A Grounded Theory of Persistence in a Limited-Residency Doctoral Program

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Abstract

Approximately 50% of doctoral students in social science, humanities, and educational doctoral programs fail to earn their Ph.D. This number is 10% to 15% higher for students enrolled in online or limited-residency programs. Using in-depth interviews and qualitative data analysis techniques, this grounded-theory study examined participants' recollections of their experience as students in a limited-residency doctoral program and their reasons for withdrawal while working on their dissertation. The study was guided by the central question "What is the nature of the participants' experiences of doctoral attrition in a limited-residency doctoral program?" The resultant theory clarified relationships between attrition and a support issues (i.e., advisor support, dissertation process support and program office support). The theoretical model helps identify steps faculty and administration may take in order to reduce high levels of attrition. Recommendations for effective doctoral education practices from existing literature are supported in the findings of this study.

Keywords

Doctoral Study, Dissertation, Attrition, Limited-Residency, Qualitative Research, Grounded Theory, Persistence

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Approximately 50% of doctoral students in social science, humanities, and educational doctoral programs fail to earn their Ph.D. This number is 10% to 15% higher for students enrolled in online or limited-residency programs. Using in-depth interviews and qualitative data analysis techniques, this grounded-theory study examined participants' recollections of their experience as students in a limited-residency doctoral program and their reasons for withdrawal while working on their dissertation. The study was guided by the central question "What is the nature of the participants' experiences of doctoral attrition in a limited-residency doctoral program?" The resultant theory clarified relationships between attrition and a support issues (i.e., advisor support, dissertation process support and program office support). The theoretical model helps identify steps faculty and administration may take in order to reduce high levels of attrition. Recommendations for effective doctoral education practices from existing literature are supported in the findings of this study. Keywords: Doctoral Study, Dissertation, Attrition, Limited-Residency, Qualitative Research, Grounded Theory, Persistence.

Approximately 50% of doctoral students enrolled in the social sciences, humanities and education fail to earn their degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Lovitts, 2001). Non-traditional schools (e.g., limited residency, hybrid or online) experience rates 10% to 15% higher. There is little evidence this pattern will change (Halse & Malfoy, 2010, Willis & Carmichael, 2011), supporting Golde's (2000, p.199) observation that "the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and the most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system - doctoral students - are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals." The words of Breneman (1977, p.54) still ring true: "Attrition rates of 50% or more would be a scandal in any professional school, but seem to be accepted in doctoral education as part of the natural order."

A significant number of educational leaders and researchers rate the quality of online education as equal to, or better than, traditional education (e.g., Allen & Seaman, 2006; Borthick, Jones and Wakai, 2003; Kuo et al., 2013; Lorenzo & Moore, 2002; Ulmer, Watson, & Derby, 2007) concluded that quality online education better prepares learners for collaboration, distance communication and presentation. These characteristics provide greater opportunities than traditional education for learner-to-learner and learner-to-teacher connectedness. Yet, the attrition rate in online education is inversely proportional to that of traditional education programs (Patterson & McFadden, 2009).

The doctoral degree program investigated in this study is a limited-residency program. The courses are offered primarily online with students required to participate on campus for either two extended weekends or one full week each five month semester. Students have access to content and may engage, through a variety of asynchronous tools, in instructional activities at any time; this allows students to balance family and career commitments with their doctoral studies. Given the uniqueness of the population, it is reasonable to assume that these students will have different experiences during their doctoral studies than students in traditional programs. Because of this, their decision to leave the program could be based on factors different from those of traditional students.

Goal

The goal of this study was to develop a theory to help understand and explain attrition from a limited-residency doctoral program (LRDP), specifically, the reasons for attrition by students who had finished coursework and left the program while working on their final dissertation (i.e., they were in candidacy). It was felt that by identifying barriers to completion it would be feasible for faculty and administrators to develop tools, processes and procedures to help improve the doctoral experience and lower levels of attrition.

Background and Significance

Increasingly, higher educational institutions are asked for heightened accountability and quality assurance by the government, accrediting agencies and professional organizations. This increased oversight has created a sense of urgency to articulate the causes of attrition since many feel that program completion rates directly reflect the quality of, or underlying problems with, a department or university (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2010; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Wendler et al., 2010; Willging and Johnson, 2009).

The LRDP investigated has a non-traditional format and experiences an attrition rate 10% to 15% higher than traditional doctoral programs (; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2011; Terrell et al., 2012; http://www.cgsnet.org/attrition-and-completion). As suggested by Carr (2000), Diaz (2002), and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2011) this is common for programs of this type. Researchers at the university have collected and analyzed demographic, learning style and personality type data and found no significant predictor of attrition (Terrell, 2002; Terrell, 2005b; Terrell & Dringus, 1999); so further investigation was necessary. Terrell (2005b) posited:

> *… developers and users of online learning environments at all institutions should consider post-hoc data collection and analysis. The use of interviews and questionnaires aimed at students' experiences in the program could yield data that might aid researchers in the identification of other personal or institutional factors that might be contributing to overall levels of attrition. (np)*

Tinto (1993) stated that students in the ABD (All-But-Dissertation) stage of the doctoral process face barriers above and beyond those faced while completing coursework. Understanding reasons for students not finishing their doctorate while working on their dissertation in a LRDP should encourage faculty and administrators to develop innovative tools and procedures that will help improve the doctoral experience, consequently, increasing the likelihood of a student completing the program. Lower attrition rates are beneficial for students and the university, in terms of both time and money.

During the time the study was conducted, Donna Kennedy was a doctoral student who had recently completed coursework and was in the initial stages of her dissertation research. Because of her familiarity with, and interest in, attrition issues at other universities, she was recruited to investigate suggestions for future research based on Terrell's previous work (e.g., Terrell, 2002; 2005a; 2005b; 2007; Terrell et al., 2012). The earlier studies focused on measurable constructs such as learning style, personality type and demographic characteristics, none of which were shown to be related to attrition. This is the first study conducted with this population based on qualitative data

Methodology

In order to understand the lived experience of students who had left the program, we conducted the study from a phenomenological perspective. This approach "enables the researcher to understand the nature and meaning of an experience for a particular group of people in a particular setting" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 4) by empowering individual participants to share their stories and let their voices be heard. Minimizing the dominant relationship that often exists between a researcher and the participants in a study (Creswell, 2007) allows all parties to understand the subjective nature of the phenomenon being investigated. The resultant grounded theory, derived from the data collected, will allow future researchers in the development of researchable hypotheses, new process and groundwork for further investigation.

Since the students who were the focus of the study were formerly enrolled at the university, approval to conduct research with human subjects was granted by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We identified potential participants from university records as those who had completed coursework but left the program prior to completing their dissertation; this approach replicated Willis and Carmichael's (2011) study concerning late-stage attrition in a doctoral counseling program.

After the potential participants were identified, we solicited their participation via postal mail. Once an agreement to be involved in the study was reached, participants completed, and returned to us, confidentiality and informed consent forms approved by the IRB. Recorded telephone interviews lasting approximately 20 to 90 minutes were conducted with a purposive, non-random sample of 17 participants. The interviews were unstructured (Appendix) but focused on the central research question:

"Tell me about your experience in the doctoral program."

Data were professionally transcribed as collected. To ensure validity, we read each transcript while listening to the recorded interview, noting any discrepancies. We then asked participants to review the the transcript to ensure it accurately represented their interview. Each participant approved the transcript that was utilized in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the development of a testable grounded theory based on interview data focused on a study's central research question. General concepts (i.e., *open codes*) are identified in individual transcripts with *axial codes* emerging from a grouping of like codes. From these, a *selective code* is chosen as the primary focus of the study.

In this case, the transcripts were analyzed using a constant comparison process. From there, general concepts were highlighted that translated into 86 open codes with 877

occurrences (N). As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), analyzing the data in this manner allowed us to develop both descriptive and explanatory categories. Table 1 provides examples of the initial open codes with specific comments related to each code.

Table 1. Example of Identified Open Codes

Open Code	Comments
Lack of support (*n*=45)	I did not feel as though we received the kind of support I thought that I would have received being at this level. But there was no support in place for getting you going on that process and helping you figure out how to write the proposal. I never felt like I was getting the support to really complete the dissertation
Coursework well received (*n*=44)	The coursework portion of it, as well as the institute, was great. I liked going in the beginning of the five-month period and meeting everybody and getting time with the faculty members and sort of getting it kicked off, I thought that was a great way to start. I loved it. I mean, it was great. It was doable. It was challenging. The professors were fantastic. Coursework wise it was the right amount of rigor. It was pertinent information and I like the way they had us do independent work at home and collaborative work online.
Wanted more face-to-face time (*n*=15)	And I think, like I say, had I been face-to-face with someone I may have been able to develop an idea. I needed more personal contact. If I would have been able to stay down there longer than a week and talk some more with [a dissertation advisor] I might have been able to write the statement so that it would have been acceptable

Further analysis of the open codes resulted in the development of three axial codes. The first code reflected participants' beliefs that the program offered inadequate dissertation support (e.g., ineffective feedback, lack of guidance, the lack of a clear dissertation process, and the need for dissertation roadmaps and checkpoints). The second axial code highlighted participants' reflections concerning doctoral study (e.g., reasons for enrolling in a LRDP, personal issues outside of the program, feelings after attrition, as well as personal aspirations, etc.). The third axial code captured participants' direct reasons for leaving the program (e.g., *"And after the professor said that to me, I quit", "I am not in a marriage that would support me finishing the dissertation. That's the bottom line."*)

Narrowing the Axial Codes and Developing the Selective Code

Sixteen of the 17 participants identified components from the first axial code, inadequate dissertation support, as their primary reason for dropping out of the program. Because of this, it was chosen as the selective code. Examples of open codes within the axial code include:

Advisor Support Issues

Participants generally agreed that the dissertation phase would have moved much smoother if they had been assigned an administrative program advisor to counsel them as they transitioned from coursework to working on their dissertation. Examples of these comments included:

1. *Why can't you be given a mentor of sorts who can start to guide you down the path toward choosing your dissertation advisor?*
2. *Well, if I had the opportunity to meet with someone and really discuss coming up with a topic, I may have been more successful.*
3. *I wish I had two advisors that I could have really fallen back on, two people that I could lean on.*
4. *I kind of felt as though when I did try to seek answers or seek assistance I didn't really receive much help or guidance.*

Terrell et al.'s (2012) study showed students were frustrated with response time and lack of guidance while working on their dissertation. This study uncovered the same frustrations; participants wanted a larger time commitment from their dissertation advisors, a desire for more on-campus and Web-enabled meeting times, as well as timelier and more instructive feedback on their papers. This was evidenced by comments such as:

1. *I had hesitancy around the dissertation piece when looking at a distance program, because I didn't know how that would workout being a long-distance student trying to get the support that you need to write a dissertation. And it did not work for me because I need to be able to talk to somebody, not hand out fifteen to twenty-page idea papers and they say, "No, it's too narrow', or 'No it's too broad'. You need a little bit more feedback than that and you didn't get it.*
2. *I would get enthusiastic, send something off, a month later email her to see where I was in the stack, and then have to regroup when I would get her response. I would have to remember where I was and what I had been doing.*
3. *Her slow response was a problem.*
4. *Responses such as 'Too broad.' What do you mean? What is it you want me to do to now? What is it you want me to do? Or 'not interested.' This feedback was not enough for me- I needed support. I needed that, 'Okay, you're going in the right direction. Why don't you look at this?'*

Dissertation Support Issues

An equal number of participants commented on the necessity of administrative dissertation support. Going beyond the need for administrative and dissertation advisors, many felt the need for other support mechanisms such as orientation sessions and established benchmarks and timelines. This code was developed on comments such as:

1. *I wish we had something like an orientation, where former students of the program could come in and let us know their experiences and talk to us and tell us what we could expect.*
2. *I did not feel as though we received the kind of support I thought that I would have received being at this level.*
3. *I'm writing this check every semester and I still don't have a committee and I don't know what to do.'No, I was not ready to start my dissertation. There wasn't enough contact and support from the staff.*

Program Support Issues

An overwhelming number of responses indicated a need for a more structured approach to the dissertation process. Participants wanted more and better guidance.

1. *I felt like although I lacked the research skills and background there was no requirement when I was admitted that I have that background. So I felt like they should have had all the structure in place, even if it meant taking extra courses that other students didn't take.*
2. *You expect somebody who goes through the interviews, completes the classes, pays everything, you get to that level and all you need is somebody to help you, to be with you, to give you a hand, to take you by the hand through the process. It's not there. It's actually the opposite.*
3. *They take their hands off you when it comes to the dissertation.*
4. *I needed a structured path with a way to kind of have a checkpoint system and then someone assigned to me to manage all that – 'listen, I'm in fact following the path'*
5. *I wished there was kind of a plan that was almost an outline as to what to expect.*

Similar to the Terrell et al. (2012) study, where nearly two-thirds of the respondents perceived a lack of care on the part of the faculty, this study's participants were distressed that there was no follow-up from the program after they left the program.

1. *There was no sense of remorse, there was no follow-up.*
2. *There was no 'Hey you didn't finish where are you? What are you doing?' No one called me. No one looked for me. It was just like, 'Okay. See you. Thanks for the checks. See you later.'*

While building the theoretical model, the relationship between the variables, the theory underlying the relationships, and the nature and direction of the relationships must be understood. In this case, the central concept (i.e., attrition) was identified as the concern of the institution (i.e., the dependent variable). From the coding of the interviews, three axial codes (i.e., advisor, program and dissertation support) were shown to directly affect the

central concept (i.e., the independent or predictor variables). In all three cases, a moderating variable was identified that directly affected the relationship between the dependent variable and each of the independent variables (Figure 1).
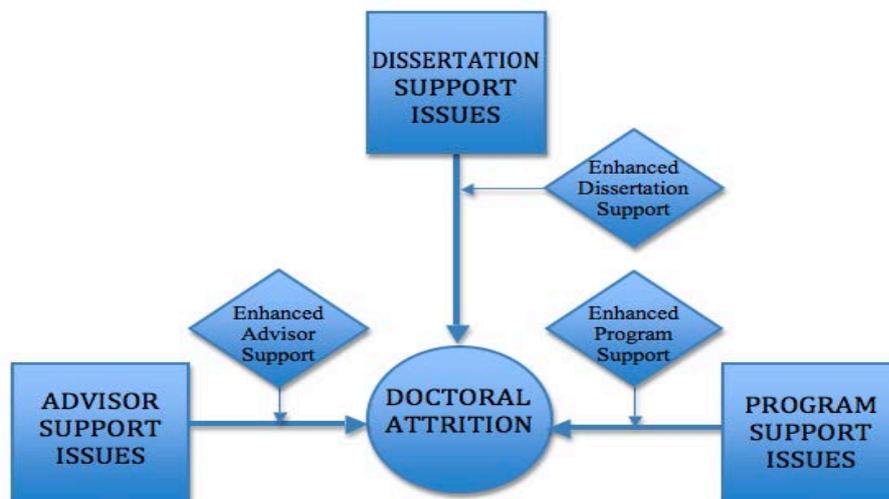

Figure 1. Theoretical Model: The Nature of Participants' Experience of Doctoral Attrition in a Limited-Residency Doctoral Program

Advisor Support Issues

Given the importance of advisor support in the successful completion of the doctorate (Lovitts, 2001), a lack of advisor support can be detrimental. The moderating variable "Mechanisms to Enhance Advisor Support" is composed of setting criteria for advisor support and creating on-going advisor evaluations. Criteria for advisor support would acquaint advisors with root causes of student attrition and establish a measurable suite of behaviors advisors must exhibit and be evaluated against (Tinto, 2007). Evaluations would assist advisors in identifying and addressing problems to reduce doctoral attrition.

Dissertation Support Issues

In this case, students clearly indicated a need for specific direction in the dissertation process itself. The modifying variable is "Mechanisms to Enhance Dissertation Support". Another composite variable, its purpose is to introduce mechanisms that modify dissertation support issues. The mechanisms include measurable milestones students should anticipate during the dissertation process as well as specific coaching and ongoing support they should expect and ask for from their advisors.

Program Support Issues

Most students pointed to a need for the administrative staff's help in supporting their progress. Based on that, the moderating composite variable "Mechanisms to Enhance Program Support" is introduced. These mechanisms include: providing ongoing orientation to the dissertation phase of the program (Terrell, 2007); helping students transition from coursework to the dissertation; making a roadmap, guide, and benchmarks available for students to mark their dissertation progress; and delivering continuing staff development for program and dissertation advisors.

The relationship between the independent and moderating variables and their effect on attrition is clearly demonstrated. This model provides a foundation for the exploration of

solutions to address this study's problem statement as discussed in the abstract. While this study did not explore the impact that personal challenges have on attrition in the LRDP, it does provide actionable evidence that the LRDP can make progress toward lowering attrition rates at the institutional level.

Limitations

Difficulties in conducting this study existed on several levels. Foremost, students in the program under consideration may not be typical of students in other doctoral programs. In addition to their self-selection into the LRDP, many of the students are older, have families and are working full-time; because of this, it was difficult, in some instances, for them to set aside the time necessary to participate in the interview.

Recruiting participants was difficult because withdrawing from a doctoral program is often equated with failure, thus leading to negative recollections. Doctoral students hesitate to participate in research activities based upon their experience as it directly confronts self-efficacy. The researcher addressed these shortcomings by personalizing the invitations to participate, and explaining to participants that this study was concerned with their experiences in the LRDP. This communication allowed participants to speak freely without perceived judgment surrounding attrition.

Recollections in retrospect are often inaccurate or incomplete, and can be problematic for researchers. This concern has been addressed by the work of Allen and Dory (2001) who stated, "the process of studying for the doctorate is etched in the students' minds, and that while recollections may grow dim, the experience is unlikely to be erased from the students' memories" (p. 17). Consequently, students' recollections of their experience of attrition are considered dependable.

Finally, the principal researcher's experiences and bias may have affected the outcome of this study. Bias can manifest itself through the choice of the method of inquiry and questions asked in the interviews as well as in the interpretation of the answers. To insure validity, biases were addressed at the commencement of the study and reviewed throughout the course of the study.

Suggestions for Future Actions and Research

Figure 1 presents a comprehensive theoretical model derived from the component models. Evaluation of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables when the moderating variables are in place leads to three distinct inferences:

1. In the relationship between advisor support issues and doctoral attrition, the impact of the introduction of advisor expectations and evaluations on attrition can now be tested.
2. In the relationship between dissertation support issues and doctoral attrition, the impact of the introduction of clear dissertation milestones and support can now be tested.
3. In the relationship between program support issues and doctoral attrition, the impact of the introduction of program orientation and support on attrition can now be tested.

Recommendations

Many variables contribute to attrition from a limited-residency doctoral program. Personal concerns outside the institution are inevitable in any doctoral program. Nevertheless, institutional problems that lead to attrition such as inadequate interaction with faculty, staff, and peers, poor integration into the program and insufficient dissertation support require corrective action and must be addressed. The following suggestions for best practices are recommended for the viability and reputation of the institution.

Program Support

In their national study of 4114 participants, Golde and Dore (2001) found doctoral students did not understand how the process of doctoral education functioned, how to navigate the process, or what was involved in doctoral study. A lack of structure and direction from program administrators and advisors led to non-completion (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Golde & Dore, 2001; Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005). Specific best practice suggestions for program support include:

1. Assign a faculty advisor to each incoming doctoral student with responsibilities for facilitating their socialization into the school (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000; Terrell et al., 2012).
2. Consider reliable alternatives for program evaluation such as the development of an accountability system to monitor degree progress and attrition (Gilliam & Kritsonis, 2006). Administrators should monitor student progress and proactively offer support as needed. In cases of attrition, students should be interviewed and that data used to develop further preventative processes and procedures.
3. Create additional research courses to bridge the coursework to the dissertation. Atienko Okech et al., (2006) ascertained that 93.7% of their sample "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that "mentoring is important in research training and ought to be included in doctoral research training requirements" (p. 139).
4. Establish assistantships and fellowships early in doctoral study (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Tinto, 1993, Willis & Charmichael, 2011). Assistantships will permit doctoral students the opportunity for further mentoring. Additionally, the financial assistance will allow doctoral students to avoid the potential distraction of full-time work and focus on doctoral study.

Dissertation Support

The reporting of need for additional dissertation support was ubiquitous among participants. At the beginning of the dissertation phase, a defined structure serves as the single most effective tool in persistence and degree completion (Tinto, 1993). Courses, seminars, support groups, and program resources provide doctoral students with much needed structure, experience, and guidance in eliminating the sometimes bewildering process of completing the doctoral degree (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Recommended best practices for dissertation support include:

1. Develop program guidelines that include a clear roadmap, timelines, and checkpoints for dissertation students, advisors and mentors. This will allow all stakeholders to monitor student progress (Lovitts, 2001; Robinson, 2010). Make dissertation benchmarks and celebrate them; this can become an added motivator to drive students to degree completion (Robinson, 2010).
2. Faculty should benefit from professional development relating to:
   - The creation and use of student cohorts to build well-functioning dissertation student communities (Kohun & Ali, 2005; Terrell et al., 2012).
   - How to provide students with guidance on finding and refining a dissertation topic (Graduate Supervision, 2006).
3. Establish social supports within the department that include:
   - Regular orientation sessions that provide further details about the doctoral process (Graduate Supervision, 2006).
   - Regular contact with other students at the same level (e.g., study groups, communities of practice, etc.; Snyder, Dringus, & Terrell, 2012; Terrell et al., 2012).
   - Regular contact with the students' program advisor and dissertation chair (Graduate Supervision, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Robinson, 2010; Willis & Charmichael, 2011).

Advisor Support

Tinto's (1993) theory on doctoral attrition called for improved faulty-student relationships. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) found that student's perception of the quality of their relationship with faculty directly contributed to their ability to persist to completion. Specific suggestions to enhance advisor support include:

1. The administration must recognize the importance of doctoral supervision and provide the training and development of doctoral supervisors. Additionally, faculty would benefit from professional development in mentoring dissertation students. This professional development should cover the necessity of guiding students toward finding and refining a dissertation topic (Graduate Supervision, 2006) as well as the importance of timely and effective feedback (Gilliam & Kritsonis, 2006; Graduate Supervision, 2006; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000; Willis & Carmichael, 2011).
2. Faculty should encourage face-to-face time with their advisees. This contact could take place on campus or via Web-enabled supports such as Skype, Face-Time, Secondlife and GoToMeeting (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Terrell et al., 2012). All communications must be documented and distributed to the student to ensure accuracy and consistency (Graduate Supervision, 2006).
3. The criteria for the selection of dissertation committee members must be established (Graduate Supervision, 2006). Adopt guidelines for the roles of advisors and advisees, clear responsibilities of both, authority of committee members, and adopting procedures for replacing committee members and chairpersons (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Graduate Supervision, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Willis & Charmichael, 2011).
4. Impose structure on the dissertation process by establishing benchmarks and deadlines (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Graduate Supervision, 2006). Advisors must

outline their expectations, provide guidance, assess and supply constrictive responses to material submitted by the students within a reasonable time frame (Graduate Supervision, 2006).

5. Encourage collaboration between students and advisors as well as with others in the department. The implementation of online web tools such as utilizing avatars in a dissertation chat room (Teigland, 2012), and developing communities of practice to support student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lohle, 2012; Snyder et al., 2012; Terrell et al., 2012), must be used as a means of supporting and assisting doctoral students.

6. Allow students to publish their work in a common website so each student can gauge his progress toward completing the dissertation (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lazerson, 2003). Using this approach, students may provide feedback to each other's dissertations helping to identify and remedy problems. This policy will help the students feel less isolated, thus, some of them will be able to complete their dissertation (Ali & Kohun, 2006).

Non-completion is normal and expected in doctoral programs, however, when an institution falls short, that situation needs to be rectified immediately. Suggestions for the institutional improvements previously addressed are presented in this revealing graphic (Figure 1).
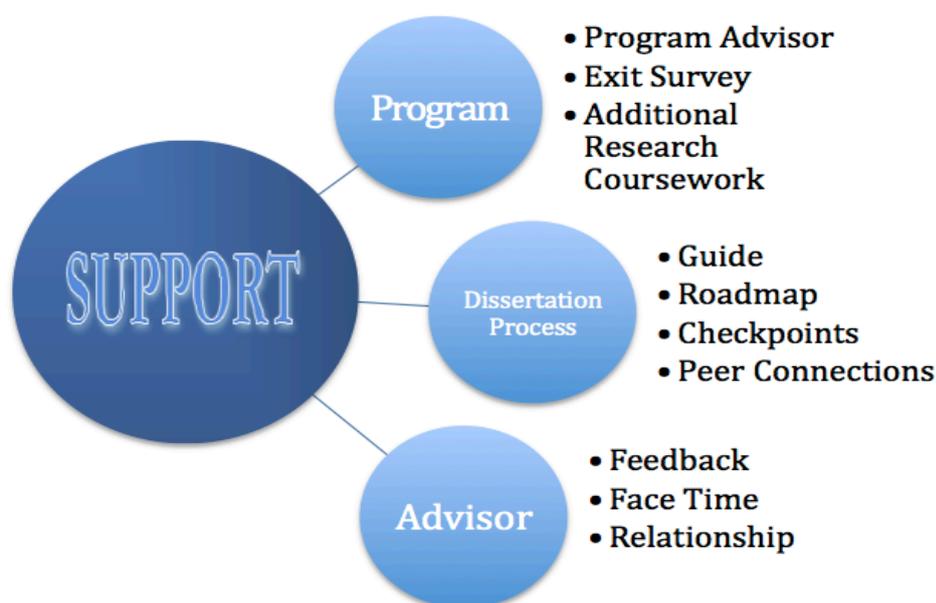
Summary

Historically, attrition rates from doctoral programs have consistently been between 40% and 50% (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Lovitts, 2001). These rates differ among disciplines, department, and universities (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). In limited-residency doctoral programs (LRDPs) such as the one studied here, doctoral attrition rates can be higher than the historical attrition rate (Terrell, 2005a; Terrell et al., 2012). Studies have shown the majority of students are capable of completing their degrees (Golde, 2005); given that, this study was undertaken to explore reasons for attrition from the LRDP.

A grounded-theory approach was used to analyze the experiences of doctoral students during the dissertation phase of their study. The researcher conducted seventeen audio-recorded interviews that ranged from 20 to 90 minutes long. The participants were asked to talk about their experience in the LRDP. An analysis of the transcripts identified three support issues that greatly influence attrition rates: dissertation support, program support and faculty support. Based on themes derived from the transcripts specific best practices are suggested herein.

In closing, it is interesting that, in a common word-count analysis of the transcripts, *advisor* and *communication* were the two words most often used. These words are clear indicators of the issues students felt would help them ultimately complete the limited-residency doctoral program.

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Appendix

Doctoral Attrition Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol - An Investigation of Candidates' Lived Experience of Attrition in the LRDP

Time of Interview:
Date of Interview:
Participant Number:
Phone number:
Male/Female:

Greetings and Introductions

Did you receive the consent form?
Do you have any questions concerning the form?
Is it okay for us to move forward with the interview?
The conversation is being recorded.

What year did you enter the GSCIS program?

Tell me about your experience in the doctoral program?

If respondents need further guidance use the following prompts as necessary:

What was your first impression of the limited-residency program?

What were your experiences during the coursework?

Did you feel ready to start working on the dissertation when you finished coursework? Please explain.

How did you start the dissertation – did you have an idea you wanted to work on?

Were you interested in a specific problem area?

How did you initially approach the faculty members?

Did you feel connected to the faculty and other students while working on the dissertation?

Were they easy to communicate with and did they give you adequate, timely and informative feedback?

Can you remember at what point you made the decision to leave? Please explain.

What caused you to begin thinking about leaving the program?

How did you reach your final decision?

What year did you leave?

Did you ever return to another program for your Doctorate – or do you think you will in the future?

If you had the opportunity to start the program again, is there anything you would do differently?

What things do you know now that you wish you had known then? Would any of this motivate you to return and finish your dissertation?

I will send you a copy of the transcripts to ensure their accuracy. If there is anything you would like to add, or change please let me know in an email and I will add it to the bottom of the transcript. Please return the transcript ASAP.

Would you like to have a copy of the results of this study?

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