



Resiliency and Doctoral Student Attrition in Counselor Education

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Abstract

Every student's experience in a doctoral program is unique. However, there are some common factors that contribute to student attrition. Approximately half of all doctoral students complete their degrees and underprivileged populations face even more challenges that contribute to attrition. Students in counselor education programs face similar factors that contribute to student attrition as students in other fields. Such factors include organizational elements like the advisor relationship and personal elements like balancing family responsibilities. This manuscript addresses the barriers to program completion and explores resiliency as a meaningful strategy for student success through the doctoral program. Implications for counselor education are discussed and suggestions are provided to enhance resiliency in doctoral counselor education students.

Keywords: Counselor education; Doctoral student; Attrition; Resiliency

Abbreviations: PWIs: Primary White institutions

Introduction

Students enter into doctoral programs for a variety of reasons. For instance, some students embark upon doctoral studies because they want to improve their lives, while others enter the doctoral program because they want to strive to create a better and more secure future. Regardless of the reason they enter a doctoral program, only about half of doctoral students will see their graduation day. Gravois [1] cite the National Research Council's study on doctoral research programs and concludes that there was a 57% attrition rate across disciplines. This number falls within the 40-60% range of Bair and Haworths' meta-synthesis of doctoral students who fail to complete their degrees [2].

Although only half of all doctoral students will graduate, other groups of students are at greater risk for not completing their doctorate degrees. Underrepresented groups like African American students have a higher reported rate of attrition across disciplines (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; [3] indicating that these students encounter additional hurdles. Furthermore, African American students have an added burden of experiencing, responding to, and addressing race-based exchanges while pursuing their graduate degrees [4]. African American students also encounter isolation in doctoral programs at primary White institutions (PWIs) [5-10].

As another underrepresented group, women grapple with challenges throughout their doctoral study related to the dual demands of both the domestic and academic worlds [11]. In their qualitative study of eight women, Brown and Watson [12] determined that being female was a significant hurdle to thesis completion. Women in doctoral

programs are often still held to traditional gender norms, meaning that in addition to facing the demands of doctoral study, women are also expected to fulfill duties as partners and mothers [11]. The conflict of dual roles on women in doctoral study has been noted as a barrier to program completion [12,13], which may be due to women having to prioritize their personal roles over the pursuit of higher education and professional interests.

Brown and Watson [12] conducted eight interviews with female doctoral students and found that mothering influenced the timing of doctoral study while also negatively impacting their ability to attend conferences. Attaining a balance of domestic and academic duties was considered to be a source of stress [12]. Women of color encounter unique experiences in higher education. Shavers and Moore [9] completed fifteen interviews with African American women at primarily White institutions and found that participants in the study sacrificed emotional and mental needs in order to persist academically and professionally, in what the researchers described as a “double-edged sword.” In addition to the obstacles they must overcome as women, they must also face the structural barriers as individuals of color. Furthermore, the combined underrepresentation of both women and students of color on college campuses means that women of color have fewer role models to look up to [14]. This leads to an experience of seclusion and separation.

International students are also considered to be a special population at risk for higher rates of attrition, as they too experience many challenges. Such that, there is evidence that international students have more negative experiences with transition and ambiguity and have to be more self-reliant while pursuing their graduate degrees [15,16]. Similarly, this indicates that they experience additional barriers to degree completion as well.

Despite the aforementioned knowledge regarding attrition, most institutions do not have plans of action for student retention that have led to significant gains in student perseverance and graduation [17], which may leave students to rely on themselves for support and persistence. Given the many barriers that doctoral students face, the purpose of this manuscript is to discuss the common factors that contribute to doctoral student attrition across disciplines and within counselor education and to introduce resiliency as a meaningful strategy for completion of the doctoral program.

Factors that Contribute to Doctoral Student Attrition

The challenges that graduate students encounter along their doctoral program journey may lead students to

develop a negative perception about their experience. Moorhead-Rosenberg [18] found that 2,000 students in 97 departments reported negative experiences during their doctoral program. Factors of both an organizational and personal nature contribute to this perspective. Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, and Abel [19] made a distinction between organizational and personal factors that contributed to high attrition rates across graduate programs. Identified organizational factors were ineffective advisors, ineffective mentors, program structure, program flexibility, community of the program, and the student selection process. Personal factors were time constraints, financial strains, employment responsibilities, support systems, family responsibilities, overload, and relationships with significant others [19]. The remainder of this section will explore key organizational and personal factors in depth.

Organizational Factors

The graduate advisor is typically the first person to meet with the student to review a program of study and may or may not become their committee chairperson [19]. A students' connection with his or her chair/advisor is arguably the most important relationship they will develop throughout the course of their study. This relationship has a profound impact on whether the student successfully completes the doctorate degree [20]. In a qualitative study of interviews with 14 clinical and counseling psychology faculties, Knox et al. [21] discovered that problematic dissertation experiences were often characterized by a poor relationship between the chair and student. Given the significance of this research, the selection of a dissertation committee chair is an important decision for doctoral students. However, this decision may bring about many challenges for students, such as anxiety, fear of asking a faculty member to take on the charge of committee chair, or feeling obligated to stick with the advisor to which they were originally assigned at the beginning of the program [19].

Another organizational factor of importance is the community of the program. A lack of social integration can be a contributing element to whether a student views their program experience as negative [22,15]. Social integration for graduate students refers to the new student becoming a member of the academic community [23] and the process through which that individual attains the knowledge, skills, and values required for effective entry into a chosen profession [16]. Entering into a doctoral program is a time of transition, where students are learning how to navigate the expectations of graduate school and how to move between different phases of doctoral study. The process of socialization assists doctoral students in learning what is expected of them and how to navigate the academic climate

[23]. For example, students must be socialized to learn objective skills and how to conduct research, which assists in development from dependence to independence [24]. [15] Identified four themes and their relationships to one another in the doctoral socialization process (support, self-direction, ambiguity, and transition) in her study of 60 doctoral students from 6 disciplines. The students from departments with lower completion rates were often those with the least supportive environment [15]. This finding indicates that support is a major component of successful integration and is a critical factor for assimilation into the academic culture.

Personal Factors

Work and family have been cited as the biggest contributing issues to students' decisions to leave doctoral programs [25], and women in particular find balancing study and home life especially difficult due to parenthood impinging on time for study and research [12]. When students encounter a deficient personal support system, other problems arise. Without the emotional and social encouragement of family or friends, students must navigate and manage difficult situations on their own, leading to feelings of isolation [19]. This leaves doctoral students vulnerable to the potentially difficult and confusing transitions they will encounter.

The organizational and personal factors that impact student attrition are interconnected and influential on each other [19]. In an Australian study, Beer and Lawson [2] identified a complex relationship between factors that contribute to student attrition on a micro- (individual), meso- (institutional), and macro-level (societal). These factors overlap with organizational and personal factors and also emphasize the importance of contextual variables. All of these factors combined highlight the unique experiences that students encounter. For instance, students who have negative experiences with both organizational and personal factors may have a harder time persevering in the doctoral program than students who experience negative challenges with only organizational factors. However, this outcome could vary depending on a vast array of contextual variables.

Counselor Education and Doctoral Student Attrition

Estimates of attrition rates for counselor education programs specifically are not easily identified. Findings must be extrapolated from studies examining doctoral students across all disciplines and then generalized to counselor education programs [26]. It is likely that counselor education attrition rates are at least as high as

the rate across disciplines [27], given that the social sciences and humanities field, which includes counselor education, harbor the highest attrition rates [28,29].

Doctoral students in counselor education programs encounter similar barriers as students in other subjects. Negative experiences involving aspects of both organizational and personal factors have been found to be primary reasons for students to leave counselor education programs [27,30,31]. Hoskins and Goldberg conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed 33 counselor education doctoral students from CACREP accredited programs on what factors assist students to persist toward degree completion. Their findings indicated that student-program match, a multidimensional interplay between the student and assorted aspects of the program, may influence doctoral student persistence. The two main components of student-program match were academic match, such as curriculum, and social-personal match, such as relationship connection [30].

These components represent the organizational and personal factors that impact persistence in doctoral programs. The more organizational factors such as curriculum or program focus that match the student academically, the more likely the organizational aspect of doctoral study will be a positive experience, and in turn, the student will be less likely to attrition out of the institution. Similarly, the more those personal factors such as social and personal relationship connections are favorable within the doctoral program, the more likely the student would have a positive experience and their ability to persevere may be enhanced. Many factors can contribute to doctoral student attrition and while each student faces a unique experience there are common elements that contribute to a student's early departure.

Consequences of Low Student Attrition

Ultimately, the organizational and personal factors that contribute to doctoral student attrition in counselor education and other disciplines are complex and multifaceted [25]. When doctoral students do not complete academic programs, there are negative repercussions for the student, the faculty and academic department, and the institution [11,32,33]. For students, doctoral attrition may cause an emotional toll [33], such as a loss in their identity and self-esteem. Doctoral student attrition could have an economic impact on the academic department, such as dropping programs or placing new faculty positions on hold because of funding concerns. For institutions, decreased enrollment also has implications such that it can cause the university to encounter financial losses and even a damaged reputation [25,28].

The consequences of doctoral attrition are widespread and detrimental on a multitude of levels. Solutions have been identified to remedy the problem. In a review of studies on the research and practice of student retention, Tinto [17] identified three areas for further exploration: institutional action, program implementation, and the promotion of success for low-income students. While Tinto recognizes that our knowledge about student retention has developed since the 1970's, he asserts that progress on institutional practices requires further attention [17]. Furthermore, broad recommendations for increasing student retention have been suggested and include encouraging doctoral students to seek out programs with financial assistance, and to consider committee chair options early in the program [33].

These aforementioned recommendations offer consideration for organizational and institutional improvements. More specific interventions have been suggested such as the implementation of stress-management programs [19], interaction with a counselor-mentor that combines facets of counseling, mentoring, and support [35], increasing positive experiences [35], and developing a group doctoral support program [36]. These ideas take into consideration the innate personal factors that all individuals possess. These internal elements can be combined with environmental elements to evaluate the level of resiliency that each person naturally holds. A higher level of resiliency will enable a person to rely more heavily on their own strengths and abilities, regardless of the potential positive or negative organizational factors of the doctoral program.

Resiliency

Resiliency is the ability to overcome the difficulties encountered in life [37], and to positively cope, adapt, and persist to recover from adversity [38]. Since doctoral students experience many challenges and obstacles which impact their progression through the doctoral program, the authors wanted to explore the concept of resiliency with counselor education doctoral students to help mitigate rate of attrition and increase likelihood of program completion. However, resiliency is such a broad term and has various meanings and uses that this concept should be further explained. Resiliency is a multi-dimensional construct [39] and may change with varying circumstances. Rutter [40] asserted that any one factor cannot be considered protective because what is a protective factor for one person in a given situation may be a risk factor for another person. Rutter therefore conceptualized resiliency as a process rather than a collection of protective factors, and emphasized an examination of the individual protective processes in order to better understand resiliency.

Resiliency has been a popular topic within multiple disciplines, with various branches of resiliency discussed in the literature, such as resiliency theory [41,42], ego resilience [43], emotional resilience [44,45], and educational resilience [46-49]. Resiliency theory has been defined by Gonzalez [50] as "a form of theoretical understanding and problem-solving that focuses on the assets of people and systems, rather than on the deficits" (p. 292). Ego-resiliency possesses the ability to adapt to constantly changing demands from the environment [43]. Emotional resilience is having the ability to "bounce back" after a negative emotional experience through adaptation [44]. Educational resilience refers to students' ability to overcome adversity and be academically successful, despite challenging situations [46,49,51]. Although all theories of resiliency share a capacity to persevere in the face of adversity, the authors chose to focus on educational resiliency in this manuscript for the appropriateness of the content related to students in higher education.

Educational resilience has historically focused on "at risk" students (e.g., homeless or in foster care ;) [49], but recent research has led to a paradigm shift from emphasis on individual traits to a strengths-based approach that encompasses external factors and structural obstacles [52]. For college students, past negative experiences cannot be undone, but work toward building or bolstering current constructions can foster academic success. When students have higher levels of resiliency they are likely to have better mental health, sleep well, and are able to participate in positive social relationships [53]. Johnson, Taasooobshirazi, Kestler, and Cordova [54] recommend pairing academically struggling college students with peers who can demonstrate and model resilience as a way of building resiliency. Educational resiliency can also be promoted through college programs that include a consistent and supportive counseling element that focuses on both academic and personal problems [47]. Counselors provide both emotional support and practical information about navigating the college environment.

Resiliency research with doctoral students in counselor education is limited. Breckner [26] completed his dissertation on doctoral student attrition in counselor education by interviewing eight women and one man who had withdrawn from a counselor education doctoral program after at least one semester of study. Breckner discussed the role of resiliency and concluded that the participant responses supported both Cohler's [55] discussion of the unpredictable nature of resiliency related to success and failure, and Polk's [56] theory of four factors that influence resiliency. These four factors are identified as: dispositional pattern, relational pattern, situational pattern, and philosophical pattern [56]. Breckner ultimately decided that resiliency was an important factor

related to doctoral student attrition in counselor education; however, resiliency was not the focus of this dissertation.

Four models of resiliency have been proposed in the literature [40,57-59] the compensatory model, the risk-protective model, the protective-protective model, and the challenge model. The authors suggest that educational resilience of doctoral students may be enhanced through adopting one of the following resiliency models. Each model is presented further below and applications to counselor education doctoral students are provided.

The compensatory model is a simple model that states risk factors and protective factors possess additive and independent qualities to predict outcomes of maladjustment. For example, a doctoral student with no support network is more likely to drop out than a doctoral student with a strong support network. The risk-protective model assumes an interaction between risk and protective factors. Protective factors influence the strength of the relationship between risk and outcome, such that the presence of protective factors makes for a weaker relationship. For example, the relationship between poor social supports and attrition is weaker for doctoral students who have a positive relationship with their chairperson.

The protective-protective model also assumes an interaction between risk and protective factors. Here the presence of protective factors again weakens the relationship between risk and outcome, but additionally states that with every added protective factor the relationship between risk and outcome will decrease. For instance, a positive rapport with the chairperson and a strong social support network combine to reduce the likelihood of attrition than either protective factor by them.

The challenge model is the fourth and last of the resiliency models and represents a curvilinear relationship between risk and outcome. The model assumes that moderate levels of risk activate protective factors, which in turn reduces the potential impact of the risk factor and leads to better adjustment. Moderate social support may not lead to attrition, but if the challenge had not been presented or other risk factors increase beyond one certain point, the likelihood that the student will drop-out rises.

Discussion

Organizational and personal factors intertwine to create unique obstacles for doctoral students. The culture of the department is an important organizational factor to students successfully completing the doctoral program [31]. It is possible that there are problems within the

department, or the existence of politically charged matters. Incoming doctoral students have to adjust and learn the dynamics of the department after beginning their doctoral studies. When students do not understand how to navigate the departmental culture effectively, they may be at a disadvantage [60]. While departmental culture and politics have an impact on students and faculty alike, they may not be openly discussed [31], leaving students in the dark about how to manage these concerns.

As previously noted, the working relationship with the program faculty and committee chair is extremely important for all doctoral students. Counselor education students have identified this relationship as integral in persevering in doctoral study [30]. In fact, the most influential factor in the overall relationship is the students' perceptions of how well they can collaborate together with their chairperson [61]. The student will often look to the chair for guidance and leadership. Counselor education students benefit from faculty who are interactive and provide guidance on topics such as supervision, research, co-teaching, advising, and finding employment [62]. However, students have reported that they find faculty do not have time for appropriate mentoring [31] and have responded to students in ways that felt non-caring [27]. When the student feels neglected by their departmental faculty or committee chair, these problematic relationships then become a barrier to degree completion [33]. In addition to the relationship with the chairperson, successful social integration while pursuing doctoral study is important. The support of peers who are enduring the same experiences or talking with members of other cohorts further along provides encouragement and guidance [31].

When considering personal factors, personal support systems are also critical to student persistence within the doctoral program [19,30]. However, despite the need for strong support throughout their journey as a doctoral student, many students find balancing family with the responsibilities of academia to be difficult [31]. While familial relationships are a source of encouragement, they may also be a source of stress. Additionally, some doctoral students choose to work concurrently with their academics, which can be exhausting and leave some students with ambivalence about which to prioritize [35]. When doctoral work is prioritized over other life responsibilities, students feel guilt and regret [31]. Other studies like the one by Hughes & Kleist [35] describe the emotional turmoil that counselor education students encounter at the beginning of the doctoral program, which included self-doubt and fear. Personal factors that contribute to why students leave counselor education programs include aspects such as energy and stamina, as well as health in general [25,27,31]. Ultimately, personal

matters impact students and whether or not they can fulfill their duties in doctoral programs.

Implications for Counselor Education

Universities may be able to bolster educational resilience in doctoral students by adopting one of the aforementioned four resiliency models. The protective-protective model specifically may be one of the more useful models to adopt, given the strengths-based focus for educational resiliency. The model asserts that each protective factor has an additive benefit beyond what any protective factor can provide alone [40, 57-59]. With this information in mind, counselor education departments may be able to foster as many protective factors to their students as possible. Guidelines for evaluating student-program match can be developed and enforced through diligent interviewing and gatekeeping. Administrators can work with other departments to strengthen social support and mental health care on campus via formation of support groups or study groups for doctoral students, beyond what may organically occur within a cohort. The chairperson can lead discussions with the student on what the students' expectations are of how the chairperson will mentor and collaborate with them. The ultimate goal is to build educational resiliency to increase the likelihood that doctoral students will persevere throughout their programs.

It has been found that educationally resilient middle and high school students had support from adults that help them cope with challenges [48], and application for college students was possible. One of the major recommendations in the literature for building educational resiliency in college students is to increase exposure to positive modeling. Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski [47] concluded that counselors can be sources of social modeling and Johnson et al. recommended that college educators and student services faculty assist students in having interactions with positive role models of resilience. They also recommended pairing academically struggling students with models of resilience who can provide encouragement. Educational resilience can also be built through the incorporation of counseling that addresses academic and personal issues into college academic programs [47].

Counseling can also be an aspect of developing and promoting student wellness and support, an important facet for building and utilizing resiliency. Master's level counseling students whose programs offered a course in wellness reported significantly higher wellness levels [63], suggesting that programs have a role in promoting wellness of students.

Assisting students in taking care of themselves, which ultimately helps them to build their resiliency to challenging situations in doctoral school, is not a novel suggestion. Despite this and the fact that many professional counseling organizations emphasize wellness of counselors and counseling students [32,64], counselor education programs still lack sufficient wellness support. Counseling students do gain exposure to many concepts of wellness in counselor education programs, but the implementation of effective strategies to education and evaluation of students in wellness has been minimally researched [65]. Counselor education programs can incorporate a standard of wellness practice by using a wellness model [63,65], and by assisting students in developing personal wellness plans [9,65].

The development of an academic and wellness plan can assist university faculty in building supportive campus environments for doctoral students [9], and could be a possible method for developing unique educational resiliency for an individual within complex organizational and personal factors that exist. Furthermore, it is not enough to only focus on the institutional side of academia; satisfaction ratings, wellness scores, and other measures should be examined for determining overall well-being of students [9]. Lastly, it is the university's responsibility to address the historical trends of racism, sexism, and elitism that may dissuade talented students from applying to programs or enter into programs as marginalized individuals [50]. This could decrease fear of xenophobia for international students when searching for a doctoral program.

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