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# Decoding the Persistence and Engagement Patterns of Doctoral Students Who Finish

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## ABSTRACT

Doctoral attrition rates are alarmingly high, causing concern to university leaders and students alike. These constituents seek solutions to address the troubling phenomenon of doctoral students dropping out of their programs of study. This article discusses persistence patterns of doctoral students who finish. The authors matriculated in a hybrid Ph.D. cohort program consisting of a residency requirement, coupled with online coursework. Cohort engagement, collaboration, vertical teaming, academic productivity, and networking are among the strategies discussed as effective in persistence to program completion.

## Key Words

**Doctoral persistence, cohort engagement, mentor relationships, academic productivity, collaboration**

## INTRODUCTION

Doctoral attrition is a current issue that affects universities and colleges across the globe. Ali and Kohun (2007) referred to doctoral attrition as academia's best-kept secret. Statistics relating to doctoral attrition are dismal and paint a picture of academic defeat. Spaulding and Szapkiw (2012) noted that studies over the last forty years show that 40% to 60% of doctoral students do not finish their programs. When focusing on education doctoral programs, attrition rates soar as high as 70% (Nettles & Millet, 2006), and in virtual doctoral programs, the attrition rate is even higher. There is a need to examine what can be done to reduce the number of students who drop out (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, 2006). In light of these statistics, lived experiences were investigated to assist in decoding the persistence and engagement patterns of doctoral students who finish.

## PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

The participants in this study were enrolled in a Ph.D. Educational Management Program at a Historically Black University in Southeast, Virginia. The program utilized technology to facilitate the majority of coursework requirements and included a two-week mandatory summer residency. The demographic breakdown included nine African American doctoral students. The participants were a representation of three cohorts in the Ph.D. program. The participants included one African American female from cohort one, four African American females from cohort five, two African American males from cohort five, one African American female from cohort six, one African American male from cohort six.

**Participant 1** is a member of cohort five. She is an African American female who defended her dissertation in February of 2016. The title of her dissertation is *Sustaining Teaching Careers: Perceptions of Veteran Teachers in a Rural Mid-Atlantic School Division*. She is employed fulltime and is married with four adult children.

**Participant 2** is a member of cohort five. She is an African American female who defended her dissertation in February of 2016. The title of her dissertation is *Elementary Assistant Principals: Perspectives on Role and Responsibilities*. She is employed fulltime as an elementary school assistant principal and is single with two children.

**Participant 3** is a member of cohort one. She is an African American female who graduated from the program in 2015. The title of her dissertation is entitled, *Urban Gifted Education and African American Students: Parent and Teacher Perspectives*. She is employed fulltime and is single.

**Participant 4** is a member of cohort five. She is an African American female who defended her dissertation in February of 2016. The title of her dissertation is *Peer Jury: A Restorative Alternative to Suspension and Expulsion*. She is employed fulltime, married and has three children.

**Participant 5** is a member of cohort five. He is an African American male who graduated from the program in 2015. The title of his dissertation is entitled, *Elementary School Male Aggression: Teacher Behavioral Intervention Strategies*. He is employed fulltime as an assistant principal. He is married and has three children.

**Participant 6** is a member of cohort five. He is an African American male who defended his dissertation in February 2016. The title of his dissertation is *Halting the Exodus from Academe: Exploring Retention of Academic Medicine Faculty*. He is employed fulltime and is married.

**Participant 7** is a member of cohort five. She is an African American female who defended her dissertation entitled *Left Behind Literacy: Teacher Perspectives of Literacy Instruction for Ninth Grade Special Education Students*. She is married and has children.

**Participant 8** is a member of cohort six. He is an African American male that is matriculating through the coursework requirements. He is a married and is a father of three children.

**Participant 9** is a member of cohort six. She is an African American female that is matriculating through the required coursework. She is single with no children.

Table 1 below provides demographic information pertaining to ethnicity, gender, employment status, cohort number, dissertation exploration, and married/single status.

Table 1 *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Ethnicity	Gender	Employment Status/ Cohort Number	Dissertation Exploration	Married/Single Children Status
P1	African American	Female	Fulltime Cohort 5	<i>Sustaining Teaching Careers: Perceptions of Veteran Teachers in a Rural Mid-Atlantic School Division</i>	Married with children
P2	African American	Female	Fulltime Cohort 5	<i>Elementary Assistant Principals: Perspectives on Role and Responsibilities.</i>	Single with children
P3	African American	Female	Fulltime Cohort 1	<i>The title of her dissertation is entitled, Urban Gifted Education and African American Students: Parent and Teacher Perspectives.</i>	Single with no children

P4	African American	Female	Fulltime Cohort 5	<i>Peer Jury: A Restorative Alternative to Suspension and Expulsion.</i>	Married with three children
P5	African American	Male	Fulltime Cohort 5	<i>The title of his dissertation is entitled, Elementary School Male Aggression: Teacher Behavioral Intervention Strategies.</i>	Married with three children
P6	African American	Male	Fulltime Cohort 5	<i>Halting the Exodus from Academe: Exploring Retention of Academic Medicine Faculty</i>	Married with no children
P7	African American	Female	Fulltime Cohort 5	<i>Left Behind in Literacy: Teacher Perspectives of Literacy Instruction for Ninth Grade Special Education Students</i>	Married with children
P8	African American	Male	Fulltime Cohort 6	N/A	Married with three children
P9	African American	Female	Fulltime Cohort 6	N/A	Single with no children

## COHORT ENGAGEMENT & COLLABORATION

Cohort engagement is important in helping doctoral students to stay the course and complete the program (Radda, 2012). Platforms such as Blackboard, video conferencing, emails, discussion posting, and other social media outlets have created a shift in doctoral learning. These changes provide doctoral students alternative ways of engagement.

Radda (2012) suggested that nontraditional doctoral education is designed for adult learners who have earned Master's degrees and possess significant knowledge and experience in their current field of practice. Participant 2, noted that members of cohort five entered into the program with a wealth of education, knowledge, varied experiences, talent, and a thirst for learning. It was during the first days of residency, that Participant 2 became acutely aware that in order to complete the program successfully, it was necessary to develop relationships with other students and faculty members. Participant 2 two explained how initially there was struggle with developing cohort relationships. Batts, Cry, Washington, and Wickham (2013) stated that persistence in an online doctoral program has to be intentional and deliberate. Participant 2 continued to take advantage of every opportunity to get to know cohort members and faculty, which included using social media platforms, collaborative assignments, and all social activity opportunities afforded during residencies.

Participant 2 was in the unique position of being in close proximity of the university, and was able to attend activities such as proposal and dissertation defenses, and meet with professors on behalf of cohort 5 for questions and clarification. After making these connections, Participant 2 shared information, findings, and observations with cohort 5 members so everyone could keep abreast of what was happening at any given time. Participant 2 noted that being able to serve in this capacity enhanced engagement with fellow cohort members and faculty.

Virtual learning for doctoral programs is an expanding phenomenon (Vanstone, Hibbert, Kinsella, McKenzie, Pitman, & Lingard, 2013). One of the multiple components needed to complete a doctoral program is engagement. A key to success for Participant 2 was being able to identify strengths, heighten personal

contributions, and to utilize virtual learning platforms to become even more personally engaged with fellow cohort members and faculty.

## **THE COHORT MODEL**

The university loses resources when a student decides not to continue in the doctoral program. Additionally, the student loses time and money. Students have cited personal and professional reasons why they drop out or become designated as All But Dissertation (ABD), because at this juncture, the students have completed all of the coursework, but not the dissertation. Santicola (2013) cited several reasons for students not completing a program. Personality factors, motivational factors, financial burden, family obligations, and feelings of isolation have been found to contribute to doctoral student attrition. The cohort model was designed to address some of the contributing attrition factors (Santicola, 2013).

Cohorts consist of a small group of students with the goal of working together and providing support to one another throughout the academic program (Gratten, 2014). In this model, which can be viewed as a learning community, students have the same classes and are taught by a core of faculty members. Participant 7 stated that the logic behind the cohort model for a doctoral program is that if students work together, they can create a supportive network. The network enables students to work collectively and collaborate with one another, eliminating students' feelings of working in isolation (Gatten, 2014). Lawrence, as cited by Gratten (2014) believes that a cohort's "community" does not just happen, but evolves in stages over a period of time. Members of the cohort exchange various roles during the development stage. However, as the members become more familiar with each other and gain respect for one another's skills, the bond develops (Gratten, 2014). Collaborative learning, where students and instructors connect and develop strong working relationships, will follow (Betts, 2014).

With all of the positive outcomes associated with the cohort model, simply changing format of doctoral study to this configuration is not enough to address student needs or university concerns (Dawson & Kumar, 2012). Capacity must be built for faculty members to embrace the programmatic thrusts of the model in order to be effective in working with adult students (Alexander, 2009).

## **VERTICAL COHORT ENGAGEMENT**

In recent years, studies have revealed that doctoral cohort-based programs have many benefits for students despite the tacit frustrations of completing the dissertation (Freeman & Kochan, 2012; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Some of the benefits include creating strong relationships and bonds, peer-reviewing assignments, offering support and encouragement to stay the course, networking, and developing long lasting friendships. Generally, a cohort matriculates through the program together with the exception of those students who are permitted to transfer credits from other institutions. Bista and Cox (2014) noted that generally in closed cohort models, new students are not permitted once the cohort is underway. This allows cohort members time to develop relationships with each other. However, after finishing all of the required coursework for the doctoral program, cohort camaraderie and collaboration can vary depending on where students are in the writing process. It is at this juncture, where vertical cohort engagement may prove to be beneficial to doctoral students.

Pemberton & Akkary (2010) shared that in open-cohort models, students interact with different cohort members as needs determine. For example, Participant 5 advanced through the program at a quicker rate than his fellow cohort members. Participant 5 was also able to transfer in some previous credits from another institution, which helped to complete the coursework more quickly than other cohort members. As a result, Participant 5 sought doctoral advisor guidance to engage a cohort three member further along in the process and published a journal article. Participant 5 stated this is where vertically engaging previous cohorts proved to be helpful. Cohort members that have already completed the coursework requirements and have been in the dissertation writing process for a while may have important information and perspectives to offer.

Vertical engagement of cohorts is another form of social presence that involves the way that students engage each other virtually, as opposed to face-to-face engagement (Kumar et al., 2011). Participant 5 said engagement of previous cohorts through e-mails and phone calls, ultimately led to the development of relationships that have grown stronger over time. Social integration provides a sense of connection and community. Therefore, doctoral students who maintain persistence, coupled with vertical cohort interactions, may be better suited to

complete the doctoral journey (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

## **SCHOLARLY ENGAGEMENT & PRODUCTIVITY**

Scholarly productivity is critical to the advancement of doctoral students in becoming 21<sup>st</sup> century thought leaders and researchers. However, a large proportion of graduate students may not have authored or co-authored a publication by the time graduation arrives (Wei, et al, 2015). Doctoral students who matriculate in a culture of scholarship within the Ph.D. program have greater opportunities to contribute to the research community (Kamler, 2008). A number of components assist with creating capacity for doctoral students to serve in the community of engaged scholars. Cultivation of advisor-advisee relationships (Sandmann, et al, 2009), collaboration (Holmes, et al, 2014; Wei, et al, 2015), and exposure to a larger group of engaged scholars (Anderson, et al, 2013) are three activities that foster academic productivity.

A need exists for skilled faculty members to participate in scholarly endeavors, as doctoral students are learning the process of research and societal expectations of those in the academy (Bloomfield, 2006; O'Meara & Jaeger, 2007). An exploratory multi-case design study conducted by Sandman, et al (2009) found that advisee approaches to scholarly work was influenced by their relationships with advisors. Participant 1 felt that productivity was higher when students were encouraged to publish from research conducted for and from the dissertation. Advisors work as sponsors and advocate for students, providing opportunities at the university and beyond for students to share their work (Sandmann, et al, 2009).

In addition to advisory leadership, collaboration among students is also helpful in scholarly productivity. Graduate students appreciate individual and team research, and are likely to participate on a research team when a sense of individual self-efficacy is present (Wei, et al, 2015). Supporting the concept of academic productivity in a team setting is the work of Holmes, et al (2014) who found that team building for scholarly engagement develops trust and cooperation among group members. Participant 1 noted that collaboration helped to deter academic isolation, thus enhancing retention and experience in scholarly pursuits. Additionally, Participant 1 noted that combining advisor-advisee relationships and collaboration assist the graduate student in gaining exposure to a larger cadre of scholars and practitioners in the intellectual community. Anderson, et al (2013) concluded engagement in scholarly activity is an important practice in doctoral education. Experience in publishing and presenting original research was found to have an effect on student development as scholars, as well as prediction of doctoral education outcomes (Anderson, et al, 2013).

Participant 1 noted that advisor-advisee relationships, collaboration, and exposure to the larger research community were important factors for the growth and development of the members of cohort 5. Participant 1 stated that of the 12 students in cohort 5, eight have published, or plan to publish as an author or co-author. Participant 1 also stated peer and mentor support, as well as the intellectual culture of the program influenced the desire to publish. Cohort 5 members have “grown up” in an environment that has cultivated expectations to extend the “work of the scholar” beyond the dissertation and to the research community-at-large.

A learning environment where scholarly productivity is inherent can provide a context to increase graduate student exposure in the academy, but also may serve as motivation toward doctoral persistence and degree attainment. Engagement in scholarly productivity increased confidence in writing, as well as elevated the desire to present to audiences that will use research of Participant 1 to solve problems and help create policy in K-12 education on teacher development for longevity.

## **SUCCESS DRIVERS**

Participant 6 noted that doctoral students who complete programs do so because of resilience. Resilient students enter doctoral programs with a history of academic support and achievement, and remain enrolled in programs to continue the trend of success (Clewell, 1987). These students will persist through the most difficult academic scenarios out of an internal drive to not fail. Therefore, a major success driver for doctoral students is resilience (Valdez, 2010). Participant 6 achieved resiliency as a result of observing a final defense during an initial doctoral residency. Participant 6 further stated that seeing the doctoral candidate cross the finish line was a fortunate opportunity to witness. Participant 6 noted that during weary times on the doctoral journey, reflection on the final defense helped to re-energize a press towards degree completion.

Mishra (2015) indicated another key driver for doctoral student success was time management. Time management is necessary to bring appropriate balance to personal and academic aspects of life. Doctoral students who employ effective time management methods are adept at setting timelines to meet important targets, and allowing for flexibility in the daily schedule (Mishra 2015). Participant 6 stated that flexibility decreased stress and allowed doctoral students the ability to shift priorities to meet deadlines, which was critical to academic success. Time management for Participant 6 meant compartmentalizing life. Participant 6 also accounted for each minute of the day as well as making time for work, family commitments, and schoolwork. Participant 6 made the commitment to work every day by taking time to devote to doctoral studies and dissertation work.

Clearly defined and thoughtful university processes are another key driver for the academic success of doctoral students (Di Perro, 2015). Students are caught racing against the clock of degree completion requirements because they are unsure of university processes and policies. Di Perro (2015) posits that students have to deal with family issues such as marriage and illnesses, and are left stressed because of a lack of knowledge about academic leave of absence policies. This may cause attrition, or the exhausting of time the university allows for degree completion. Di Perro (2015) also claims that universities create class schedules, milestone dates, and policies that are nearly insurmountable for students and the dissertation committee to meet. When difficulty is experienced meeting institutional requirements, both students and advisors feel unsupported. Universities should audit their processes and remove those that waste students' time, and contribute to delays in degree completion (Di Perro, 2015).

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & NETWORKING**

Participant 8 was afforded an opportunity to present at an international academic conference and engaged with scholars from all over the world. This experience expanded Participant 8 vision of how doctoral programs can help students grow professionally. Demands of doctoral training have increased over the last several years focusing on factors such as assessing the quality of the doctoral student experience through student development, program satisfaction, personal well-being, and overall sense of support (Ampaw and Jaeger 2012; Austin 2011). The expansion of studies examining doctoral program quality has helped to define doctoral student success beyond degree completion (Gardner 2009).

Doctoral students' need for strategies regarding professional development should prompt university administrators and faculty to create networking opportunities from a variety of sources throughout graduate school matriculation (Barnes and Randall 2011; Danby and Lee 2012; Lee and Boud, 2009; Wendler et al. 2012a). Participant 8 found networking with cohort members and industry leaders to be effective in helping to understand how to navigate paths of career growth. Doctoral students should extend beyond the university to be equipped for life in and beyond the halls of academia.

Finally, the professional development experience should be characterized as personable and personal (Foote, 2010). These elements may address specific needs of students by fostering interpersonal communication skills required to secure employment, post-graduation. Doctoral students may also be more competitive candidates for employment across multiple sectors after having been engaged in professional development (Heflinger & Doykos, 2016). Participant 8 found that engaging in professional conferences and networking with industry professionals provided a stronger foundation to become an agent of change.

## **EXPECTATIONS & DISCIPLINE**

According to Golde (2005), attrition occurs when student researchers are not knowledgeable of objectives and expectations of the academic discipline required for doctoral discourse. Furthermore, not having an acute awareness of one's personal skill set, as it pertains to doctoral studies, is a key factor in student attrition (Golde, 2005). It is important for novice scholars to be reflective at multiple stages of their matriculation towards obtaining a terminal degree. Participant 9 suggested two absolute instances of reflection that should occur: (1) during the initial stages of seeking admissions and acceptance to a doctoral program, and (2) following the conclusion of either the first semester or the first academic year (Lovitts, 2005). At this juncture, students will have had the opportunity to make observations of personal and organizational expectations (Lovitts, 2005). The autonomy to evaluate and assess the relationship between the student and the institution is a determinant in making informed decisions as a lifetime intellectual willing to contribute sound scholarship and respected research to the academy as an expert in the field (Lovitts, 2005).

Participant 9 noted the doctoral journey is a long, arduous one that can be intimidating. Participant 9 worried about finding a topic of passion that would not impede timely completion, while also balancing an extremely demanding full-time job. However, despite these concerns, the successful completion of Participant 9's first semester enhanced motivation and resilience to continue the journey. As a doctoral student and higher education practitioner, Participant 9 found the study of theory and practice to be extremely rewarding, as the dual process of learning, in and out of the classroom, solidified career aspirations and created a platform for real-life application of current issues in higher education.

Participant 9 now has an understanding of the competencies required to promote effective higher education reform, as the leading force of motivation relates to the ability to use scholarly approaches to invoke effective, innovative change. To that end, doctoral persistence is the ability to persevere, manage time, be collaborative and accountable, be willing to inspect the leader within, accept challenges and constructive criticism, and develop relationships (Spaulding & Rockinson- Szapkiw, 2012). Studies indicate over the last four decades 40% to 60% of doctoral candidates failed to demonstrate doctoral persistence at some stage in the process (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Hoskins & Goldberg (2005) affirmed that students are more likely to persist in programs where the curriculum is flexible and pertinent to the student's professional practice (Spaulding & Rockinson- Szapkiw, 2012).

Wasburn-Moses (2008) suggested that student expectations about the academic programs and coursework contribute significantly to persistence. Additionally, a powerful doctoral program outlines expectations, program processes, and procedures, as well as introduces students to the academic culture of higher education. Spaulding & Rockinson- Szapkiw (2012) proposed future students may be better prepared for the challenges and setbacks by understanding what doctoral students experience and what measures students take to persist. Participant 9 suggested that patterns of persistence doctoral students must use to finish their programs include the development of successful connections with other doctoral students, ability to identify and compartmentalize priorities, and stamina to trust the process of their journey.

## PERSISTENCE NARRATIVES FROM DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Persistence is an individual phenomenon (Cardona, 2013). Investigation on the subject matter suggests that students who are both personally and professionally motivated are more likely to persist (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). Exhaustive research on persistence suggests that goal-setting and motivation are elements demonstrating strong correlations to doctoral degree attainment (Antony, 2002; Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Further, motivation and goal-setting are identified as personal elements contributing to doctoral persistence (Spaulding & Rockinson- Szapkiw 2012; Litalien, Guay and Morin, 2015). Therefore, Participant 4 suggested that understanding doctoral students' motivations may also provide insight into factors contributing to persisting towards a doctoral degree. Participant 4 desire to become a credentialed author fueled persistence in completing the doctoral journey.

There are varying intrinsic and extrinsic factors also suggested as motivators toward persisting towards doctoral completion. Intrinsic features include: (1) self-efficacy, personal abilities, and coping skills (2) attitude, beliefs, and motivation, and (3) effort and perseverance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research points out that extrinsic motivation, that which is influenced externally from the individual and is not necessarily for the individual's own interest and enjoyment of the activity, contributes to the phenomenon of doctoral persistence as well (Nota, Soresi, Ferrari, Wehmeyer, 2011).

Participant 4 conducted a study exhibiting reflections of current doctoral students representing three different cohorts of approximately twenty students. Table 2 identifies reflections on persisting towards completion. Table 3 identifies intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and strategies.

Table 2 *Doctoral Student Reflections Persistence Strategy*

Participant	Reflections
Ben	<i>Because of my full schedule as a wife, mother, educator, and ministry leader, I had to</i>

	<i>create a plan to balance my personal, professional and academic obligations.</i>
Marci	<i>Reminding myself of the benefits of a having a PhD motivates me when assessing the cost of getting there. Life planning has also assisted me in conquering mini-milestones along the way.</i>
Bria	<i>Understanding the process and the need for persistence ensures preparation for the pressure, challenges and setbacks that will likely occur.</i>
Hillary	<i>I have found constantly identifying and reflecting on reasons to persist beneficial in when challenges occur.</i>
Willis	<i>Planning allowed me to include the children, the workload, coursework, volunteer hours, being a dance mom, tutoring, making homemade meals, maintaining a household and earning sleep time in addition to late night Blackboard log ins.</i>
Hannah	<i>The ability to manage stress with friendship, religion, financial relief, and time management will guide to doctoral perseverance.</i>

Table 3 *Intrinsic / Extrinsic Persistence Motivators*

Participant	Reflections
Simon	<i>I continue to persist due to my intrinsic motivation and established support system. Failure is not an option. If I set a goal, I must achieve that goal.</i>
Marci	<i>My motivation for persisting in this learning journey has always been thinking beyond school. I view achievement of this quest as an open door to a career path of unparalleled intellectual freedom. Therefore, my lens of achieving a PhD is not completion, but a certificate or approval to participate.</i>
Torrie	<i>The experience with my cohort and those cohorts that have come before me, have been motivating factors in my persistence.</i>
Henry	<i>Shared journeys will aid students' persistence to a conferred doctoral degree.</i>
Richard	<i>I feel I am intrinsically motivated and that is why I am persevering.</i>
Henry	<i>My advisor plays a critical role in my Doctoral Persistence. When students receive mentoring from their advisor, they submit more conference papers, journal articles, book chapters, and grant proposals.</i>
Steven	<i>I believe I have the intrinsic ability to effectively plan assignments, readings, and writing time that turn these external stressors into learning opportunities.</i>
Willis	<i>Persistence became innate to me as I began to mature into a young lady who knew there was more to life than what I saw every day in my neighborhood.</i>
Dale	<i>At this point and time in my career, completing the doctoral program is the best investment for me to pursue.</i>

## SUMMARY OF PERSISTENCE PATTERNS

This study utilized interview data from individual students enrolled in doctoral programs from 2010 to 2016 to identify patterns and determinants of their persistence. Table 4 summarizes the major themes that emerged on persisting towards degree completion in doctoral programs.

*Table 4 Persistence Patterns*

Number	Persistence Pattern
1.	Successful doctoral students make powerful connections with other doctoral students.
2.	Persistence is an intentional and highly personalized activity.
3.	Doctoral students need a laser focus on process, persistence and product.
4.	Cohort members benefit from vertical engagement with those who have finished.
5.	Active scholarship is an essential factor in academic socialization.
6.	Time management is not optional. Time is a constant companion that accompanies you throughout the doctoral journey
7.	Learning how to identify and compartmentalize priorities is a requisite skill.
8.	Frequent feedback on the work helps to refine the final manuscript.
9.	Honing communication skills and learning to ask questions will propel you forward.
10.	Embrace the responsibility to become a thought leader and expert in the field.

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