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Abstract

More than half of all graduate students drop out before graduation. Doctoral students often become mired in the “all but dissertation” (ABD) phase of the process. This grounded theory study focused on the perceptions and experiences of doctoral students in an educational leadership program, who were ABD, regarding their participation in a dissertation-focused intensive writing course called the Dissertation Boot Camp (DBC). Findings revealed participants had particular challenges with time, writing, and advisement. The DBC attended to many of these challenges by providing time, structure, encouragement, and support. Results of the study led to the development of a conceptual framework, which helps to better understand the complexities involved in a student’s pathway to ABD status.

Keywords

Graduate Students, Dissertation, Graduate Attrition, All But Dissertation, ABD

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Avoiding the A.B.D. Abyss: A Grounded Theory Study of a Dissertation-Focused Course for Doctoral Students in an Educational Leadership Program

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More than half of all graduate students drop out before graduation. Doctoral students often become mired in the "all but dissertation" (ABD) phase of the process. This grounded theory study focused on the perceptions and experiences of doctoral students in an educational leadership program, who were ABD, regarding their participation in a dissertation-focused intensive writing course called the Dissertation Boot Camp (DBC). Findings revealed participants had particular challenges with time, writing, and advisement. The DBC attended to many of these challenges by providing time, structure, encouragement, and support. Results of the study led to the development of a conceptual framework, which helps to better understand the complexities involved in a student's pathway to ABD status. *Keywords: Graduate Students, Dissertation, Graduate Attrition, All But Dissertation, ABD*

People pursue advanced degrees for various reasons. For some the ultimate goal may be monetary; for others the objective may be service to the field; and still, for others, obtaining a master's or doctoral degree may be a personal or spiritual calling. No matter the motive, seeking an advanced degree is a risky endeavor. Nearly half of all graduate students leave their degree programs before graduation (Jimenez y West, Gokalp, Vallejo, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011; Sowell, Zhang, Bell, & Reed, 2008), a decades-old trend seen in graduate schools across the country (Hawley, 2010; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, many students originally enrolled in doctoral programs decide to complete only a master's degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde, 1996), while some students become stifled after completing the required coursework to stay "all but dissertation" or "ABD" for years.

After working with graduate students in an educational leadership doctoral program for several years, the majority of who work fulltime outside of their graduate programs, we have heard their confusion and their frustration. These graduate students' primary complaint reflects a lack of time to work on their dissertations due to their fulltime jobs. A secondary complaint is that they have not been prepared through coursework to write a dissertation and therefore, have not acquired the writing skills to complete a quality dissertation. Because of the lack of time and preparation, many students drift off into what we call the ABD abyss, that is, after completing coursework they make little or slow progress toward completing the dissertation and in turn graduation.

The Dissertation Boot Camp (DBC) is a response to the call from students regarding their confusion and frustration surrounding the writing process and dissertating. Inclusively, the DBC is an opportunity that creates not only time for students to work on their dissertations, but institutes quality and (almost) immediate feedback on students' writing. The

DBC, as a multi-day intensive writing workshop,[1] is designed to help students make significant progress toward the completion of their dissertations, thus reducing their time spent as ABD. We report on one DBC here through qualitative inquiry.

Background and Related Literature

Although there is no single cause that can be traced to attrition (Millett & Nettles, 2006), students cite various reasons for stifling progress, opting for a lower degree, and for early departure from graduate programs. These reasons often include the high cost of tuition, the significant time commitment, and family obligations. However, there are less understood causes that contribute to the noteworthy attrition rate, including anxiety surrounding the writing process (Foss & Waters, 2007) and the relationship between the student and primary advisor (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Lovitts, 2004). Moreover, Ahern and Manathunga (2007) suggested that students are unlikely to openly discuss their anxiety or their relationship with their advisor for fear of appearing inept and unprepared in the high stakes environment of academia. An inability to access or communicate with faculty has been reported to influence disillusionment with doctoral study (Mah, 1986). Relatedly, graduate schools and specialized departments alike often lack institutional support systems for graduate students who experience difficulties in the writing process or in the relationship with their advisor (Jimenez y West et al., 2011). As the transition from coursework to independent research is a key point in the doctoral process—a lack of advisement and support almost ensures that it will be the most protracted stage (Mah, 1986; Mullen, Fish, & Huntinger, 2010). Other associated challenges include a lack of research skills and the lack of structure in the dissertation phase (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; De Valero, 2001; Golde & Walker, 2006).

The decision to drop out of a graduate program is not an easy one and likely follows a series of iterative steps. It is improbable that students who make a premeditated, conscious decision to tackle a master's or a doctorate, do so with a cavalier approach (i.e., they enter a program unsure they will complete it). Nonetheless, with a high dropout rate constantly looming, it is the responsibility of the degree-granting institution to ask, what in particular about graduate programs leads half of all enrollees to attrite before obtaining a degree? And, what can be done to address these problems?

Educational leadership programs are not immune to high attrition rates. According to Mullen et al. (2010) attrition is often close to 60% and can be even higher for students from underrepresented groups (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Moreover, educational leadership programs often recruit students who are current teachers and leaders in K12 schools for their graduate programs. These students may be seeking an administrative position in the future, which requires an advanced degree, or they may already be in an administrative position, but seek a credential to advance their future career. Still, others may be interested in transitioning into the professorate. Regardless, educational leadership doctoral programs are often designed, in terms of the coursework, to compliment these students' schedules. That is, many classes are offered in the evenings and/or on the weekends, and many programs now offer a significant percentage of classes online. As such, students are able to complete coursework, while limiting the number of hours away from their fulltime teaching or administrative jobs.

However, because these students are "non-traditional" graduate students in that they hold fulltime jobs off campus (as opposed to traditional graduate students who often enroll in

[1] The DBC reported on here was designed as a credit-bearing course. However, the structure of the DBC is flexible. For example, it may also be structured as a fee-based or non-fee-based workshop.

their graduate programs fulltime and work part-time—usually in an on-campus position related to their research interests), they are not typically exposed to opportunities that would allow them to develop scholarly skills or appropriately integrate with their academic departments (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Furthermore, as Labaree (2003) suggested, there may be a clash between the cultures of K12 and higher education when teachers and leaders are asked in graduate courses and through graduate-level writing and research expectations, to shift from the practical to the theoretical. To compound their lack of development and integration, and challenges with shifting between the practical and the theoretical, most educational leadership doctoral students have little training in research and formal scholarship (library skills, information synthesis, production of research questions) before they start the doctorate, coming from undergraduate and master's programs that typically do not require a traditional thesis, but some form of practical capstone project (Labaree, 2003).

As these students stay in their practitioner positions and are absent from traditional campus/graduate school life, this may preclude them from feeling as though they belong in the world of academia (Osterman, 2000), as well as the often necessary socialization process (Gardner, 2007), including the development of a close relationship with a dissertation committee chair and potential mentors or committee members. Furthermore, because these non-traditional students work fulltime, once they complete their coursework and move into the dissertation phase, many do not fully understand the dissertation process or how to structure time required for dissertating (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012), and many have not obtained the necessary writing and research skills. Yet, the essence of a doctorate is independent research and original contributions to the field (Lovitts, 2005), and the dissertation is arguably the most challenging rite of passage in doctoral education (Austin & McDaniels, 2006). For many students who are interested in teaching or practitioner careers, the dissertation may be seen as little more than a barrier to overcome, rather than the training of an independent scholar (Mah, 1986). This same perspective may be embraced by faculty and practitioner-focused doctoral programs alike. However, as Boote and Beile (2005) suggested, the higher education community cannot place full blame on students for their failure to demonstrate competence when they have not been shown the skills that are valued.

Purpose, Goals, and Research Questions

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to detail the perceptions and experiences of 11 advanced doctoral (Ph.D.) students who were enrolled in an educational leadership (K12) program, and who participated in a Dissertation Boot Camp (DBC). Specifically, it detailed students' experiences in the DBC and the challenges they faced in trying to complete their dissertations. For the purpose of this study, an advanced student was someone who was finished with coursework, had passed the comprehensive exams, and was in the writing/dissertation phase of their doctoral program—they were considered ABD. Most of the participants in the DBC were lagging, and had been ABD for a significant period of time. The goals of the DBC were to assist students in making significant progress on their dissertations, to remove anxiety surrounding the writing process, and to provide a space for students to find support for other issues or setbacks they had experienced in their graduate programs.

Goals

Our goals for this study were to understand the perceptions and experiences of advanced doctoral students in an education leadership program regarding the challenges they had faced in their programs, their reasons for stalled progress, and their participation in a DBC. According to Golde and Dore (2001) and Golde (2000), it is important to assess doctoral education through the perspectives of students. Without the benefit of conversations to identify institutional interventions that facilitate or hinder doctoral students' progress—inclusive of the student perspective—we are unable to identify what works and what does not. Student voices then highlight (best) practices, which can effectively support student persistence and progress toward graduation. This study did that; it highlighted the voices of doctoral students that may help to identify institutional interventions that better integrate students to the degree-granting institution, and support student progress toward graduation. Moreover, this study highlighted some of the stubborn problems associated with doctoral student attrition, and the particular issues doctoral students in one educational leadership program were experiencing.

Research Questions

1) What are the perceptions and experiences of educational leadership doctoral students who participated in a DBC, regarding their graduate program and their capabilities to complete their dissertations?

2) What are the perceptions of educational leadership doctoral students regarding their participation in a DBC?

Data Sources

Participants

All 11 participants in the DBC were recruited from South University (pseudonym), a small public university in the South, via email and personal communication. All participants had completed their coursework, passed their comprehensive exams, and were at the dissertation- writing phase of an education leadership (K12) doctoral (Ph.D.) program.

Each participant completed a questionnaire that asked for basic demographic information. In order to maintain confidentiality, we include summative information regarding the participants here. The majority (eight) of the students/participants in the DBC were women. The racial (self-identified) make-up of the students were six Black, and five White, and the average age was 43.7 years. All of the participants worked fulltime while in graduate school. Eight of the participants were first-in-the-family graduate students. All of the participants started the Ph.D. program between 2003 and 2010, and completed coursework between 2009 and 2013; and all of the participants reported that they intended to graduate within one or two years after completing the DBC. The average time that the students were ABD was 1.6 years.

Facilitators

The two facilitators for the DBC were also the researchers conducting this study. As facilitators, we had unique experiences that we believe greatly assisted the participants. First, we each held a Ph.D. in educational leadership—doctoral degrees that had been recently

attained. Thus, we knew well the issues and anxieties graduate students may bring to the writing process, as we were not too distant from the "graduate student experience" ourselves. And second, we each had participated in similarly intensive dissertation writing courses as advanced graduate students and therefore knew the value of both participating in and completing such a course.

Thus, we acknowledge that our insider observations (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) and previous experiences further informed this study and how the DBC was designed. While a goal of the DBC was for students to make significant progress on their dissertations, our role as facilitators was to move that process along through constructive feedback and support—that is, to assist and guide (or nudge) students, particularly when they were "stuck" or encountered writing blocks. We now turn to a brief discussion of the methods undergirding our study, and the context, before examining the participants' experiences and perceptions more directly.

Methods and Context

Methods

We analyzed the data via Charmazian (2006) grounded theory procedures of open coding followed by axial, selective, and theoretical coding. Through the emergent open coding process, we developed initial categories and subcategories. We next applied axial coding followed by selective coding in an attempt to relate and unify the categories and subcategories, and ultimately give coherence to the emerging analyses (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, we applied theoretical coding, which encouraged us to consider the relationships between the codes and respond to the data with theoretical coherence and direction. The resultant themes and subthemes are addressed in detail in later sections of this article.

In addition to the grounded theory coding procedures, we also—based on our research questions and rooted in the data—developed a grounded theory or construct (Charmaz, 2006, 2011) to present and explain our phenomenon under study—a doctoral student's pathway toward ABD status. This construct is addressed in detail in later sections of this article.

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from South University's institutional review board before any data collection began. Two semi-structured focus group interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000) with all 11 participants served as the primary means of data collection. The aim of the focus groups was to facilitate participants in their discussions of the issues they had faced in completing their degrees, particularly the dissertation. We conducted one focus group at beginning of the DBC ("pre-DBC"), and another at the conclusion of the DBC ("post-DBC"). Each focus group lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours, and took place in the same location as the DBC. Demographic data and data related to individual participants' goals for the DBC were collected through short questionnaires given to the group immediately before the pre-DBC focus group. Each group interview was audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Field notes were taken during the interviews and observations occurred throughout the DBC. All data were analyzed using open, axial, selective, and theoretical coding procedures. Trustworthiness was established through the following means: triangulation of data from multiple sources (interviews, observations, field notes, engagement with the context); peer debriefing with one another and a trusted, impartial colleague at South University; memoing, which allowed us the opportunity to keep track of our ideas about the data and the analyses as they were ongoing as well as to bridge the coding processes; and member checking with participants to review, clarify, and revise if necessary any constructions we developed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We now turn to a brief discussion of the context of the study.

Context

The five-day DBC took place on the campus of South University during the summer semester. Each participant was encouraged to stay in on-campus dormitory housing for the duration of the DBC to limit travel and distractions. Each day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., the participants met in a large conference room in the same building as their dorm rooms. The furniture in the conference room was arranged such that each student had their own table as workspace. These tables were arranged in a large circle, so participants could face one another. The facilitators also had their own similar workspaces in the conference room during the DBC for immediate access by the participants, along with a private room for one-on-one conferencing. The participants were instructed to respect the room as a dedicated quiet workspace and to use headphones/ear buds if they desired to "tune out" external noise. There was a printer available for all to use.

In the following sections we detail our findings. As noted previously, we conducted two focus groups. We start by detailing the findings from the analyses of the first focus group held immediately prior to the commencement of the DBC, which we call "pre-DBC findings." Next, we detail the DBC itself including the rationale and purpose driving the DBC, as well as descriptions of the format of the DBC, and the physical space where the DBC was held. Then, we detail the findings from the second focus group held immediately after the conclusion of the DBC, which we call "post-DBC findings." This presentation format follows how the DBC was actually conducted. First we conducted the "pre-DBC" focus group, then the five-day DBC occurred, and then in the late afternoon of the fifth day of the DBC we conducted the "post- DBC" focus group. We elected to present the findings this way in order to relay a better understanding of how the events actually played out. And finally, as is customary with the use of grounded theory, we detail the conceptual framework we created, which can be used to understand a student's pathway to ABD status.

Pre-DBC Findings

Qualitative analyses of the pre-DBC focus group interview and questionnaires revealed four primary themes: (1) Not knowing how to start; (2) Writing barriers; (3) Challenges with advisors; and (4) Finding the time. We explore these themes in greater detail below.

Not Knowing How to Start

The majority of the participants expressed an unclear idea of how to start writing their dissertations. That is, they felt that their experiences in the program and coursework had not adequately prepared them to understand how to begin the dissertation writing process. For example, one participant detailed a lack of having a plan: "Getting started has been rough. I don't have a detailed plan of action and organization. I don't feel like I have enough guidance or direction. I guess I don't have the knowledge of what to do."

Other participants corroborated this statement. For example, "[The dissertation] was like so overwhelming. I couldn't think of how to even get started…It's just overwhelming, I became so clouded…" Another participant agreed, "I want to get my starting point like on the monopoly board… Instead of just flying everywhere. Just start at point A and go to B." One participant, who had started to review the literature still felt lost. She said:

> I'm just getting started. I feel like I'm, I don't know where to start. I have started reading and doing summaries…but I don't know how to even begin the

> first sentence of anything. …so I am hoping to figure out how to take what I wrote [so far] and turn it into a dissertation.

Not knowing where or how to start the writing of the dissertation seemed to greatly impact participants' abilities to make the first steps toward completion. Going from a structured experience while in coursework, to an unstructured experience in the dissertation phase, along with a lack of guidance, seemed to not only confuse and frustrate students, but also significantly stifle their momentum and progress.

Writing Barriers

Most of the participants discussed battling writing barriers, or obstacles which tended to derail their progress. Many participants felt that even though they had written numerous papers successfully in the courses in their graduate program, writing a dissertation was not a comparable exercise. Some felt their coursework and comprehensive exams leading up to the dissertation phase did little to prepare them for the seemingly enormous task of writing a dissertation. Other participants suggested that their coursework gave them a false sense of ability and security, and they were rudely awakened to discover they would struggle with the writing phase. For example, one participant noted,

> … some of the earlier courses you take, you know reading articles and giving your perspective all the time. And with [the dissertation] it's not about your perspective. You know it kind of changes. You are so used to writing these papers and talking about what you read and how you feel about it, and you can't say that anymore. It makes it tough.

Another participant corroborated, "We write all these papers and do all these articles. I would have loved to have everything I was doing, going towards my topic… so I mean, I killed a lot of trees [from printing so many articles]."

Several participants made comments indicating their lack of confidence in their own writing, for example: "I'm not the greatest writer. Getting my thoughts into the correct format has been a challenge. I am fearful of the 'next steps' when I am writing…"; "…I struggle with formatting my thoughts and making them flow."; "I have trouble staying focused and on topic."; "…when I get the red marks [feedback from advisor] back, I think 'how else do I say it?'…writing is not my strength." Thus, feeling that they were "not great" writers seemed to impact the participants' capabilities and confidence to complete their dissertations. They did not know how to synthesize and organize the literature, or understand how to create a scholarly or academic written work.

Challenges with Advisors/Dissertation Committee Chairs

While many participants thought they did not have the necessary skills to write a well-crafted dissertation, they also felt their advisors or dissertation committee chairs were not willing to help them through the difficult aspects of the writing process. Several of the participants discussed dealing with serious challenges in working with their primary advisor or chair of their dissertation committee. Often a participant's relationship with their advisor or chair was a tenuous one, and they felt they could not approach their advisor or chair for needed guidance. Several participants commented on a lack of advisement. For example:

> The further along I got, the less engaged with my advisor I felt. [He] is difficult to get in touch with. We don't have enough person-to-person contact. Our relationship is a bit disconnected. I can't contact him for help, well, if I do he doesn't respond.
>
> I finished all my coursework, then I took three dissertation hours in the fall and spring. I didn't do anything. [My advisor] didn't say "do this." When I had questions I wasn't answered but directed to someone else who was busy. So I was just lost. …I don't know if I am heading in the right direction.

Other participants commented on receiving insufficient and inadequate feedback on their writing. For example, one participant explained, "I needed that face-to-face, I needed to just sit down for her to look at me. To show her I needed help and to look at my stuff…the feedback is never enough." Another participant corroborated, "My advisor only wants to see my writing when it is "done" but I don't know how to get it that far."

While recognizing personal responsibility and comparing his experience to that of advising in the K12 world, one participant suggested that the department take a new approach to working with students and interactions with advisors,

> …when you are at a certain point there should be… some discussion between you and your advisor on where you are and that's documented and inserted in your program. Just like the timeline to get your committee and so forth, there should be a time that's carved out when you speak to your advisor. I'm sort of thinking about at the [K12] school level, the kids get to a certain point, it's getting close to graduation then you find out you don't have the classes that you need to have, the credits. It's like what happened? ...the parent is saying... "Hey, what the hell y'all doing over there?" I kind of feel like that, not to that extent because of course I have some personal responsibility, I'm an adult now. I kind of feel along those lines though.

Overwhelmingly, the participants reported that they experienced a lack of needed support from their primary advisor(s). Inadequate support led to students feeling frustrated and lost, which seemed to negatively impact their motivation and progress toward completion. Participants felt like they had to guess at each new step.

Finding the Time

As fulltime K12 teachers and leaders, and graduate students, the participants reported feeling a serious lack of time to devote to writing the dissertation. They did not seem to understand how to create time in their schedules to write. For example, one participant pointed to a lack of time to identify and correct errors,

> Ya know, I have spent all this time writing this thing, I have spent all this time reading and researching. I need [someone] to sit and read it…and correct it and send it back to me and tell me where my mistakes are. I don't have time to sit, I know that sounds terrible. But I don't have time to sit…and go over it.

Other participants noted the distinct differences in their abilities to complete tasks from when they were in coursework and when they were ABD,

> I'm one of those people when I was doing the coursework when we had deadlines and things were due boom, boom, boom, things were perfect. But the minute we became ABD and we started writing, I didn't have a deadline or a timeline or something due…that is when I struggled. I need somebody with a foot in my back to keep me going.

Several participants corroborated these sentiments regarding time constraints. For example, "…without having the structure of deadlines and accountability, I feel like my time is delegated elsewhere. Time is a barrier." And,

> I wake up everyday with this thing over my head, ya know I want this over because I feel like a nobody. And I will seem fine, but I want my life back. Just getting through it, I mean managing time with family and everything else.

In addition to the challenge of finding time to work on the dissertation between work and family, it is clear that disillusionment with the program and inaccessible, unhelpful faculty negatively impacted the participants' progress. The data suggest the participants felt their department and advisors did not articulate the expectations for dissertation writing or completion. As a result, participants became frustrated and disillusioned, which in addition to their busy lives, may have pushed them toward ABD status.

In sum, lacking a clear understanding of how to begin a dissertation, alongside deficiencies in advisement, writing skills, and time, participants found themselves unable to make much quality progress toward completing the dissertation. We now turn to a detailed discussion of an institutional intervention, the DBC, designed to assist students who are ABD.

An Intervention: The Dissertation Boot Camp

The DBC at South University was a doctoral-level educational intervention that sought to improve educational leadership students' capabilities to complete their dissertations and for students to make significant progress toward that goal. Within these objectives included a push toward actual writing. Thus, we asked that students be "ready to write," having completed most of the reading and organizing of literature and/or analyses of data, when they arrived at the DBC. Moreover, we asked that participants send their written work (whatever they had completed thus far related to their dissertation) to us (the facilitators) so that feedback could be provided at the start of the course. Students were also encouraged to connect with their dissertation advisors/chairs before, during, and after the DBC so that the work produced at the DBC aligned with the dissertation committee's guidance. Our roles as the facilitators were to serve as a guides and mentors, not to replace advisors or committees.

Format of the DBC at South University

The format of the DBC reported on here was a five-day, consecutive session. The DBC met from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily, with enrichment sessions in the evenings. The day hours were dedicated specifically to progress on the dissertation. Mostly, we encouraged participants to use this time to write, however at times participants also used some of this time to read, research, or analyze data. The evening enrichment sessions included a facilitator-led review of APA citation style, an overview of the dissertation process including the order of events and deadlines, a discussion of videos related to methodology, and an open forum with participants of past DBCs to discuss challenges and successes.

We allowed only a small number of participants to enroll in the DBC in order to be able to provide quality, individualized attention and feedback for each participant. In order to make the most of their time, we asked that participants "disconnect" from their jobs and families for the entire DBC, allowing interruptions only for absolute emergencies. However, when students needed a break, we asked, for example, that they take a short walk, or make a quick phone call, but that they return to writing expeditiously.

Because this particular DBC was geared toward students in an education leadership (K12) program, and these students also held fulltime teaching or administrative positions in K12 schools (the most common lamentation from the group included a lack of time to work on their dissertations), the DBC was offered during July when public schools were on summer break. Holding the DBC during the K12 summer break allowed participants to dedicate five full days and evenings to the DBC. Moreover, this also allowed participants to plan for and dedicate specific time to write (that is, they could put it on their calendar and plan for it months in advance).

This DBC was configured as a three-graduate-credit-hour elective pass/fail course[2] In order to receive a "P" or pass the course, the students had to hold themselves accountable to attending each day and evening session and making progress on their writing. Through this format, our goals were to provide structure, time, encouragement, and accountability.

In the particular DBC reported on here, there were two facilitators and eleven participants (because the DBC is intensive, 10 or fewer participants is ideal for two facilitators, however we did allow an exception for this DBC). Throughout the DBC, the facilitators were available for consultations and to provide feedback on writing. Often participants provided the facilitators with written work at the end of the day that was then read over night and returned the following day.

On the first day of the DBC, a conversation occurred where each facilitator discussed the unique challenges, barriers, and frustrations they had experienced when they were writing their own dissertations, and then each participant did the same. On the final day of the DBC, each participant met privately with the facilitators to discuss progress made during the DBC and to create a calendar from then to graduation. This calendar was unique to each participant, and may have included defense dates, completed chapter goals, IRB application submission dates, and so on. At the end of the final day of the DBC, there was a large group discussion about how to maintain the momentum they had started, to stay motivated, and to stay connected to each other. We also discussed directives related to dealing with the challenges that were sure to arise.

Space for the DBC at South University

As noted previously, the DBC reported on here took place in a large room equipped with individual tables (one per participant and facilitator, large enough so that participants could spread out any necessary materials and a laptop). The room was private and large enough so that the tables could be arranged in a circle where participants were facing toward the center.

The room set-up created an environment of support and encouragement. For example, when one participant felt exhausted or frustrated, she may have looked around the room and

[2] With the DBC structured as a course, an additional benefit was that for students who needed it, they could apply for financial aid through the university. Participants' grades in the DBC were not impacted by their participation in the study.

saw her peers busily working, and thus felt inspired to refocus on her own work; a supportive and encouraging atmosphere evolved. Furthermore, we asked each participant to reserve housing in the adjacent dorm and stay each night of the DBC; this created opportunities for the participants to bond during their free time outside of the DBC. Thus, throughout the DBC, participants were able to build a network of fellow students to share their struggles and triumphs. Participants were encouraged to share contact information and meet regularly to write after the conclusion of the DBC. That is, they were encouraged to be supportive and accountable to each other.

Post-DBC Findings

After participating in the DBC, and being able to spend five consecutive days and nights working solely on their dissertations, the participants had overwhelmingly positive reactions. One participant noted that the DBC was "a blessing." Aligning with the goals of the DBC, students felt they were able to make significant progress on their dissertations during the five days, and work through some of the anxieties they had surrounding their own writing. Moreover, the DBC provided structure and time, two qualities that would allow the participants to progress toward graduation, and qualities that the participants felt they were missing. Analyses of the post-DBC focus group revealed three primary themes: (1). Finding support and camaraderie; (2). Providing structure; and (3). Creating time. We explore these themes in greater detail below.

Finding Support and Camaraderie

For the 11 participants, the DBC offered them a chance to bond with peers who were like them—ABD—and who were trying to trek their way toward graduation. Being able to make those connections and support one another was valuable. For example, one participant noted, "Making connections with people who are in the same boat as us that we can collaborate with even though have different topics [was valuable], we are still in this thing…" Likewise, another participant suggested that

> [The DBC] helped…it made me step-up by game. You really do feel that camaraderie. I knew [participant name] and [participant name] prior to this, but there is so much attachment now. I wouldn't trade [their] friendship and support. I love [them]! You know to have somebody, to bounce back and forth, means the world.

Regarding the support driven by the room set-up, one participant noted, "I would look up and see [participant name] and [participant name] and be like… "Man, they are working!" The participants not only found support through their DBC peers and the format of the course, but also through the facilitators and the feedback they provided. For example, one participant noted,

> I've had calendars and timelines before, but I have never been able to submit my work and have my feedback, and be taken to ground zero again and again. I've been sitting in the [proverbial] basement and gotten comfortable, so when the timelines and deadlines fell away, there was no direction. [Now] I can get myself out of the basement. You know, and get that feedback and feel like ok, I know where I am going now and I think I just got comfortable at the [basement] level because I didn't know how to get out of it.

Support and camaraderie were significant for the DBC participants. Not only did these aspects of the course allow them to make forward progress on their dissertations, but they were instrumental in the development of a community of scholars. The structure of the environment propagated a comfortable arena for students to learn and share, which in turn pushed them to achieve more than they had been able to on their own.

Providing Structure

The participants reflected positively on the organizational structure or format of the DBC, and noted that it was complementary to assisting them in meeting their goals. For example, one participant noted that the DBC was "a good jump start" for completing the dissertation. Others commented on the small size of the DBC and the end-of-course personal calendar as particularly beneficial: "I think [a] good thing about the boot camp is the size, the small class."; "I like the calendar because it's... it's doable. I like the fact that it's personalized to me."

Interestingly, one participant commented on the structure being compatible with her busy lifestyle,

> …the structured schedule that [is] in place was really good, like it makes you...because I'm a multitasker, [I'm thinking] what am I gonna cook tonight, what do I need to get at Wal-Mart. I don't sit still throughout the day.... I was worried because we sat here all day. I go home and it's constant moving, it's just constant. So I mean just having the structure in place to say this is where I'm going to go, it's something you do. You give us a format, [we] follow the format and we're Gucci.

The participants appreciated the small size of the class. Through the small class size, combined with the one-on-one attention given by the facilitators, they were able to find direction and make plans, where previously there had been questions and struggles. The structured environment allowed the participants to gain confidence in their capabilities and motivation to continue their journey.

Creating Time

In the DBC we tried to shift participants' thinking regarding time from a frame of "finding time" (that is, many participants initially complained of an inability to *find* time in their schedules to devote to the dissertation), to a frame of "creating time" (that is, we stressed that time will not be found, but must be *created* in their schedules). By participating in the DBC and "disconnecting" from the typical distractions in their lives, the students were able to create some necessary time to devote to their dissertations. Regarding the creation of time, one participant noted,

> …one thing you realize this week shutting off the emails and phone for five days is that it should be easy to shut it off an hour every now and then. Turn it off and walk away. I did this for five days and the world [didn't] end… but you realize that there are things to do, with time and dedication. It should be easier now.

Similarly, another participant noted how she worked to create time. She said, "So that is just awesome, just doing something and saying ok, I need to be doing this at [noon] and sit there

and do nothing but that…" One participant aptly summed up the DBC and the time she was able to devote to her dissertation. She said, "Having this class gives me a week away from everything to dedicate that time and make the best of it."

The DBC allowed the participants to see that their personal and professional lives continued even if they were not involved in every step. Being able to *create* time in their busy schedules allowed participants to see how imperative it will be for their continued success. Furthermore, the course brought to light that in order to complete the dissertation and make it to graduation; it would require significant time and adjustments to their personal and professional schedules.

Clearly, the DBC served as a useful course for the participants. It provided time, peer support, and accountability. As they noted, the participants appreciated the small size of the group and the network they were able to build with each other. Most importantly, they appreciated having the opportunity to make significant progress on their dissertations and devote time to writing.

As is customary in a grounded theory study, we were able, based on our findings, to develop a theory or construct (we call it a conceptual framework) to better understand the phenomena of students' progress toward ABD status, or what we call the ABD abyss—where students often find themselves mired in doubt and lack of direction regarding the completion of the dissertation. We now turn to a detailed discussion of this framework.

Using our Findings to Create a Conceptual Framework

As noted previously, our treatment of grounded theory stretched beyond coding procedures. Our construction of a conceptual framework was driven by our analyses of the data we collected—however, in reviewing the related literature in preparation for this article, it was impossible to avoid previously articulated theories on student persistence in higher education. While we were inspired by other theorists who have written about similar phenomena, and recognize their theories provide an understanding regarding many aspects of student persistence—what we learned from the participants in this study coalesced with only *some* aspects of these theories, not all. Therefore, we were compelled to add to the story. That is, to make a more holistic and coherent picture inclusive of our participants' experiences in higher education.

We used interpretive theorizing (Charmaz, 2006) infused with previous scholarship to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon. That is, we troubled, interpreted, and reflected on aspects of established theories in coordination with our data in terms of fit. These analytic acts, processes, and objectives contributed to the construction of the conceptual framework we highlight here. While related to other theories, our conceptual framework remained rooted or grounded in our data. It was not created a priori, but rather posteriori, to data collection and analysis. After our data were collected and analyzed, we began to grapple with the theoretical foundations on student persistence and creating a conceptual framework.

In the development of our framework for understanding a student's pathway toward the ABD abyss, we were initially influenced by Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of persistence. Tinto (1975) suggested, "Given individual characteristics, prior experiences, and commitments, the [persistence] model argues that it is the individual's integration into the academic and social systems of the [higher educational institution] that most directly relates to his continuance in that [institution]" (p. 96). Furthermore, Tinto argued there is a direct relationship between the level of a student's commitment to their goals of completing a degree and persisting to graduation.

Thus, the two primary components of Tinto's model, institutional commitment and individual goal commitment, were suitable lenses with which to analyze the experiences and perceptions of doctoral students who participated in the DBC, and the elements that led to either success or the ABD abyss. Building on what we know from Tinto's theory of persistence, what we have gained from the grounded theoretical analyses of the experiences and perceptions of the students who participated in the DBC, and from our own experiences as former graduate students and facilitators of several DBCs, we believe we have a more nuanced understanding of students who are ABD.

This interpretive approach presented us with an opportunity to make sense of our participants' realities while begin conscious of existing theory. However, for us, Tinto's theory did not explain the full story. Rather, it exposed gaps in our understanding of doctoral students' experiences (based on our data) and thus prompted us to consider how our data could mesh with Tinto's theory to push for a better and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. By using Tinto's work as a metaphorical springboard, we used our data to "wring a new twist on old theoretical clothes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 134). This interaction between old and new allowed us to bring some fresh insights to our understanding of a graduate student's pathway toward the ABD abyss, and the development of a conceptual and explanatory framework.

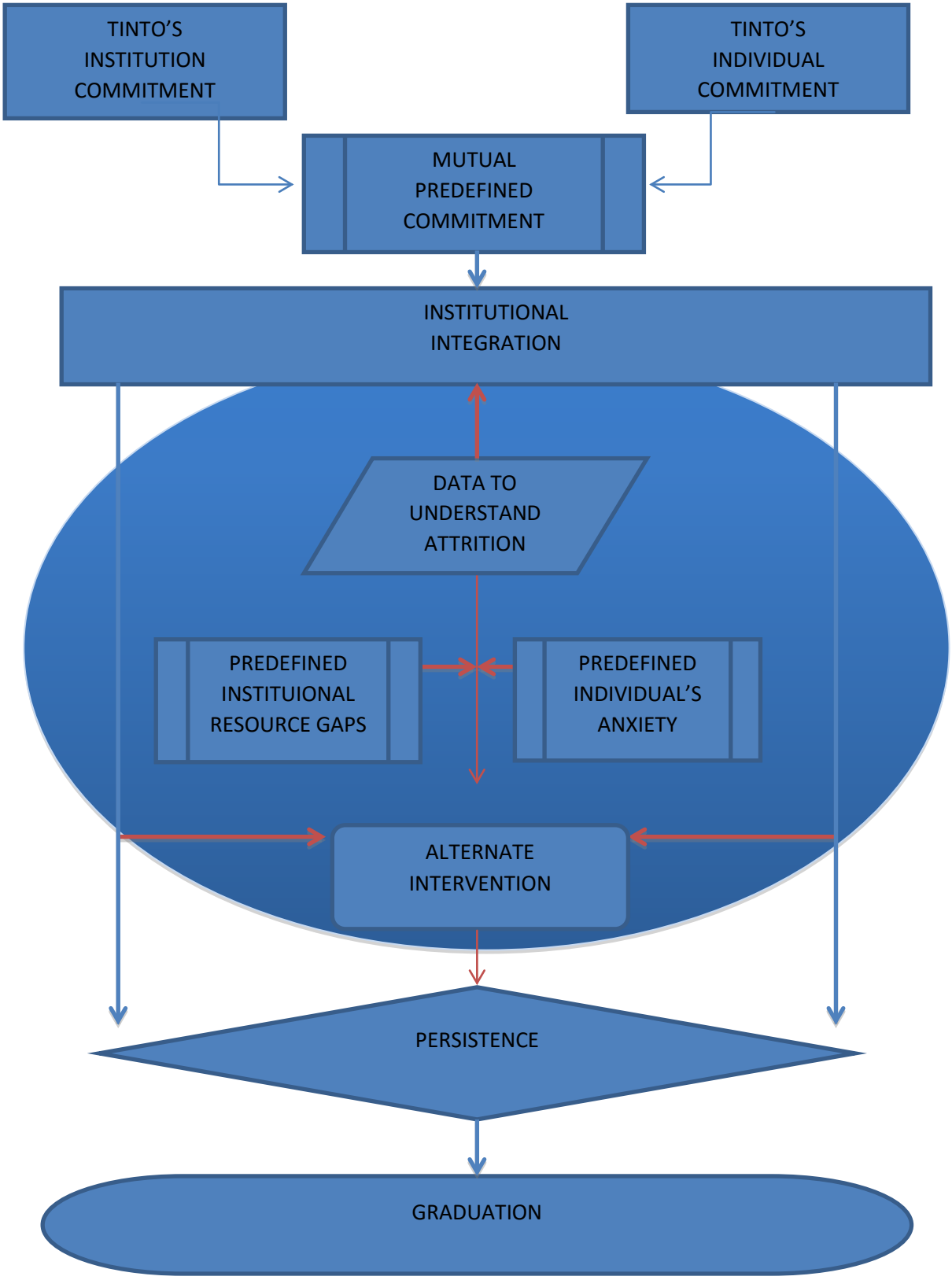
Based primarily on the data and secondarily on previous scholarship, we developed a framework for understanding a doctoral student's persistence or their trajectory toward ABD status, or what we call the ABD abyss. We argue that many graduate students are not being well integrated into the academic social system, and without some institutional intervention or support, like the DBC, students may find themselves progressively drifting toward the ABD abyss. We call this framework Pathway to Understanding ABDs (see Figure 1).

Within the Pathway to Understanding ABDs, first, we know that institutions and individuals are two entities that approach graduate education with certain perceptions and conceptualizations of what is defined as graduate school. The individual (the student) sets out to learn a chosen field in-depth and obtain a doctorate, knowing the substantive time and financial commitments. Individuals may or may not bring with them specific characteristics and capital (e.g., ability, savvy-ness, connections, research skills, ideas). Individuals also bring specific perceptions and experiences surrounding graduate school (e.g., self-perceptions of abilities, experiences of integration/disintegration with the department and fellow students). These characteristics, capital, perceptions, and experiences may facilitate or hinder the individual's progress in graduate programs. Collectively, these characteristics, capital, perceptions, and experiences may largely dictate student anxiety.

Likewise, institutions also approach graduate education with certain perceptions and conceptualizations. It is understood that institutions set out to teach and transform doctoral students into independent scholars and respected experts, and in the case of some educational leadership programs, expert practitioners. Institutional characteristics to assist in these goals include, but are not limited to, quality courses and faculty, access to related scholarship and literature, as well as physical space for scholarly development.

However, at a specific point the individual's commitment to their goals and the institution's commitment to the student may become misaligned—particularly, we believe, at the dissertation phase. Institutions may lack targeted resources for graduate students at the ready point of writing the dissertation. This institutional lack of resources to assist the student in the writing phase may expose a weak commitment to seeing the student through the process and to graduation. Recognizing a lack of commitment from the institution, the individual's commitment to their goals may wane.

Figure 1: Pathway to Understanding ABDs



In Tinto's model, the synergy of the individual and institutional commitment facilitates the integration of the student to the institution, which, according to this theory, engenders persistence within the student and thus leads to success or graduation. Nonetheless, we surmise, that it is at this junction where at least part of the mystery of attrition lies. That is, we theorize that there exists a mismatch between the institutions' resources available for students and the students' needs, which manifest as anxiety, which in turn limits the students' level of integration into the institution. The nature of this integration is where the divergence between completion and attrition has its origin and where an opportunity exists to intervene. Briefly, before a student can be fully integrated into the institution, the institutional resources available must match the students' anxieties regarding her success within the institution; with the right information (data) to match student need with institutional resources, interventions that reduce student anxiety can facilitate the integration of the student into the culture of the institution and thus engender persistence to graduation. Understanding this synergistic process generates new alterative processes and interventions which may lead to a stopgap in terms of attrition, to increased student persistence, and eventually, to graduation. We believe the DBC is one such intervention.

Discussion

Receiving a doctorate can be both important and fulfilling, and represents a significant milestone in one's career. This study extends the literature by adding to the scholarship on educational leadership doctoral student persistence. Furthermore, it highlights the less understood reasons contributing to the attrition rate among doctoral students—particularly those in an education leadership (K12) program. This work also provides a new framework for understanding a student's pathway to the tenuous status of ABD, and details students' experiences in an intervention—a DBC—designed to reduce students' time as ABD.

According to Jimenez y West et al. (2011), students struggle at the dissertation phase because dissertation writing is an ambiguous, unstructured, and unfamiliar process. However, graduate students must be agentic, and willing to identify and work on their academic and scholarly weaknesses. Yet, at what cost? How committed are institutions to seeing their graduate students through to graduation? Is it ethical for institutions to enroll students and then allow them to drift away into the ABD abyss? As literature and policy in other areas of education have exhibited, a 50% (and sometimes higher) dropout rate is alarming. Educators and policymakers have worked to create and institute stopgap measures (accountability and sanctions) to counteract attrition in other sectors of education, yet we continue to accept that one out of two students pursuing a graduate degree will fail to reach their aim. Moreover, research has continued to identify the staggering dropout trend plaguing graduate students, yet little attention has focused on their unique educational needs. We agree with Hawley (2010), "… the loss of such a large proportion of scholars-in-the-making is astonishing… and… largely unnecessary" (p. 4).

The DBC was designed to push completion for lagging students. Participating in the DBC seemed to reinvigorate the students' enthusiasm for their dissertations; that is, they were motivated and could see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. The DBC seemed to counteract some of the dispiritedness the ABD abyss can reinforce.

As our findings demonstrate, the participants were craving time and direction, and felt their research and writing skills were significantly underdeveloped. Recall one participant who referred to the dissertation as "this thing over my head" and another who felt like "a nobody" as she mired in the ABD abyss. Furthermore, participants seemed unaccustomed to the independent decision-making process required in the dissertation phase (Feldon, Mahr,

Hurst, & Timmerman, 2015). Recall one participant who said she needed a "foot in her back" to assist her progress. While some wandering is typical at this phase, perhaps these participants would not have drifted so far into the ABD abyss with adequate guidance. We agree with Jones (2009) who noted, "When faculty members clearly articulate their expectations of student performance, then they help orient and guide doctoral students to become experts in their chosen field of study" (p. 156). Because these participants did not have such an articulation or orientation, based on our findings, the DBC was particularly beneficial.

If universities want to improve their current graduation rates, they must become more aware of the needs of graduate students and devise specific ways to serve and assist them. The student voices included in this study expose the barriers and challenges some students enrolled in a K12 educational leadership doctoral program faced in working toward completion. However, such knowledge, as it is likely common to graduate students broadly and not just those in educational leadership programs, will assist graduate programs and universities in the development of structured interventions that may ensure individual and institutional interests converge and more students obtain their goals and complete their degree programs. Institutions can likely reduce attrition through specific interventions such as a DBC. Doing so may offer students an unmatched opportunity for time, structure, and support, while ensuring that institutions see increased degree completion rates.

Limitations

This study was limited to the specific context and the 11 particular students'/participants' perspectives and experiences. Thus, our findings are not generalizable. However, the design of the study allowed for the generation and collection of rich data as well as data saturation. Our unique roles as both DBC facilitators and researchers may also be considered a limitation of the study. We were, however, aware of our roles and worked to remain as neutral as possible throughout all aspects of the study.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on our findings and our creation of the Pathway to Understanding ABDs framework, action must occur at both the individual student level as well at the institutional level to create sustained commitment between the individual and the institution. While episodic interventions serve in many positive ways, students and departments alike would be best served by more frequent and long-term interventions. Therefore, we recommend that a DBC be offered multiple times per year, and participants be allowed to enroll multiple times. For students who also work fulltime, a DBC during the summer session or mini-session (between semesters) that align with K12 calendar breaks, works exceptionally well. Often, particularly with graduate students such as those typically enrolled in education leadership programs who also work fulltime, simply an inability to create the time to dedicate to writing is something that funnels them toward the ABD abyss. Thus, by being able to enroll multiple times, students are able to schedule (i.e., create) significant allotments of time to dedicate to the dissertation. Furthermore, for non-traditional graduate students, and also fulltime employees, the DBC offered these students an opportunity to "belong" (Osterman, 2000), to meet and bond with peers—a support system that is typical for traditional graduate students and has been known to assist students in their trajectory toward graduation (Price, 2012). Importantly, the DBC must be small (10 or fewer participants is recommended), otherwise the effects of the facilitators' individually- tailored constructive feedback will be diluted.

These facilitators should have experience in a DBC, or similar program, in order to best serve the students.

Lastly, although this study did not focus on advisement specifically, the participants clearly pointed to a lack of adequate advising as a problem that negatively impacted their progress toward completion. Inadequate advising led to few opportunities for the participants to receive targeted feedback and seemed to negatively impact their perceptions of their capabilities (Feldon et al., 2015). A poor relationship between advisor and student can be traumatic and discouraging, and a lack of guidance can easily thwart a student's progress (Carter, 2004; Lovitts, 2004). Therefore, we recommend that universities and departments alike create opportunities for faculty to further develop adequate dissertation-related advising and mentoring skills in order to better meet both student and university needs.

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