stressed that the dissertation is “...the brass ring and it should be the foundation for everything we do in course work”.

Many participants sought extra help with practical skills, such as writing and APA guidelines: “Workshops on writing styles, format, and APA rules would be more helpful if they were offered on a rotating and continual basis --- you just need to be expert in these things if you are going to survive a doctoral program.”. In terms of other types of skills, one second- year student noted that “the program has made me a much better researcher, and I look at research and asking questions in a different way now – in my professional practice, I feel that my decisions are based in research more as a result of this program”.

As one graduate suggested, “I do not think that the doctoral program should be where I learn how to problem-solve on the job but rather to help me frame the

problems so that critical analysis and problem solving is more relevant and based on current research in the field...”.

**Dimension #3:**

**Faculty-Student Interactions: “It’s a partnership....”**

Most students commented on the intense faculty support and availability in the doctoral program and the way it encouraged their success and academic achievement. As one third year student declared, “One of the surprises of this program has been the incredible student-centered focus of the program and the helpful advice, honest concern, and willing availability of my faculty to support the students”. Nearly all alumni agree that faculty were extremely helpful in the completion of their degrees. This was not surprising, since the literature indicates that direct contact with faculty members is paramount to a successful program (Tinto, 1987; Weidman, 1989). Faculty are seen as essential partners in the dissertation process, rather than adversaries or ‘road-blocks’; as one graduate said, “my advisor allowed me to go beyond my comfort zone in the application of the knowledge I needed to become an expert in my area...”. Another graduate found that “...the best part of my experience with the program was the relationship I developed with my dissertation advisor, which was a surprising benefit of the process”.

Participants warned that they felt disconnected to the program when they were enrolled in a course with an adjunct faculty member, and even more so when they were enrolled during a semester when both of their courses were taught by adjunct professors. This dilution of the normal student-centeredness of the program caused some participants to express concern: “Since my success in

this program is tied, in large part, to my connection with my faculty, the selection of adjunct faculty should be made carefully...”. Finally, representing the sentiments of many other participants, a third-year student offered the following: “I am particularly impressed at how much support is provided by the full-time faculty, and I believe I will finish and accomplish excellent work because of them. It is truly a partnership”.

**Dimension #4:  
Personal and Social Growth: “Unexpected changes...”**

Nearly all students and alumni report that their personal growth was significant as a result of their participation in the doctoral program. Interviewees further emphasized that personal growth, development of professional identities, and relationships with their peers significantly improved or matured as a result of their program experience.

According to the literature, teamwork is a necessary skill for leaders (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Students agreed that their educational leadership program encouraged collaborative teamwork and peer-to-peer learning; in fact, they suggested more and different opportunities to collaborate with each other, both inside and outside of class.

Personal and social growth was expressed by participants in other ways. One third-year student stated that “..you need to be prepared to learn about yourself, the good and the bad, your strengths and your weaknesses, if you are going to grow because of this experience...”, while another first-year student noted that “balancing the work-life-study challenges has been a bit overwhelming...”. Finally, a current second-year student observed that “...the personal growth has

been incredible, just feeling more confident in my abilities to try new things and not be afraid to fail the first few times... but my growth as a professional has been significant, as well. I have learned things I never even knew about a few years ago... and I am continuing to recognize abilities I possess that I never knew I had. The changes were very unexpected...”.

A graduate offered some pros and cons: “Overall, this was a great experience, despite the ridiculously hectic schedule of working and going to school full-time.. I believed in what I was doing and felt it was achievable because I found a strong sense of belonging and community among my peers, the faculty, and the doctoral staff. It was obvious that everyone is invested in our success!”.

**Dimension #5:**  
**Sense of Community: “Thinkers and doers...”**

Many participants talked about the ways their respective cohorts bonded and worked together; alumni reflected on the continued connections they have with their classmates. “Our cohort continues to be close even 10 years after graduation; we bonded almost immediately and promised to support one another through degree completion”., said one graduate. A second-year student reflected that “...we hit it off as a group right from the first class sessions, and the high degree of professional expertise and the intellect that was shared is what has made this learning experience outstanding... but more than that, it is what has made me feel like I belong here”. A third-year student highlighted the ways in which cohort members complimented one another by saying that “...I have benefited from being in a cohort where there are thinkers and doers...the

thinkers force everyone to consider things like background, implications, larger issues, while the doers have the common sense and contribute to getting tasks accomplished!”.

While participants felt a sense of community within their cohorts and felt that faculty were deeply interested in their academic concerns, when it came to feeling connected to the rest of the university, their responses shifted. Most programs and services were offered for undergraduate students and doctoral students did not always feel “part of” the larger community. A second-year interviewee complained that “... we are on the fringes in this institution! Our email is cut off during the summer, our card access doesn’t work during the breaks, and many of the typical services are unavailable to us on Friday evenings or on Saturdays... we are nearly invisible!”. Many students felt that, outside of the doctoral faculty and staff, they were not taken seriously nor considered to be part of the larger institutional community. This feeling of living on the periphery affected their sense of affiliating with the institution, as a whole, and caused students and alumni to bond only with the program. In this sense, the cohesiveness of the cohort was particularly important to students.

**Dimension #6:**

**Overall Commitment to the Institution: “The privilege of the experience...”**

Students and alumni emphatically agreed that their experience in the doctoral program was an experience they would repeat, if given the chance. Participants were consistently supportive of the program and indicated that they had or would recommend it to others without reservation. One graduate furthered this sentiment by saying that “... the quality of the program and the support of the

faculty makes me proud and I would like to encourage others to share the same experience...”. Participants, however, stressed that potential students should understand the commitment and demands required of them, should they choose to enroll: “Know that it is a challenging commitment requiring tenacity, an open mind, a tolerance for ambiguity, and a willingness to sacrifice. Like most aspects of life, the program does not provide answers so much as the way to consider the questions... and despite some really rough moments, I would do it all over again!. A first year student found that “...you should be prepared to acknowledge that the experience is a privilege, not a burden, and you should realize that you only get out of it what you put into it, so use your talents and energy for the ‘good’”. Participants, through interviews and self-reflection in their journal entries, expressed appreciation for the program and the value of the experience, feeling that it had been the right place and the right choice for them, personally and professionally.

As a graduate asserted, “There isn’t anything in the program that will keep you from obtaining your doctoral degree except your lack of determination, vision, and sacrifice to reaching your goal.”

### **Implications and Conclusions**

This exploratory study attempted to converge the stories and descriptions of doctoral students and graduates into an ‘essence’, or a picture of how the doctoral experience changed them in significant ways. How did these participants attribute meaning to their experience? What were the pivotal and transformative events that represented the essence of their experience? For

many, if not most participants, there were at least two or more critical incidents that caused them to see themselves and their capacities as professionals in significantly new ways.

While interviewees offered numerous examples of their experience during the semi-structured discussions, it was the culminating question about their critical or pivotal incidents that yielded the richest and most interesting details. As confirmed in the literature, these stories suggest that doctoral students struggle with the shift from graduate education to doctoral education, which feels insurmountable in the early semesters; they are relatively unprepared for the effects on their work-life balance, their families and their careers; they are surprised by the cohesion and support that comes from bonding with a group of strangers who quickly become colleagues and friends; they universally realize that they are capable of new kinds of work, thinking, and questioning, typically revealed to them around the end of the first semester; and they 'make sense' of their experience by referring to particular events that feel like turning points, when the confusion or chaos of prior months suddenly makes sense.

As one student expressed, "it was that moment when I realized that I actually felt more self-confident, surer of my opinion about an issue in my field, more rooted in real research rather than what I just heard over the water cooler, that made me feel like I was learning, growing, and adding some value to my profession". Supporting this comment was the story told by a graduate who described that moment when she walked into her office the day of her defense and was called "doctor" for the first time; "I never expected that all those

semesters sitting in the classes and wondering how I was going to make sense of all of this... that I would find it all came together during the dissertation. Until that point, I appreciated the course work and the faculty expertise, but the focus of the dissertation and the challenge of synthesizing research made me finally understand the value of the rigor of the classes". Tinto (1987) and Elliott (2003) concur that it is often a disappointing classroom or academic experience that dilutes the student perception of success or satisfaction; additionally, the lack of curricular relevance adds to this disappointment. Doctoral students who find challenge, rigor and relevance in their educational experience also find satisfaction and reward

The stories about personal growth were especially meaningful, as they pointed to the evolution from self-doubt ("I didn't think I would ever figure out a research topic" or "I had no idea how to write a paper at the doctoral level") to self-actualization. A recent graduate tells the story about how he submitted assignment after assignment to a professor, only to have them all rejected and "marked with red ink until you could no longer see the whites of the pages". His personal 'awakening' came when he complained to a fellow classmate who offered to read his work. After reading his many poorly graded papers, she turned to him and said "I think your professor was being kind... I really have no idea what you are talking about!". It was at this point that he began to acknowledge that he needed to approach his doctoral education in a different way, coupled with a renewed commitment to his work and his dedication. "It no longer was just a graduate program to me... it was a quest! I told myself I could

do this...and I did!". As Golde (1998 ) notes, doctoral students often hold unrealistic expectations about their programs and themselves, including the ways in which they expect to grow and change. Pivotal incidents commonly bridge the gap in that growth experience, an experience that is episodic and strategic rather than incremental. "Growth and change happened to me in spurts" recalls one doctoral graduate.

Stories about developing close relationships with faculty, not only in course work but also as dissertation advisors, played a critical role in the doctoral student experience. Numerous incidents were relayed by participants about a single event in a class or a particular conversation with a faculty member that became an 'aha' moment. One student expressed their surprise at having a conversation with a faculty member about a possible topic for a paper in their class and the faculty's comment that it was not substantive enough for the assignment. "I realized at that moment that until I was willing to really do the hard work, which this faculty member had been pushing me to do for an entire semester, I would never become a doctor. They were saying the same thing to me at that moment that they had been saying to me for the entire semester... but finally, I was ready to hear the message. It was not because I did not hear it before that moment... it was actually because the faculty member believed in me enough to patiently say the same thing repeatedly, and consistently. I saw faith in action at that moment. I did not want to disappoint them...".

Finally, this journey from student to scholar-practitioner in a doctoral program is realized in different ways by students sharing their unique experiences. There

were several common phrases and concepts that were expressed by many participants. So many of these participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for their experience, and an equal number noted that it had been a surprising experience in so many ways. In the end, most students and graduates relayed that it had been an honor to be part of the program; “I knew I was part of something special the moment I interviewed with the faculty, but looking back, thinking about the friends I have made, and the incredible knowledge I have acquired... and generated through my study... makes me realize that it has been both a privilege and a challenge to do this”.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Doctoral students require special attention and support to ensure their academic and personal success. While considerable research has been conducted with regard to graduate students, particularly related to graduate student satisfaction and attrition, much of the research has viewed graduate students as extensions of undergraduates in terms of their motivations and needs. Specifically, minimal research has been conducted regarding the perceptions of doctoral when viewing their experience holistically, and from the perspective of their personal and academic endeavors as a balance that must be maintained successfully. The findings from this study suggest that doctoral program faculty and administration should consider alternative ways to assimilate, support, and partner with their students in order to ensure student success.

Select program changes and additions should include the following strategies:

- 1) Refine orientation programs to include student panel discussions about the program and expectations, opportunities to meet fellow cohort members before the program begins, more of a chance to talk with program faculty, and an expanded introduction to the campus and the university;
- 2) Expand doctoral research skills assistance, such as year-long courses in research methods, summer clinics, and a research 'help' center;
- 3) Expand support programs in the areas of APA assistance and scholarly and academic writing;
- 4) Increase peer-to-peer learning, more content in specific topic areas related to current trends in education or foundational areas;
- 5) Develop guest speaker programming to relate coursework to current events and issues in education;
- 6) Support personal and professional growth and development by creating additional opportunities for students to collaborate with each other, both inside and outside of class;
- 7) Provide ongoing and specific information about the program and the university, via a variety of mediums (monthly "town meetings", student group discussions, alumni visits to classes) in order to help students feel increasingly connected to the institution.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

There are several future research strategies that would enhance this research, to include:

- 1) Expand this research to a larger participant sample, extending the sample beyond a single institution; additionally, increase the number of interviews/participants in each sub-category as described in this study (current student, students in the dissertation phase, and recent graduates);
- 2) Segregate participants by their areas of concentration, such as doctoral candidates in elementary/secondary tracks as compared with higher education tracks; in this way, it would allow the researcher to understand the experience from the perspective of the professional backgrounds and orientation to see if there are any differences in those perspectives or whether the themes remain universal to all doctoral students and graduates.

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