RETURNING COUNSELOR EDUCATION DOCTORAL STUDENTS: ISSUES OF RETENTION AND PERCEIVED EXPERIENCES

A dissertation proposal submitted to the Kent State University College and Graduate School of Education, Health, and Human Services in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of counselor education doctoral students who had voluntarily departed from study and successfully returned. The main research question was: What are the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned to the same programs? Six female participants completed a series of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed utilizing Creswell’s (2007) 4-step approach for phenomenological research. Themes derived from the data analysis suggest there is a common essential experience to departing from and returning to study, including four major categories: (a) departing and returning are salient personal events, (b) faculty responses are noticed and important, (c) departure is informed by personal factors, and (d) departure is informed by academic culture. All participants conveyed that departing from and returning to study were significant events in their lives, and expressed a variety of reactions, both positive and negative. Participants also communicated the importance of how faculty members responded to them when departing and returning, suggesting that faculty members are uniquely positioned to respond to doctoral students departing from and returning to doctoral study. Finally,
participants departed from doctoral study because of academic culture, personal factors, or a combination of both. No studies were encountered in the literature examining doctoral students who had departed from and returned to study, highlighting the singular nature of this research. The findings have implications for counseling departments, counseling faculty, and counselor education doctoral students. Limitations to the research study were elucidated and proposals for future research were offered.
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I dedicate this dissertation and my PhD to my father, who I know would be immensely proud.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ iv

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................ x

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................. 1

  Purpose ............................................................................................................................... 2

  Statement of the Problem ................................................................................................. 4

  Research Question ........................................................................................................... 5

  Operational Definitions ................................................................................................... 5

    Student Retention ............................................................................................................. 6

    Attrition .......................................................................................................................... 6

    Persistence ....................................................................................................................... 6

    Withdrawal ...................................................................................................................... 6

    Voluntary Withdrawal .................................................................................................... 6

    Involuntary Withdrawal .................................................................................................. 6

  Review of the Literature .................................................................................................. 7

    History of Higher Education ........................................................................................ 7

    Retention ......................................................................................................................... 10

      History of Student Retention ....................................................................................... 10

      Student Retention Research ....................................................................................... 17
Pedagogical Recommendations .......................................................132
Future Research ..................................................................................136
Limitations .............................................................................................139
Researcher’s Experience ......................................................................139
Summary .................................................................................................141
APPENDICES ..........................................................................................142
APPENDIX A: KENT STATE IRB APPROVAL .......................................143
APPENDIX B: CESNET-L EMAIL ..........................................................145
APPENDIX C: COVER LETTER ...........................................................147
APPENDIX D: SCREENING FORM .......................................................149
APPENDIX E: TOPIC LIST FOR FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .......152
APPENDIX F: CONSENT FORM .............................................................154
APPENDIX G: AUDIOTAPE CONSENT FORM .....................................156
APPENDIX H: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE ...............................158
APPENDIX I: MENTAL HEALTH AGENCY INFORMATION ................160
APPENDIX J: FOLLOW UP EMAIL .........................................................162
APPENDIX K: AUDIT LETTER .................................................................164
REFERENCES ........................................................................................167
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Demographic Data</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Examples of Significant Statements and Related Formulated Meanings</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Narrative Descriptions and Corresponding Themes</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Returning Counselor Education Doctoral Students</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Experiences with Departing</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Experiences with Returning</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Colleges and universities around the United States invest millions of dollars each year attracting and recruiting potential students (Stover, 2005). Millions of dollars are also invested into graduate study, as most programs in the United States offer their graduate students’ monthly stipends and tuition remission. Even though many graduate students receive financial support, 50% of students in the United States who begin doctoral studies do not persist to degree completion (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992) and it is estimated that this 50% doctoral student attrition rate has remained constant for 40 years (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001). Universities and colleges lose countless amounts of invested money in these students, and low retention rates reflect poorly on the quality and credibility of the program as retaining students has increasingly become the duty of the academic institution (Stover, 2005) and high attrition is no longer a mark of academic rigor but “a sign of doing something wrong” (Richmond, 1986, p. 92). The financial, professional, and personal costs of attrition to the doctoral student are immense. Most doctoral students who depart from study have significant debt from student loans, accept less esteemed jobs as a result of diminished self-esteem, and experience a myriad of emotional consequences such as depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and suicide (Lovitts, 2001). Faculty members are also negatively affected by doctoral student attrition as they invest extensive amounts of time and energy in their doctoral students through their teaching, academic advising, and mentoring (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005).
The negative effects of student attrition have led to student retention being placed at the forefront of issues in higher education. This is reflected by the number of federal and state agencies requesting the reporting of retention data and the existence of special committees within colleges and universities whose sole function is to increase retention rates (Stover, 2005). Although student retention is scrutinized within higher education, no consensus exists in the literature regarding strategies to improve student retention, and most research has focused on undergraduate, rather than doctoral, student retention (Kowalik, 1989). This chapter discusses strategies encountered in the literature for improving student retention. The purpose of this study is described followed by operational definitions. This is followed by a review of the literature, including the topics of student retention, the history of student retention, student retention research, doctoral student retention, counselor education and doctoral student retention, and the student experience in graduate school. This chapter concludes with the statement of the research problem and the research question.

Purpose

This study focused on the experiences of doctoral students who voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned. Lovitts (2001) stated that the high doctoral student attrition rate has negative effects on society, the academic institution, doctoral programs, faculty, and the doctoral student who leaves. Because society needs highly educated people within and outside the academic institution, Lovitts (2001) suggested that doctoral student attrition leaves this need unfilled and wastes scarce university resources. High doctoral student attrition rates also
put the existence of doctoral programs and the faculty members who teach in them in jeopardy as programs of study are being dropped from colleges and universities around the United States. Lovitts (2001) also noted that doctoral students who leave their program experience repercussions (a) professionally, (b) financially, and (c) personally. Lovitts (2001) observed that doctoral students who have departed from study take lesser jobs that they are overqualified for as a result of diminished self-esteem. The majority of doctoral students who have left study are in significant financial debt as a result of school loans. Finally, the reported emotional fallout from departure from doctoral study has ranged from anxiety to suicide (Lovitts, 2001).

Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) similarly expressed concern regarding the high doctoral student attrition rate and conducted a qualitative study of doctoral student persistence in counselor education programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2001). Hoskins and Goldberg sought to give voice to the doctoral student and reveal what factors influenced a doctoral student to persist or depart from study. A recommendation from the authors was for counselor education faculty members to encourage open communication between faculty and doctoral students and engage in relationship building with doctoral students.

No scholarly literature was encountered which explored the experiences of doctoral students who had successfully returned after departing from study. It is the goal of this study to give voice to the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and successfully returned. The findings of this research added to the body of literature focused on the experiences of doctoral
students who have departed from study and generated new information concerning doctoral students who successfully returned to doctoral study after departing.

Statement of the Problem

The high doctoral student attrition rate in the United States has negative effects on society, academic institutions, doctoral programs, faculty, and the doctoral student who departs from study (Lovitts, 2001). Although student retention has been placed at the forefront of issues in higher education, no consensus exists in the literature regarding strategies to improve student retention and most research has focused on undergraduate, rather than doctoral, student retention (Kowalik, 1989). Current research on doctoral student retention has focused on the experiences of doctoral students attempting to persist to degree completion (Cusworth, 2001; Golde, 2005; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Nerad & Miller, 1996; Valero, 2001).

It is worth noting that the studies by Protivnak and Foss (2009), Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) and Hughes and Kleist (2005) were the only studies encountered in the literature that focused on the experiences of counselor education doctoral students. Protivnak and Foss explored the themes that influence the counselor education doctoral student experience. Protivnak and Foss reported that departmental culture, mentoring, academics, support systems, and personal issues were all variables that affected the doctoral student experience. Hoskins and Goldberg focused on what helps students to persist to degree completion and found that a positive student-program match, including experiencing quality relationships with faculty members and feeling a sense of community, was a factor in a doctoral student’s decision to persist with study. Hughes
and Kleist sought to describe the first semester experiences of counselor education doctoral students and described the initial emotional turbulence students experience when beginning doctoral study. Hughes and Kleist suggested that counselor educators could be more intentional with involving their doctoral students in empowering experiences.

In the review of the literature no studies were encountered which focused on doctoral students who had departed from study and then successfully returned. Illuminating the experiences of doctoral students who successfully returned to study after departing will bridge a gap between student attrition literature and student retention literature. This has contributed to the researcher’s desire to illuminate the experiences of doctoral students who have departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned. This desire has shaped the research question for this study.

Research Question

The main research question of this study is as follows: What are the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned to the same programs?

Operational Definitions

The review of the literature begins with definitions of commonly utilized key terms and concepts. Student retention employs multiple unique terms that have contextual meanings. Definitions are provided for student retention, attrition, persistence, withdrawal, voluntary withdrawal, and involuntary withdrawal.

Student Retention
Student retention refers to the capability of an institution to keep a student from entrance to the university through graduation (Berger & Lyons, 2005).

Attrition

Berger and Lyons (2005) defined attrition as any student who voluntarily does not reenroll at a college or university for consecutive terms.

Persistence

Berger and Lyons (2005) defined persistence as the willingness and follow through of a student to remain in the higher education system through degree completion. Bair and Haworth (1999) defined persistence as the continuation of a student’s advancement toward achievement of a doctoral degree.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal was defined as the departure of a student from a college or university and being released from enrollment in all classes (Berger & Lyons, 2005).

Voluntary Withdrawal

Voluntary withdrawal refers to a student’s decision not to reenroll in study (Berger & Lyons, 2005).

Involuntary Withdrawal

Involuntary withdrawal involves the institution not allowing the student to reenroll (Berger & Lyons, 2005).
Review of the Literature

The first area investigated was the history of higher education in the United States. This was followed by an examination of student retention, including the history of student retention, research investigating student retention, doctoral student retention, the retention of counselor education doctoral students, and the student experience in graduate school.

History of Higher Education

Before an investigation of student retention is presented, it is useful to examine the history of American higher education. A historical and cultural context will provide a framework for understanding the phenomenon of student retention. This brief review will trace the development of higher education beginning with the first European institutions and ending with the modern American university.

The renaissance in Europe during the 12th century revived a spirit of learning and produced the earliest universities, which were comprised of a society of students and faculty (Haskins, 1957). By the end of the 12th century Oxford and Cambridge were established in England and provided the template for the academic institution of colonial America. Founded by men from Oxford and Cambridge, Harvard was chartered as a college in 1636 and represented the first institution of higher education in America.

In 1800 there were 25 colleges in the United States, by 1820 there were 52, and by 1860 there were 241 (Thelin, 2004). Higher education during this time saw expanding enrollment and the additions of medicine, law, engineering, theology, and agriculture to the course catalog. While higher education in America was generally only accessible to
men who were elite and privileged, women began to enjoy admittance during this period. These changes provided a microcosm of the rapidly expanding and dynamic qualities of higher education during post-colonial America.

From the end of the Civil War through the turn of the century academic institutions enjoyed a diversification of curricula and students (Thelin, 2004). Women experienced increased opportunities and the applied sciences, engineering, and agriculture had a widespread presence among higher education course catalogs. This period from the Civil War to the turn of the century also gave rise to land grant colleges, science and technical colleges, and normal schools.

After World War I America was at the threshold of committing to higher education for the masses (Rudolph, 1990). Public secondary schools had grown rapidly and produced a large wave of young adults eager to enter college (Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, 1963). The American public had become more interested in higher education, with college football becoming popular and campuses across the United States building enormous football stadiums. Also contributing to public interest was a shift away from the university being an experience only for the elite and privileged as the cost of tuition decreased. The post World War I period also marked an increase in women’s colleges, black colleges, junior colleges, and a variety of college athletic programs.

The passing of World War II through 1970 saw American higher education experience prosperity, prestige, and popularity. Historians have labeled this period of American higher education the golden age (Rudolph, 1990). On one front, higher
education became increasingly more accessible to the masses because of significant cost reductions. On another front, the American university elevated its reputation as more institutions demonstrated multiple areas of advanced study. In spite of this, by 1970 many academic institutions were in fiscal trouble as a result of the prolific development of campus programs, new programs of study, and large and ornate architectural structures. This overdevelopment was also exacerbated by many institutions exhibiting sloppy financial planning, resulting in economic instability. On campuses around the country students were unhappy with both the government at large and the government of the university. While the student unrest was a reflection of the culture at large, the financial trouble pointed to a real threat for the future stability of colleges and universities.

In response to the student unrest and financial instability, the Carnegie Corporation formed the Carnegie Commission to research the condition of American higher education (Rudolph, 1990). Their findings pointed toward American higher education being on the brink of experiencing the equivalent of an economic depression. In response, the federal government began to standardize data tracking within American higher education, including enrollments, basic budgets, and degrees conferred. This was the first step of many colleges and universities took in an attempt to increase accountability and create financially sustainable, if not profitable, institutions.

Student retention was one of the many new challenges colleges and universities faced after the rapid expansion of the 1950s (Berger & Lyons, 2005). As a result of the rapid expansion of campuses and massive enrollment of students, institutions of higher education were not ready to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse student body.
Student withdrawal became common, and as the 1970s approached student retention was a frequent topic in colleges and universities. In response, institutions began to systematically attempt to discover reasons and answers for the challenges to student retention.

This history of higher education in the United States demonstrates the dynamic qualities of the American college and university. As institutions increased in physical size and student population, they faced new and complex challenges. One of the most pervasive and unique challenges colleges and universities encountered was student retention.

**Retention**

Retention of first and second year students is poor at most colleges and universities, leading to parental concerns, state, local, and federal government concerns, student development issues, and financial issues (Golde, 2005). In light of these issues, tracking of student retention has become a widespread phenomenon within higher education and a surplus of literature exists attempting to explain and cure the problem (Stover, 2005). An exploration of student retention was conducted in order to thoroughly understand this phenomenon. Areas of student retention explored included the history of student retention, theories of student retention, demarcation between undergraduate and doctoral student retention, and counselor education and student retention.

**History of student retention.**

The retention of students was not a concern of colleges and universities until after the two World Wars. This time period saw the GI Bill, the National Defense Education
Act, and the Higher Education Act spur immense college and university enrollment and establish higher education as part of American stability (Berger & Lyons, 2005). The federal government at the time recognized the rapidly increasing number of college age students who desired the opportunities a college education could afford, and also recognized the need for individuals “trained beyond the high school level in our increasingly complex society” (Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, 1963, p. 44). The GI Bill, the National Defense Education Act, and the Higher Education Act opened up substantial funding for students and incited immense enrollment. As rapid growth occurred and the 1960s began, large enrollments and diverse student populations presented substantial challenges for higher education. Easier access resulted in students being admitted to college who were neither cognitively prepared nor disciplined enough for the college environment. In addition, colleges and universities were not ready to face the increasing and more complex demands of students. Because both students and academic institutions were unprepared, higher education saw large numbers of students withdrawing from study or academically failing to complete their degree.

The early portions of the 1960s witnessed higher education begin to explore the situation of student failure. Although studies on this topic were conducted in the 1950s, they were limited in scope and only examined personality attributes of the student (Berger & Lyons, 2005). In the beginning of the 1960s, colleges and universities also focused on the individual attributes of the student that led to academic success or failure. Higher education soon realized the simplistic inadequacy of this approach, and by the end of the decade studies were focused on the role emotional characteristics and social
contexts played in student failure, as well as any effects of their interaction (Berger & Lyons).

The beginning of the 1970s marked the first example of a comprehensive attempt at understanding student retention. Spady (1971) reported that current studies on student retention were singular in focus and lacking a comprehensive understanding of student failure and retention. In his study, Spady focused on the interaction between a student’s attributes and the campus setting, and he attempted to develop an initial comprehensive framework for studying student retention. Other noteworthy aspects of his study were his synthesis of existing empirical evidence and his sociological rather than psychological perspective.

Tinto (1993), Kamens (1971), and Astin (1977) each made a strong contribution to student retention research during the 1970s. Their studies built on the foundation laid by Spady (1971) and provided strong frameworks for later researchers to operate within. Tinto’s interactionalist model of student withdrawal “became one of the best known, and most often cited, theories relating to student departure” (Berger & Lyons, 2005, p. 19). Tinto’s interactionalist hypothesis included essentials of both the psychological and organizational models. It alleged that a student’s entry characteristics together with the student’s initial dedication to the institution and vow to graduate shaped student departure decisions. Tinto’s research also suggested that early and continued institutional commitment would impact both academic and social assimilation within the university, both key factors in college student retention.
Central to Tinto’s (1993) model were his 13 propositions, which represented his departure hypothesis and were delineated to explain student departure:

1. Student entry characteristics affect the level of initial commitment to the institution.
2. Student entry characteristics affect the level of initial commitment to the goal of graduation from college.
3. Student entry characteristics directly affect the student’s likelihood of persistence in college.
4. Initial commitment to the goal of graduation from college affects the level of academic integration.
5. Initial commitment to the goal of graduation from college affects the level of social integration.
6. Initial commitment to the institution affects the level of social integration.
7. Initial commitment to the institution affects the level of academic integration.
8. The greater the degree of academic integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from college.
9. The greater the degree of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution.
10. The initial level of institutional commitment affects the subsequent level of institutional commitment.
11. The initial level of commitment to the goal of graduation from college affects the subsequent level of commitment to the goal of graduation from college.
12. The greater the level of subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from college, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college.

13. The greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college.

Kamens (1971) was another early retention researcher who offered a sociological perspective. Kamens utilized multi-institutional statistics to show how institutions with larger size and complexity, coupled with a greater capacity to put graduates in high-status social and occupational roles, had lower rates of attrition than did other types of post-secondary institutions. Kamens provided an open systems examination of organizational behavior in higher education and emphasized how colleges and universities with extremely institutionalized social charters were capable of utilizing their elevated status in the arena of higher education to exert a stronger sway on student persistence.

Astin (1977) had been analyzing student retention beginning in the 1960s by means of huge national databases sampling hundreds of colleges. After extensively scrutinizing the data, Astin came to the conclusion that involvement was critical to student retention. Astin posited that the amount of psychological and physical energy students devoted to college life (social life and academic life) directly influenced the decision to withdrawal. Because of its simplicity and ease of use, this model of student retention was used by academic institutions around America.

As a result of Tinto (1993), Kamens (1971), Spady (1971), and Astin (1977), at the close of the 1970s retention research had great momentum and had become well established. Tinto’s research in particular had incited rigorous and methodical student
retention research, as subsequent researchers developed operational measures of the 13 propositions of Tinto’s model. The retention research of the 1970s provided the underpinning for the approaches to studying student retention that would follow.

Student retention research in the 1980s grew rapidly and was sustained throughout the decade. This was in part because of the quality of research completed in the 1970s but mostly was due to shifts in enrollment (Berger & Lyons, 2005), namely the leveling off of the enrollment boom of the 1970s. As a result of stagnant enrollment numbers, colleges and universities began to prepare for what higher education could do to attract and retain students. Enrollment management became the new buzz word in higher education, as institutions began to search for optimal quantities and qualities of students. This new focus was reflected in the study of student retention, and the development of new student retention research decreased. One new hypothesis that did emerge was Bean’s (1979) research which explored the role organizational characteristics and rewards played in student persistence and contentment. Bean discovered that student perceptions regarding the institutional attributes of routinization, (finding daily life at college repetitive), participation, and communication combined with rewards to influence student satisfaction and persistence.

By the 1990s student retention had become an established priority for higher education in America (Berger & Lyons, 2005), and Tinto’s (1993) interactional model was still the framework the majority of student retention researchers operated within. However, the empirical evidence to support the model was scarce, and Berger and Braxton (1998) set out to empirically test the 13 propositions of Tinto’s model. Their data
revealed that four of Tinto’s propositions were connected and affirmed that social integration, rather than academic integration, was essential to understanding student retention. Another development that occurred during the 1990s included the emergence of research focused on the role money played in student retention (Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1988). This research attempted to draw upon both economic theory and Tinto’s integration model to better understand the role finances played in student persistence. Cabrera et al. reported that while their results supported Tinto’s integration model, financial variables moderated the effect of goal commitment on student persistence.

Student retention is presently a major policy issue at almost every college and university in America (Berger & Lyons, 2005). In addition, a journal has been established for the specific purpose of publishing student retention research, the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. Retention rates persist in being low while student retention increases in its importance. Retention rates for minority groups, first generation students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds continue to be lower than the national average with still no rigorous explanation as to why. These issues within student retention remain important as competition for resources in higher education as well as the importance of a college education continue to increase. The priority of a college education and the economic challenges facing higher education have resulted in the large amount of research on student retention and the emergence of student retention research.
Student retention research.

For the purpose of this study, major and distinct research on student retention spanning different disciplines are examined, including economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological. Research (Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1988) focused on the economics of student retention explored the relationship between student persistence and ability to pay for college; specifically, the cost of attending a particular institution and the student’s ability to meet those costs. Cabrera et al. (1988) explored the effect ability to pay had on student persistence. The authors reported that students in the highest socioeconomic groups were less likely to withdraw from study than those students in lower socioeconomic groups. The Cabrera et al. (1988) study also revealed that ability to pay had a moderating effect on a student’s commitment to their academic goal and their commitment to the institution.

Bean (1979) developed a student retention model based on studies of turnover in the workforce. Bean asserted that nine external factors influenced student contentment and ability to persist. Those nine factors were routinization (feelings of repetitiousness), instrumental communication (knowledge of academic and social norms), institutional commitment, high university GPA, perceiving that education leads to self-development, coursework, practical value (college will lead to employment), participation in decision making, and membership in campus organizations. All factors positively influenced persistence except routinization, and institutional commitment was the most significant factor for predicting persistence. Bean also discussed two additional variables that
negatively influenced persistence, which were marriage and additional academic opportunities.

Psychological studies focused on the affect individual attributes had on student persistence, including academic aptitudes and skills, personality traits, and motivational states. Bean and Eaton (2002) discussed four integrated psychological perspectives explaining student withdrawal. Student entry attributes such as past behavior and worldview influenced the way students perceived the institutional environment. The interactions the student then had with the college or university resulted in psychological effects that altered a student’s motivation. Successful experiences within this psychological realm positively influenced a student’s decision to persist to degree completion.

Another major psychological perspective was Astin’s (1977) research on involvement. The thesis of his research involved the amount of psychological energy a student invested in their higher education experience. This energy related to the involvement students had in the college experience, and this in turn influenced student persistence. The five principles of his research were (1) student involvement may be generalized or specific (2) involvement exists on a continuum, (3) involvement possesses qualitative and quantitative qualities, (4) student development and learning is positively correlated to the amount and quality of student involvement, and (5) the strength of educational policy is positively correlated to the institution’s ability to increase student involvement.
Sociological studies revealed the effects social forces and structures had on student retention. Significant social forces such as student peers, social support from significant others, and socioeconomic status were all found to influence student retention (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Among sociological perspectives, Tinto’s interactionalist model (1993) has received the most attention, and among all student retention research, Tinto’s model has been the most reviewed, critiqued, and tested (Braxton & Hirschy). The essence of Tinto’s research declared that when students successfully integrated both academically and socially, they had an increased chance of persisting to degree completion.

**Doctoral student retention.**

Although the foundational student retention research was conducted in response to undergraduate student attrition, doctoral student attrition and retention has also been an issue of study and concern (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Because doctoral student attrition has consistently remained at 50% for the last 40 years (Lovitts, 2001), and because of the economic, societal, and personal losses associated with dropping out, doctoral student retention has been studied at the university and government level (Nerad & Miller, 1996). Golde (2005) reported that despite research, doctoral student attrition remains poorly understood due to the minor amount of attention given to the phenomenon. Golde maintained three reasons underlying the importance of understanding doctoral student attrition and retention: (1) understanding is a critical step toward positive change, (2) high attrition rates may be indicative of institutional, discipline, or departmental problems that need amending, and (3) the highly negative economic and psychosocial consequences. A
review of the literature on doctoral student retention was conducted to provide a basis for understanding doctoral student attrition and retention.

Valero (2001) conducted a study which operated on the presuppositions that the key arena for doctoral education is the department and that “organizationally, the department, rather than the institution, is the locus of control for doctoral education” (p. 343). Valero utilized quantitative and qualitative research methods to answer the following research questions: (1) what are the median times to degree completion of Ph.D. students among academic departments, and (2) what factors of departments do graduate students and faculty perceive to have a positive effect on time to doctoral degree completion. Valero studied departments across disciplines, including finance, chemical engineering, aerospace engineering, chemistry, physics, psychology, biochemistry, and family and child development. Valero found that the median completion rate for the departments under study was 57.1%, with 53% of students completing their doctoral degrees. The departmental factors described by doctoral students and faculty as having a positive effect on time to degree completion were financial support, doctoral student-faculty advisor relationship, doctoral student participation in department activities, and peer support (support among doctoral students).

Nerad and Miller (1996) analyzed doctoral student retention at the University of California, Berkeley. Using a database that had begun tracking graduate students in 1960, the authors studied three cohorts from the late 1970s through the mid 1980s. The authors reported that an initial finding was that doctoral students did not withdrawal from study during the all but dissertation status, but rather the majority departed between years one
and three. The authors characterized the departmental responses to doctoral student attrition as “With few exceptions, these responses indicate that graduate faculty and chairs at Berkeley view attrition primarily as a result of external forces and not as a consequence of the structure of the program or departmental practices” (Nerad & Miller, p. 66).

Nerad and Miller (1996) interviewed doctoral students who had withdrawn from study and categorized them as early leavers (leaving doctoral study between years one and three) or late leavers (leaving doctoral study between years four and eleven). Reasons for withdrawal cited by early leavers were as follows: field switchers, institution switchers, mismatch (between student interests and those of the program), frustrated expectations, and student professionals (career goals not compatible with academic life). Field switchers were typically politically conscious, action-oriented individuals who preferred a shorter length of study and a more ordered program with an unambiguous professional path (e.g. law). Institution switchers were doctoral students who left Berkeley for another institution for a variety of reasons, including the relocation of their faculty advisor or learning that the exact research emphasis they desired was not accessible at Berkeley. Mismatch described a doctoral student who left when they found a schism between their preferences and the programs preferences. Doctoral students who left because of frustrated expectations reported that they left because graduate life did not match what they had originally imagined. Student professionals described doctoral students who already had responsible careers and were pursuing a doctorate as a means of
career advancement. These doctoral students left study when they discovered that student life was not compatible with their professional life.

Nerad and Miller (1996) reported that the late leavers cited a lack of clear professional goals, poor faculty advisor-student relationship, lack of financial support, and negative departmental climate as factors contributing to leaving. The doctoral students who cited a lack of clear professional goals reported that they were unwilling or unable to choose a dissertation topic and therefore forsake their multiple interests and narrow them down to one. These doctoral students were typically in the humanities and social sciences. Doctoral students who reported poor faculty advisor-student relationships also typically left doctoral study late, citing reasons ranging from being exploited as research assistants to interpersonal conflicts that built up over time and resulted in discontinuing their doctoral program. A lack of financial support was also a factor in late attrition. Doctoral students beginning their dissertations had typically used up the available teaching fellowships and/or graduate assistantships and were unable to secure funding for their dissertation research. This lack of financial support from the institution resulted in many doctoral students departing from study. A negative departmental climate was expressed by doctoral students as a factor in leaving study. Doctoral students who experienced little or no feedback from professors about their work, were not extended research opportunities, and who experienced “a chilly departmental climate” (p. 71) were more likely to withdraw from study.

Golde (2005) examined the role of academic department and disciplinary field in doctoral student attrition and retention. Golde posited that the quality of the match
between doctoral student and department and doctoral student and disciplinary field would have a strong bearing on the doctoral student’s decision to persist. The author utilized a qualitative methodology by interviewing and reporting the experiences of doctoral students across departments. Golde chose four departments within the same university to observe: geology, biology, history, and English. The author conducted 58 interviews with doctoral students who had withdrawn from study at the same university. The author captured six themes accountable for contributing to doctoral student attrition: (1) research practices were not matched with student’s strengths, (2) mismatch of expectations between student and department, (3) poor fit between advisor and student, (4) student perceived the research life of a faculty member incompatible with self, (5) student perceived a poor job market, and (6) structural isolation of the student from the department.

Bair and Haworth (1999) presented findings from a meta-synthesis of research on doctoral student retention. Bair and Haworth introduced meta-synthesis “as a means to synthesize findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies on the topic of attrition and persistence of doctoral students” (p. 3). The sample included 118 research studies completed between 1970 and 1998. The authors isolated six commonalities from their meta-synthesis: (1) a wide variation existed across fields of study regarding persistence and attrition rates, (2) departmental culture and climate affected doctoral student retention, (3) dissertation difficulties influenced attrition, (4) excluding the graduate record examination, academic achievement markers (e.g. grades) were not predictive of degree completion, (5) both employment and financial variables were unreliable
indicators of doctoral student persistence, and (6) a wide variation of doctoral student retention rates existed among institutions. The authors suggested that faculty and staff systematically survey their doctoral students in order to ascertain what departmental aspects were and were not working and make changes accordingly.

Rapoport (1998) reported the conclusions of a workshop held by the National Science Foundation focused on doctoral student retention. A presenter at the workshop discussed the findings of a qualitative study which examined nine departments from two top 40 Ph.D. producing universities in the United States. The presenter reported a significant positive correlation between the extent to which departments provided opportunities for integration (academic integration and social integration) and their retention rates. The study also compared high Ph.D. producing faculty and low Ph.D. producing faculty from those universities and found that high Ph.D. producing faculty were more likely to: scaffold their students’ learning and model professional behavior by initially providing more intellectual support and withdrawing slowly as the student becomes more self-directing; co-author work with students and/or allow students to be the first author; refer to their students as friends and have their students to their homes (p. 6)

The findings of the workshop indicated that higher education must modify selection criteria, reduce time to degree, increase student participation in department life, encourage degree completion, and provide incentives for faculty mentoring.

Golde and Dore (2001) conducted a national survey to provide insight into doctoral student retention and attrition by surveying the experiences of doctoral students.
The survey asked doctoral students why they pursued a doctoral degree, how effective their programs were, and expectations and understandings of their programs. Doctoral students from 27 institutions were mailed surveys and 4,114 responded. Results indicated that doctoral students were not receiving the training they wanted nor did it prepare them for the jobs they took. Many doctoral students surveyed did not understand what doctoral studies required or how to effectively navigate their program. The authors concluded that there was a divergence among the purpose of doctoral education, the ambitions of the students, and the actualities of their careers within and outside academia.

Ivankova and Stick (2007) sought to investigate factors contributing to doctoral students’ persistence in an educational leadership doctoral program. The authors utilized both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in their research. In the first phase of research, the quantitative phase, five external and internal program factors were predictors of doctoral students’ persistence: (1) program (quality of the program content itself), (2) online learning environment (convenient, flexible, sense of community), (3) student support services (warm, empathetic), (4) faculty (responsive, receptive, encouraging), and (5) self-motivation (personal drive, extra effort). The second phase, the qualitative phase, revealed four themes relevant to the participants’ persisting in the doctoral program: quality of the program and other academic experiences, online learning environment, support and assistance from different sources, and self-motivation. The quality of the academic experiences had the greatest positive effect on persistence, and support and assistance had the greatest positive effect on matriculation.
Lovitts and Nelson (2000) asserted that the source of doctoral student attrition was not poor students but apathetic and careless programs. Lovitts and Nelson surveyed a cohort of 816 students (511 who completed their degree and 305 who did not) at two institutions, one a private university in an urban setting and the other a public university in a rural setting. The students came from nine departments from major areas of knowledge: math, biology, chemistry, sociology, economics, psychology, English, history, and music. The authors also interviewed the faculty at both institutions. The average attrition rate between the two schools was 50.5%, which was consistent with most reports of doctoral student attrition during the past 40 years. Lovitts and Nelson reported that a lack of integration into the departmental community contributed most to doctoral student attrition, specifically the quality of the relationship between a doctoral student and their faculty-advisor. The authors stated that doctoral students who completed their degree were twice as likely to express satisfaction with their faculty advisers as were students who departed. Lovitts and Nelson noted that the departments with the lowest rates of attrition were in the sciences where students worked in laboratory groups and participated in group research, and the highest rates of attrition were found in the humanities where learning and research were mainly individualized and secluded.

Lovitts and Nelson (2000) further observed that faculty generally operated from the premise that the best students succeed and the worst fail. Faculty typically reported that the best way to decrease doctoral student attrition was to admit better doctoral students. The results of Lovitts and Nelson’s (2000) survey indicated that the undergraduate GPA of those who departed was the same as those who persisted,
contradicting the assumption of faculty that the worst students fail. Lovitts and Nelson
(2000) also reported that the way in which doctoral students departed from study
reinforced the notion among faculty that the blame lays mostly on the student. Doctoral
students most often engaged in a silent and unexpected departure from their program,
with the faculty having no awareness that the student had been experiencing any
difficulties. Having any contact with a departed doctoral student was rare, and engaging
in exit interviews was a scarce occurrence. Doctoral students also described having an
awareness of the negative consequences of criticizing their program. The participants of
Lovitts and Nelsons’ (2000) study pointed out that faculty conceptualized a successful
doctoral student as someone who was cheerful and compliant, and those students were
more likely to receive monetary assistance, superior teaching assignments, and excellent
letters of recommendation.

Lovitts and Nelson (2000) suggested that doctoral student attrition is profoundly
rooted in the organizational traditions of graduate school and the organization and
practice of graduate educations. The authors reported that doctoral students are more
likely to persist with study when they are in a department that facilitates academic and
personal integration.

Boyle and Boice (1995) reported the results of a study of factors affecting the
success of 40 first-year graduate students. Boyle and Boice conducted interviews at a
Research I university with first year graduate students from the hard sciences, social
sciences, and humanities departments, graduate directors, and graduate students close to
completing their degrees. Boyle and Boice discovered that departmental atmosphere had
a considerable impact on the success of graduate students. Out of all the departments studied, the top rated department (as rated by the National Research Council and reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) sponsored 42 informal social events for faculty and staff per year. Most departments surveyed conducted an average of one or two. The top rated department had three weekly opportunities for new incoming students to interact with faculty, including a weekly dinner hosted by each faculty member for first year graduate students only. At this dinner the host faculty member would present on their research interests and recent projects. Boyle and Boice concluded that their results indicated the need for graduate departments to create supportive environments and effective professional socialization seminars for incoming students.

A study from a different perspective was conducted by Cusworth (2001). The author desired to study doctoral students immediately after acceptance and orientation into their doctoral program. The author interviewed nine first year doctoral students in a Ph.D. counseling program. Emergent themes from the interviews revealed four areas of doctoral student concern: (1) immediate concerns, such as lack of funding and departmental disorganization, (2) mentorship programs, including perceiving a good fit with their mentor or not, (3) administrative issues, e.g. interpersonal difficulties with faculty and staff, and (4) perception of the formal orientation meeting. The author recommended that faculty effectively reach out to doctoral students through mentoring, offer opportunities for students to gather socially, provide support for locating additional funding, and provide information about administrative concerns such as parking, financial aid, and library use.
Counselor education and student retention.

Literature on doctoral student retention within counselor education is scarce. Only two studies were encountered in the literature examining doctoral student retention within counselor education. Protivnak and Foss (2009) conducted a qualitative study of themes that influence the counselor education doctoral student experience. The authors used a large scale qualitative approach (a survey of open ended questions) via an Internet format “to collect a variety of perspectives from counselor education students regarding what influenced their experiences in their doctoral programs while minimizing students’ discomfort in discussing potentially sensitive issues” (p.241). The authors utilized a convenience sample of 141 counselor education doctoral students, of which 88.7% attended a program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2001). Participants represented all five Associations for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) regions across the United States. 49.7% of participants had not passed comprehensive exams, 20.6% had passed their comprehensive exams, 26.2% had passed their comprehensive exams and proposed their dissertations, and 3.5% did not state their progress. The authors partly utilized a convenience sample of doctoral students they knew professionally and personally “Because a comprehensive accessible population list of counselor education doctoral students was not available” (p.243). Emails were sent to these doctoral students requesting their participation, and these emails also included the survey of open ended questions. Sixty seven usable completed surveys were received from the initial convenience sample. The authors then posted to the counselor education and supervision
electronic mailing list (CESNET-L) and the North Central ACES electronic mailing list. From these postings, 74 more completed surveys were generated, totaling 141 completed surveys.

After analyzing the responses of the 141 completed surveys, the authors generated five themes that impacted the counselor education doctoral student experience: (a) departmental culture, (b) mentoring, (c) academics, (d) support systems, and (e) personal issues. Departmental culture had the ability to positively and negatively impact the experience of the participants. Participants positively impacted by departmental culture identified faculty who were focused on their student’s success and faculty members who initiated contact with doctoral students to participate in research and teaching. Participants negatively impacted by departmental culture identified factors such as departmental politics, difficult faculty, pressure to conform to the department’s philosophy, and special attention given to favorite doctoral students. Participants also expressed incidents when they had to compromise their values (a religious student not speaking out when faculty criticized religion). Participants were negatively and positively affected by their mentoring experiences. Positive experiences with mentoring included mentors who were encouraging, supportive, passionate, and willing to assist students outside the classroom. Participants were also negatively impacted by mentoring or a lack thereof, reporting poor treatment from professors and feeling like they were isolated from faculty. Regarding academics, participants were overwhelmingly negatively impacted, citing a lack of preparedness for statistics courses and writing requirements, frustration with the dissertation process, and having classmates not suited for doctoral level study.
Support systems that were helpful to participants included supportive classmates, friends, and family. Participants also experienced challenges with support systems, including how doctoral study constricted their support systems (loss of friendships, loss of romantic relationships, less time spent with family) and the negative impact of difficult classmates. Finally, personal issues of the participants that impacted their experience in doctoral study were energy level, adjustment to being a doctoral student, time management, reduced money, and personal health issues. Protivnak and Foss (2009) reported that the results of their study confirmed other research in the literature regarding the experiences of doctoral students and suggested that future research could include “more in-depth qualitative studies…to clarify some of the themes expressed by the participants of this study” (p. 254).

Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) conducted a qualitative study of doctoral student persistence in counselor education programs accredited by CACREP. The authors performed interviews with 33 doctoral students representing 17 different doctoral programs. The findings from the interviews revealed that doctoral students described student-program match as an influencing factor in their decision to persist. The two chief mechanisms that comprised the student-program match were labeled the academic match and the social-personal match. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) described student-program match as a “multifaceted interaction between the student and various components of the program” (p. 179). The components within student-program match emerged as student expectations, student experience, academic match, and social-personal match. Student expectations were defined as a combination of unexpected happenings and preprogram
expectations and the perception of the student as to whether or not these were met. Student experience was described as information learned by the student after beginning study regarding what doctoral study and life after graduation would be like. Academic match was explained as a comparison between the students’ reasons to pursue a Ph.D. and the program curriculum. Finally, social-personal match was defined as the appraisal of student relationships with faculty and fellow students and the presence or lack of community. The authors concluded that student-program match is necessary for counselor education doctoral students, and that this conclusion was affirmed by previous literature on doctoral student retention (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Golde, 2005; Nerad & Miller, 1996). A recommendation from Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) was for counselor education faculty members to encourage open communication between faculty and doctoral students and engage in relationship building with doctoral students. The intangible experience (such as relationships with faculty and social connections) of a doctoral student gives insights into factors contributing to a decision to depart from study. A better understanding of these experiences may improve the ability of academia to successfully assist a struggling doctoral student.

The Student Experience in Graduate School

The student entrance into doctoral study is often not smooth or even pleasant (Adler & Adler, 2005; Conti, 2001; Herzman, 2003). Doctoral students described entering doctoral study as daunting and “being thrown into a fray they knew little about” (Adler & Adler, p. 13). This typical beginning for a doctoral student may provide a snapshot of the beginnings of doctoral student attrition. Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemere-
Topf, Ross, and Turrentine (2006) were interested in designing effective interventions for working with graduate students and helping them succeed. The conclusions of their research were based on insights from three studies they conducted.

The first study was conducted at a master’s college in the northeast. The research included individual interviews with 61 graduate program coordinators, faculty, administrators, and support staff members; ten focus group interviews with 119 graduate students; and development of recommendations by a 12 member working group. Graduate students were asked to report which administrative and support services were most helpful and least helpful to them. Students were subsequently asked to appraise issues brought up during the interviews with faculty, graduate program coordinators, and administrators and report on how relevant those issues were to their experiences in graduate study. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to analyze for emerging themes. The 12 member working group was organized to talk about the results and create suggestions for the institution. The working group was made up of the researcher who conducted the study, graduate program coordinators from each academic college, an associate academic dean, a faculty member, four administrators, two support staff members, and a graduate student.

The second study focused on the needs of doctoral students at a public midwestern university. Two rounds of focus group interviews were conducted with 31 doctoral students from math, chemistry, English, communication studies, curriculum and instruction, psychology, engineering, neuroscience, business, accounting, speech pathology, math education, rehabilitation counseling, student affairs administration and
research, foreign language acquisition research, and biomedical engineering. Participants were requested to describe their graduate study experiences, identify factors that were helpful and unhelpful with persistence, and report what student needs graduate student services should be prepared to meet. The focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for emerging themes.

The third study was also conducted at a public midwestern university focused on the perceptions of doctoral students. Six focus groups were held with 30 doctoral student participants from biochemistry, physics, mechanical engineering, agronomy, immunobiology, economics, genetics, bioinformatics, sociology, human development, educational leadership, and political science. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and statistical analysis focused on budding themes. Nesheim et al. (2006) reported that the combined results of all three studies indicated that graduate students were discouraged with meeting the multiplicity of professional and personal demands, felt a lack of accommodation for the numerous functions they had to fill, were troubled about vocational plans and potential employment prospects, lacked occasions to get together with, learn from, and mingle with other graduate students, and experienced dealings with faculty as essential but unpredictable. These reported experiences of graduate students reflected the importance of relationships with faculty and successful assimilation into their program of study. Nesheim et al. noted that their results indicated a dire need for services and programs intentionally designed for improving the experiences of graduate students.
Adler and Adler (2005) discussed the worries, experiences, and struggles of students in graduate school. Adler and Adler researched the experiences of 12 sociology doctoral students who were both still in graduate school and who had completed study. The participants were asked to write about their experiences upon entering graduate school from the beginning of study up through their present status. The participants described arriving at campus as daunting and overwhelming as they struggled to find a place to live and take care of other logistical matters while being separated from friends and lovers. Students described this phase of study as a feeling out period characterized by a lack of self-belief, worries about whether they selected the correct career, and apprehension they would not be able to perform satisfactorily. Students stated that they felt like outcasts or pretenders during this stage of their studies and reported low self-esteem.

Another commonly reported struggle experienced by students was described as department politics. The doctoral students in Adler and Adler’s (2005) research universally “expressed dismay about the politicization of academia” (p. 16). Upon beginning their program, students reported learning that certain professors did not get along, professors they had come to work with were either too busy or apathetic about working with them, and the secretive politicking and backstabbing was so menacing in some departments that individuals could not even be in the same room together. These schisms also affected doctoral students when they attempted to choose a committee, with many reporting being unable to choose the professors they wanted because some professors would not be on committees with others. The findings of Adler and Adler
demonstrated the complexity and turmoil of the beginning of doctoral study and pointed toward the powerful influence the school environment may have on doctoral students.

Nyquist, Manning, Wulff, Austin, Sprague, Fraser, Calcagno, and Woodford (1999) examined the experiences of two cohorts of doctoral students over a span of four years and one cohort of master’s students over a span of two years. Nyquist et al. desired to add to what is known about the experiences of graduate students, specifically, what these aspiring professors experienced during their graduate educations. Ninety nine doctoral and master’s students originally participated in the study, and at the conclusion of the research four years later, 68 were still persisting to degree completion and participating in the study. Thirty one of the original participants had left their program of study to pursue other goals. Nyquist et al. conducted two in depth interviews per year with each participant, administered survey questionnaires, and led focus groups. Three principal themes emerged from the data: (1) the tensions graduate students experienced in adapting to the values within higher education, (2) the mixed and ambiguous messages students received about priorities in the academy, and (3) the pleas for support in the stories graduate students told.

Nyquist et al. (1999) reported that students were not prepared when they entered study for the existence of value systems within higher education. The participants revealed that a significant portion of their graduate student development consisted of attempting to reconcile the conflicting values and expectations articulated by different voices of authority within the academy. In some cases the students’ values and expectations fit together well their chosen program of study. Other students had to leave
behind some of their own values and goals in order to persist to completion, and still others experienced the values of the academy as unscrupulous or even nasty. Nyquist et al. reported that the majority of the participants viewed themselves as isolated during their journey through graduate school, “facing down the odds and slaying the dragons along their path by themselves” (p. 23).

Another theme encountered by Nyquist et al. (1999) was the mixed and ambiguous messages graduate students received about priorities in the academy. Graduate students fighting to reach equilibrium in their lives between teaching and research responsibilities, between private and professional life, and between university and civil commitments also contended with the assortment of voices of authority within the academy (advisors, faculty members, department chairs, and institutional leaders) articulating contradictory thoughts about what represented stability and achievement. Graduate students reported that this ambiguousness was most clearly manifested in the competition between research and teaching. Graduate students pointed out that in spoken dialogue, administrators, department chairs, and numerous professors embraced instruction as well as research as essential to the duty of the university; meanwhile, observed unspoken messages (for example tenure decisions or other measures of respect) repeatedly exposed a diminishment of teaching and a valorization of research. Students reported a fear of voicing these observations and subsequently internalized this ambiguity and felt pulled in both directions.

The final theme in the research conducted by Nyquist et al. (1999) was classified as graduate students’ requests for more support. Graduate students stated that they
wanted additional types of support for their professional development. Specifically, students reported a desire to observe others teaching and to be observed, to give and receive feedback about teaching, and to receive consistent and relevant mentoring and advising about life as a teaching scholar. Nyquist et al. pointed out that the simple act of conducting their study resulted in an overwhelming majority of participants expressing gratitude for the opportunity to talk with an interested person about academia, teaching, and their experiences in graduate school. Graduate students also expressed a desire to connect with others in general. Many participants articulated feelings of isolation as they navigated through graduate school and described the chronic unavailability of their faculty-advisors. Nyquist et al. stated that their findings indicated an imperative need for higher education to demystify the academy, clarify values, and behave accordingly so that messages about what is valued in higher education would be clear, consistent, and convincing.

Anderson and Swazey (1998) investigated the experiences of doctoral students by sending out 2,000 surveys to randomly selected students from 99 departments at major research universities in the United States, with a response rate of 72%. The surveys were designed to prompt doctoral students to reflect on their academic work, their departments, their graduate school experiences, and their faculty.

Anderson and Swazey (1998) reported that doctoral students felt that their academic work was dominated by taking classes, working on their dissertations, and completing tests and papers. The majority of respondents indicated that they had little autonomy regarding coursework because of the amount of required classes. Ninety
percent of respondents stated that they were expected to be self-directed in regards to their independent research projects, but Anderson and Swazey pointed out that their participants’ responses “countered the common image of a solitary doctoral student toiling alone on a dissertation” (p. 4). Students in the hard sciences reported that between 55% and 60% of the time their dissertations were part of a larger collaborative project.

Doctoral students in Anderson and Swazey’s (1998) research were also prompted to discuss the climate within their departments. Departmental climates were determined by the completion of a scale designed to measure climates of graduate programs. The scale was comprised of 13 questions, with the first seven designed to measure the level of community within a department and the last six designed to measure the competitiveness within a department. Two-thirds of respondents reported that faculty in their department cared about each other and that students were treated with respect. Ninety percent of respondents indicated that their faculty was accessible to students and that students collaborated with faculty on publications, indicating a sense of community within most departments. In relation to the competitive portion of the scale, 92% of respondents stated that the faculty in their department put their own interests first, and more than 70% said faculty were more concerned with their career than with the good of the department and that people in their department had to compete for resources. Anderson and Swazey suggested that the positive sense of community some doctoral students experienced in their department was overwhelmed by the acute sense of competitiveness.

The experience of being a doctoral student was the next domain Anderson and Swazey (1998) investigated. Similar to the graduate students in the research of Nyquist et
al. (1999), the respondents indicated they were always or usually bothered by role conflict. Role conflict was described as doctoral students feeling they could “not satisfy conflicting demands of various people” (Anderson & Swazey, p. 8). One quarter of respondents felt they could not satisfy conflicting demands, one third thought the amount of work they had to complete interfered with how well they completed it, 40% felt that their work interfered with their personal life, and one third felt that evaluating their own work was difficult. One third of respondents also felt that graduate school was changing them in ways they did not like.

Another concern voiced by respondents in Anderson and Swazey’s study (1998) was perceived difficulties with faculty. Sixty three percent of doctoral students claimed that faculty expected their responsibilities as students to supersede all other responsibilities, and twenty seven percent of respondents reported that they felt exploited by their faculty. The authors suggested that the results of their survey may be useful in determining how to make the experiences of graduate students better, specifically in the way graduate students are taught and socialized in the world of academia.

Hughes and Kleist (2005) conducted a qualitative, grounded theory study of the experiences of four first semester counselor education doctoral students. Using three rounds of interviews and a focus group, Hughes and Kleist sought to develop the understanding of the counselor education doctoral student experience. Hughes and Kleist found that during the first several weeks of doctoral study the participants experienced dramatic shifts in emotions and changes in thoughts. Participants felt anxious about the unknown, high self-doubt, and general apprehension. In the middle of the semester
participants entered into a second phase of experience described as integration. During this phase participants attempted to move past classroom responsibilities and begin to engage in doctoral study, including attending departmental meetings and professional conferences. In this second phase the participants moved past the initial turbulence of emotions into making decision about participation in the doctoral program. Near the close of the semester the participants moved into a third phase of experience, describing this phase as an affirmation of their competence and credentials. During this phase of study the participants felt greater confidence and less dramatic shifts of emotions. Hughes and Kleist suggested that “Counselor educators could offer their beginning doctoral students the responsibilities necessary to garner positive feedback—responsibilities that empower the student’ beliefs in their abilities and qualifications to be in doctoral study” (p. 106).

Hughes and Kleist also suggested that doctoral students benefit from knowing what to expect and experience regarding the initial emotionality of beginning doctoral study.

Summary

The researcher desired to examine the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned. This chapter offered a discussion of higher education and student retention in the United States (Astin, 1977; Thelin, 2004). Literature was reviewed that gave a historical context to student retention and provided research in the literature focused on undergraduate and doctoral student retention (Golde, 2005; Tinto, 1993) as well as the student experience in graduate school (Adler & Adler, 2005; Anderson & Swazey, 1998).
No studies were encountered focusing on the experiences of doctoral students who had departed from their program of study and then successfully returned.

The researcher investigated the literature for studies focused on doctoral student retention within counselor education. Protivnak and Foss (2009), Hoskins and Goldberg (2005), and Hughes and Kleist (2005) were the only studies encountered that matched the researcher’s interest. Protivnak and Foss explored the themes that positively and negatively influenced the experiences of counselor education doctoral students, which included departmental culture, mentoring, academics, support systems, and personal issues. Hoskins and Goldberg qualitatively examined the perceptions of counselor education doctoral students regarding factors which assisted them in persisting toward degree completion. The authors reported that student-program match was a contributing variable in doctoral students persisting to graduation. Hughes and Kleist suggested that counselor educators could be more intentional with involving their doctoral students in empowering experiences.

The consensus in the literature on the critical importance of understanding doctoral student retention, the difficulties of the student in graduate school, the absence of literature examining doctoral students who have left study and returned successfully, and the scarcity of retention research focused on counselor education provides the basis for the researcher conducting this study.
CHAPTER II
METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter summarized the scholarly literature on the history of American higher education, student retention, and the student experience in graduate school. The high rate of doctoral student attrition, the consensus in the literature on the critical importance of understanding doctoral student retention, the difficulties of the graduate school experience, the absence of literature examining doctoral students who have left study and returned successfully, and the scarcity of retention research focused on counselor education formed the basis for this study. The main research question was: What are the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned to the same programs?

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Kent State University (see Appendix A). This chapter provides an overview of the methodological procedure used for this study.

Phenomenological Research Design

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was chosen to illuminate the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned. Qualitative research is “rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Qualitative research aims to examine issues in all their intricacies and is concerned with understanding events from the subject’s own frame of reference with an emphasis on process (Creswell, 2007).
A large portion of research on student retention has utilized a quantitative research design. These research designs fall short in their ability to provide meaning and description to the experiences of the participants. Recent research on doctoral student retention has utilized qualitative methodology (Cusworth, 2001; Golde, 2005; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Nerad & Miller, 1996; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Valero, 2001) in order to provide meaning and description, but only two studies (Hoskins & Goldberg; Protivnak & Foss) have focused on counselor education. Consequently, the present study utilized a phenomenological approach to capture the meaning and essence of the experiences of doctoral students who departed from study and then successfully returned.

The aim of a phenomenological research design is to describe what all the participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon such as departing from doctoral study (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological investigation focuses on wholeness by analyzing a phenomenon from all sides and perspectives with the goal of articulating the essence of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To capture this essence, a phenomenological investigation follows a process similar to the following reported by Creswell: (a) a phenomenon of interest is identified, (b) the researcher recognizes the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, (c) the researcher brackets out their own experiences, (d) data are collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, (e) participants are presented with at least two critical questions: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? and (f) phenomenological data analysis steps are conducted and the results are reported.
The goal of this research study closely mirrored the goal of a phenomenological methodology; therefore, a phenomenological approach was chosen. The phenomenological approach is concerned with descriptions of experiences and the emphasis of core meanings, not explanations, analyses, or generalizations (Moustakas, 1994). Because nothing is known about the experiences of counselor education doctoral students who voluntarily departed from study and then successfully returned, the phenomenological approach served as a suitable foundation for understanding the essence of that experience.

Description of the Researcher

Qualitative research considers the researcher as the primary instrument in a study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Interviews for this research were completed by the researcher. The researcher is a Caucasian male who is currently a doctoral candidate in counselor education at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. He is a licensed professional counselor in the state of Ohio and currently works at a community mental health agency and is an adjunct instructor at a local university. The researcher voluntarily departed from his program of doctoral study after the fall semester during his first year and then successfully returned the subsequent fall semester. The researcher recognizes that his frame of reference, previous experiences, and assumptions will be present during data collection and analysis. Researcher bias is therefore an issue that can negatively affect the soundness of this study and must be accounted for (Maxwell, 2005).

This researcher applied the principles discussed by Moustakas (1994), who reported that phenomenology demands that a researcher transcend or suspend prior knowledge to
recognize a phenomenon at a purer and deeper level. The phenomenological concept of epoche—“to be alert, to look with care, to see what is really there, and to stay away from everyday habits of knowing things” (Moustakas, p. 85)—was utilized to achieve this transcendent state. The following assumptions held by this researcher are as follows:

1. There is a common essential experience linking counselor education doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from doctoral study and then successfully returned.

2. The chronically high doctoral student attrition rate has negative effects on society, academic institutions, doctoral programs, and faculty.

3. A student entering graduate study, particularly doctoral study, is presented with a unique set of stressors which ebb and flow throughout the course of their program.

4. Doctoral students feel implicit and explicit pressures to not complain to faculty or administrators about the program. Doctoral students recognize the importance of faculty having a favorable impression of them and have an awareness that being cheerful and compliant will result in superior teaching assignments, monetary assistance, and excellent letters of recommendation. Because of this, the event of a doctoral student leaving doctoral study is often a quiet event in which faculty are not aware of the student’s departure; exit interviews or follow-up contacts with departing students are atypical.

5. Faculty members are positioned to ameliorate the stressors students experience when beginning doctoral study. Because of the bedrock values of
the counseling profession, counselor educators are unique and therefore doctoral students having difficulty persisting with study should experience faculty expressing these values.

6. Doctoral students have invested significant amounts of time, energy, and money into their academic careers to get them to the point of doctoral study. These investments result in doctoral students deriving great meaning from academic success and have a positive influence on the self-worth of the student. In addition, doctoral students in counselor education are engaged in a profession dedicated to helping people and are preparing to become leaders of their profession. Departing from study and consequently abandoning this goal results in a significant loss of meaning for the doctoral student.

7. The decision to voluntarily depart from doctoral study is a process that occurs over time. Doctoral students contemplating this decision experience significant distress.

8. The event of leaving doctoral study is intensely difficult and has significantly negative psychosocial effects for the doctoral student. Doctoral students experience humiliation and guilt in relationship to their parents, romantic partners, siblings, professors, and peers.

9. The event of returning to doctoral study presents doctoral students with a unique set of stressors and challenges.

At the onset of this study and throughout data analysis this researcher attempted to bracket all assumptions to promote fidelity to the phenomenon under investigation and
protect against researcher bias. An auditor, peer debriefing, and reflective journals were also utilized to minimize researcher bias.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to choose participants for this study. Using criterion sampling—a form of purposive sampling—participants were chosen in an intentional manner to provide information that could not have been acquired from other choices (Maxwell, 2005). Criterion sampling requires participants to be chosen based on their having experienced the phenomenon under investigation and ensures quality assurance (Creswell, 2007). Participants needed to have experienced voluntarily departing from doctoral programs in counselor education and be capable of expressing a comprehensive description of the experience.

At the beginning of this research study the sample size was set with a range of three to ten adult participants. No “right” number exists for sample size in a phenomenological study, with examples in the literature ranging from one (Dukes, 1984) to 325 (Polkinghorne, 1989), with Dukes recommending a sample size between three and ten. Polkinghorne recommended that a sample in a phenomenological study contain enough individuals to provide varied experiences with the phenomenon being examined. It was the goal of the researcher that the final sample size be consistent with recommendations in the literature regarding size and variation.

The final sample size of six participants met the requirements of size and variation and was determined through saturation. Saturation occurred when participants tended to provide redundant information rather than new information (Nieswiadomy,
As the aim of qualitative research is to describe and understand a person, context, or experience, this small sample size was appropriate. The quality of information is more important than the quantity of information in qualitative research (Sandelowski, 1995).

The selection of participants was based on the following conditions. Participants needed to:

1. Be counselor education doctoral students who had voluntarily departed from study and then successfully returned.
2. Have their point of departure from doctoral study be at a maximum of four years prior to participation in this research.
3. Have their point of return to doctoral study be at a minimum of one year prior to participation in this research and a maximum of three years prior to participation in this research.
4. Have their return to doctoral study occur at the same institution which they departed from.
5. Have been continuously enrolled in doctoral study for a minimum of one semester/quarter prior to their point of initial departure.
6. Be able to participate in one 90 minute audio-taped interview and one 60 minute audio-taped interview over a three week span.

Participants needed to be counselor education doctoral students who had voluntarily departed from study and then successfully returned for several reasons. The status of being a counselor education doctoral student who had voluntarily departed and then successfully returned met the criterion in phenomenological research of “all
individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128). This criterion is intuitive and ensures quality assurance. The voluntary nature of the participant’s departure mitigated the possibility that a participant had been forced to depart from doctoral study. Forced departure would introduce a new set of psychosocial problems and diverge from the focus of this research.

Departure time from doctoral study with a maximum of four years prior to this research was necessary because participants were articulating experiences that had occurred in the past. It was therefore imperative that not too much time had elapsed since experiencing departing from doctoral study. Having the experience relatively fresh in the mind of participants increased the chances of easy recall and rich description. The point of return to doctoral study was set at a minimum of one year prior to this research so that participants were sufficiently immersed back into their doctoral programs and were reasonably certain of persisting to successful degree completion. It was important that participants returned to doctoral study at the same institution they departed from so that the experience of the participant was of the same school. The criterion of continuous enrollment in doctoral study for a minimum of one semester/quarter prior to their point of departure was included to ensure that each participant had adequate time to engage in the role of doctoral student before initially departing. Finally, participants were required to participate in one 90 minute audio-taped interview and one 60 minute audio-taped interview to provide an adequate description of the experience of departing and then returning to doctoral study and offer their responses to emergent themes from the data analysis.
Participants were recruited for this research through an email (see Appendix B) sent out to CESNET-L, an unmoderated listserv concerning counselor education and supervision. CESNET-L was chosen because the listserv is aimed at counselor educators who would be the most likely audience to be aware of appropriate participants for this study. Criteria for participants were clearly stated within the emails. The emails also included the name of the researcher, including telephone number and email address. Participants were told in the email that they would each be compensated with a $25.00 Visa gift card after they completed the first interview and a $25.00 Visa gift card after they completed the second interview. Gift cards were utilized to compensate participants for their time and effort in participating in this study.

Participants were not excluded from the study based on gender, religious conviction, ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation. All participants gave their consent to be a part of this research study as well as have the interviews audio-taped. Participants were informed that they could terminate their participation in this study at any time. To guarantee confidentiality, a number system was utilized to identify participants throughout the screening procedure, and participants were able to choose a pseudonym in the data presentation. To protect confidentiality, only demographic information, such as ethnicity and age, is presented in the results section.

Procedure

Prospective participants who were interested in taking part in this research contacted this researcher by email. The researcher received a total of six contacts over the course of one week. During the initial contact, the researcher articulated the purpose of
this research and the screening procedure. The researcher obtained the prospective participant’s personal information, including telephone number, email address, postal address, and preferred method of contact, and recorded this information on an index card. The prospective participant was given a number that was also recorded on the index card. This number was to guarantee confidentiality throughout the screening process and the index card was available only to the researcher. The researcher sent a packet of information regarding the study by postal mail. This packet included a cover letter (see Appendix C) that articulated the purpose of the study and the screening procedure.

Also included in this packet was a screening form (see Appendix D) that the prospective participant returned to the researcher in a self-addressed stamped envelope. The participant’s assigned number from the initial contact was coded on the screening form to guarantee confidentiality excluding the researcher. The purpose of the screening form was to guarantee that prospective participants met the criteria established for the study. The participant’s answers on this form were kept confidential. The packet also included topic areas for questions to be asked during the initial interview (see Appendix E). Example topic areas were included so prospective participants were informed of what topics would be covered during the initial interview. Six screening forms were returned to the researcher.

After all the returned screening forms were examined and approved for meeting the criteria of the study, the researcher contacted each participant via email to arrange the initial interview. Three initial interviews were done face-to-face and three were done via a telephone call. Participants who were interviewed via a telephone call were participants
who lived out of state. Interviews were scheduled at a day and time convenient for the
participant and conducted at one of two venues (the researcher’s clinical office or a
university office at Kent State University). The first interview started with the participant
reviewing the consent form (see Appendix F) and the audiotape consent form (see
Appendix G). The participant was then extended the opportunity to question the
researcher about these forms and the study. After all questions were asked and all forms
were signed, the researcher began the audio-tape recording. The researcher asked
questions on the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix H), which was created to
gather data about the participant and is described in full in the instrumentation section.

The first semi-structured interview was 90 minutes in length and used open-ended
questions and probes to generate in-depth information from each participant about the
experience of departing from doctoral study. The researcher documented thoughts and
reactions in a reflective journal after each interview to reflect on emergent themes and the
process of the interview. At the end of the initial interview, each participant received their
monetary compensation for their participation.

As participants described troubling or difficult issues, the researcher set aside time
at the conclusion of the first and second interviews to help the participant process the
experience through discussion and to ensure that no participant was in a state of distress
as a result of the interviews. The discussion focused on the participant’s feelings in
response to being questioned during the interview and discussing sensitive material. If the
researcher felt that a participant had experienced significant distress, the researcher was
to present the participant with contact information to a local mental health agency (see
Appendix I) and ensure that the participant scheduled an appointment. No participant experienced distress in response to being interviewed for this study.

Transcription of each audio-taped interview was completed as soon as possible upon the first interview’s conclusion and checked for accuracy. A copy of the transcription was then promptly mailed to each participant to provide them with the opportunity to check the transcript for accuracy prior to the follow-up interview. The researcher commenced data analysis prior to the follow-up interview. The 60 minute follow-up interview was set after the transcript from the first interview had been checked for accuracy and analyzed. The 90 minute audio-taped interview and the 60 minute audio-taped interview with each participant were completed during a one month period.

The second audio-taped interview was conducted to allow each participant to check the accuracy of the first transcript, known as a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member check is described in full in the trustworthiness section. Prior to the second interview each participant received a copy of the transcript from their first interview via postal mail or email. Each participant was asked to examine the transcript and judge its accuracy and determine if corrections needed to be made. Participants were instructed to give feedback regarding the transcription by phone or email contact prior to the second interview and this researcher made any changes accordingly. The second interview also afforded the researcher the chance to confirm themes gathered from the first interview and to do more in-depth exploring with each participant. Participants were given the opportunity to expand and give details on certain areas during the second
interview. At the conclusion of the second interview, each participant received their monetary compensation for their participation.

At the conclusion of the second audio-taped interview the researcher immediately transcribed the interview and checked the transcription for accuracy. The original data analysis was then resumed and new germane data from the second interview was included. An auditor, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling were utilized to authenticate emergent themes and confirm that appropriate data analysis procedures were observed. During the second interview each participant was asked if they would respond to a follow-up email (see Appendix J) after data analysis was finished. At the conclusion of data analysis the researcher contacted each participant through email. In the email the research findings were presented to each participant for confirmation. The emails occurred two months after the second interviews.

Instrumentation

Three items were utilized for instrumentation during this research study: the screening form, the demographic questionnaire, and the first interview schedule. This section gives a detailed description of each form and discusses the procedures used for the second interview.
Screening Form

The screening form (see Appendix D) was created to collect data about prospective participants to judge if the participant met the criteria for this research study. The screening form was sent to each participant through postal mail. Directions were included in the screening form that directed each participant to answer all questions by checkmark or filling in the blank. Each participant was instructed to call the researcher with any questions and participants’ answers remained confidential.

The content of the screening form included the following questions: (a) how they heard about the research study, (b) if they had voluntarily departed from a doctoral program in counselor education a maximum of four years ago and successfully returned to that same program a minimum of one year ago, (c) if they had been continuously enrolled in doctoral study for a minimum of one semester/quarter before their departure from study, and (d) if they would be able to engage in one 90 minute audio-taped interview and one 60 minute audio-taped interview to articulate their experience of departing from study. Participants were requested to list prospective times and dates of availability for the first interview.

Demographic Questionnaire

The first interview began with the researcher completing the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix H) with each participant. The completed demographic questionnaires served as categories during data analysis and assisted in the establishment of rapport with each participant. The demographic questionnaire generated the following information about each participant: (a) age, (b) gender, (c) educational background, (d)
marital status, (e) ethnic or racial background, (f) current occupation, and (g) religious affiliation.

First Interview Schedule

The third instrument utilized in this research study was the interview schedule for the first semi-structured interview. This first interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions and utilized probes to facilitate participants to expand on specific topics. The questions were designed to maximize the description the participant gave of their experience of departing from doctoral study. The questions contained in the first interview schedule were generated from the main research question.

Moustakas (1994) reported that “The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). The researcher asked additional questions than those listed on the first interview schedule related to each participant’s answer. If a participant’s answer was confusing, the researcher sought clarification via questioning or reflecting the statement back to the participant to check for accuracy. All participants were asked the same set of questions during the first interview. Moustakas also stated that the main purpose of an interview is to enable the participant to fully describe their experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher designed the following interview questions to assist each participant to fully describe their experience of departing from doctoral study:

1. What led you to become a doctoral student in counselor education and supervision? (Probes)
2. Briefly reflect on and then briefly describe the overall experience of departing from doctoral study.

3. How did the experience of departing from doctoral study impact you? (Probes)
   What changes do you link with the experience? (Probes)

4. What feelings were generated by the experience? (Probes) What thoughts stood out for you during that time? (Probes)

5. How did the experience affect significant others in your life? (Probes)

6. What was occurring in the context of the college/university prior to your departure from study? (Probes)

7. What was occurring in the context of your personal life prior to your departure from study? (Probes)

8. What factors did you view as promoting a decision to persist? (Probes) What factors did you view as promoting a decision to depart? (Probes)

9. How would you describe the faculty in your program relevant to your decision to depart from study? (Probes)

10. If you knew of someone else struggling with persisting with doctoral study, what recommendations would you have for that individual to help them persist? (Probes) What recommendations would you have for their program regarding how to best help that individual? (Probes)

11. Briefly reflect on and then describe the overall experience of returning to doctoral study.
12. What feelings and thoughts stood out to you during your return to doctoral study? (Probes)

13. What factors did you see as promoting a decision to return? (Probes) What factors did you see as discouraging a decision to return? (Probes)

14. How would you describe the faculty in your program relevant to your decision to return to doctoral study? (Probes)

*Second Interview and Follow-Up Email*

The main purposes of the second audio-taped interview were to gather supplementary information from each participant and conduct a member check. The second interviews began with each participant being asked the following questions:

1. What thoughts came to your mind as you were reading the first interview transcript?

2. What thoughts came to your mind as you were reflecting on your answers from the first interview?

3. If you could say anything else about the experience of departing from doctoral study, what would it be?

The researcher then read a summary of the first interview to each participant, allowing for frequent pauses so that each participant could comment or clarify. As the summaries were being read each participant was asked to contemplate the following questions:

1. How do these thoughts match up to your experiences?
2. Have any features of your experience of departing from doctoral study been omitted?

Additional questions for the second interview were formulated when the data analysis was finished for the first interview. The second interview questions were idiosyncratic for each participant and allowed the researcher an opportunity to (a) explore themes specific to the participant, (b) present each participant with the opportunity to authenticate themes that emerged from their first interview, (c) clarify content, and (d) give each participant the opportunity to disclose supplementary information.

The follow-up email (see Appendix J) was sent to each participant at the conclusion of data analysis and consisted of the researcher revisiting the purpose of the study and presenting the preliminary emergent themes with each participant. Each participant was asked to reflect on the emergent themes to acquire their feedback.

Analysis

This research study utilized an inductive approach to analyzing the data that facilitated the emergence of themes related to the experience of departing from doctoral study. The data analysis followed Creswell’s (2007) recommendations regarding phenomenological data analysis and was comprised of four general steps: (a) analyzing the data for important statements, (b) formulating meanings from the statements and grouping them into themes, (c) generating an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and (d) reducing this description into a narrative description of the fundamental essence of departing from doctoral study.
Each interview was transcribed immediately after the interview was finished and read multiple times by the researcher and checked for accuracy. The immediacy of the transcription was necessary as the information from the interview was still fresh in the researcher’s mind. The multiple readings of the interview assisted the researcher in capturing a sense of the interview in its entirety. The data analysis began with the researcher isolating statements within the transcripts about how participants were experiencing departing from doctoral study. The importance of a statement was evaluated based on (a) if it was a direct response to an interview question, and (b) illuminated the experience of departing from doctoral study. These statements were verbatim quotes from each participant and were circled in the transcription document and then entered into a table in Microsoft Word. As statements were identified, horizontal mapping (Creswell, 2007) was utilized to create a list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements of equal value. This was done to eliminate redundancies in the participants’ responses. From these distinct statements, formulated meanings were extracted which articulated the underlying themes of the participants verbatim quotes.

The process of transforming significant statements into formulated meanings is the duty of the researcher and was described by Moustakas (1994) as finding meanings “through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles or functions” (pp. 97-98).

To promote accuracy the final summary of the first interview was presented to each participant during their second interview. Each participant was asked if the
summary matched their experience of departing from doctoral study and if any features of their experience were omitted in the summary. New and/or germane information gathered from those questions were included in the data analysis. The second interview was then transcribed and analyzed utilizing the same procedures described for the first interview. Summaries of the first interview and second interview were merged to represent a composite narrative description of each participant’s experience of departing from doctoral study.

When the researcher had generated a narrative descriptive summary for each participant, the researcher reduced each summary into meaning units (themes) in order to explicate the essence of the experience of departing from doctoral study (Moustakas, 1994). Color coded markers were utilized to assist the researcher in categorizing and visualizing dissimilarities and similarities across participants. The researcher was then able to isolate emergent themes of the experience of departing from doctoral study.

From the integrated emergent themes, a comprehensive description of the experience of departing from doctoral study was generated. This description was then reduced to a narrative description of the fundamental essence of departing from doctoral study (Moustakas, 1994).

The closing step of data analysis was the follow-up email (see Appendix J) sent to each participant to provide an additional member check. The researcher presented (a) the study’s purpose, (b) the type of phenomenological data analysis procedure used, and (c) emergent themes of the experience of departing from doctoral study and then successfully returning. Each participant provided feedback on the emergent themes.
Trustworthiness

The credibility of the results of a qualitative study is partly evaluated on the trustworthiness of the presented information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four variables comprise trustworthiness in a research study: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. These factors are described in the following section.

Credibility

The credibility of a qualitative research study is described as the extent to which the researcher represented the experiences of the participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) reported that member checks are the most critical component to achieve credibility. Member checks also give the researcher an opportunity to present each participant with emergent themes from the data analysis and receive each participant's response to the themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To maximize credibility, the researcher utilized the techniques of member checks, triangulation, and peer debriefing. A member check was conducted during the second interview with each participant as they reviewed the first interview transcript, by obtaining new data, and authenticating emergent themes from the data analysis. The follow-up email (see Appendix J) was also a member check. In general, the participants reported that the emergent themes corresponded with their experiences of departing from doctoral study.

Triangulation is described as the process of increasing the chances that the results of a research study will be viewed as credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research study achieved triangulation via utilizing multiple participants. The sample included six
adult women between the ages of 30 and 50. Five described themselves as Caucasian; one described herself as “racially mixed.” All six participants met the previously stated criteria for participating in this research, e.g., all participants were counselor education doctoral students who voluntarily departed from and successfully returned to their same doctoral program.

Peer debriefing involves soliciting a peer’s feedback regarding the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher had a meeting with the peer debriefer after all of the second interviews were finished and the transcriptions were complete. This meeting sought to (a) dialogue about the researcher’s data interpretations, (b) discuss and examine the data, and (c) dialogue about the next procedures for data analysis. Peer debriefing enabled the researcher to dialogue about personal reactions, suppositions, and thoughts and feelings connected with the research process. The peer debriefer acted as a “devil’s advocate” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 309).

Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Moustakas (1994) reported that the goal of phenomenological research is not to generalize the results. Although Lincoln and Guba (1985) agree with this point, they discussed that a thick and rich description in a qualitative study makes it possible for a working hypothesis to be generated. Chapter three of this research study provides a rich and thick description of the experience of departing from doctoral study. This description may serve to provide a preliminary hypothesis on the phenomenon being investigated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Based on this description and subsequent hypothesis, transferability to another similar setting may be possible.
Dependability represents the reliability of the research results and confirmability describes the degree of researcher objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of an outside auditor increased both the levels of dependability and confirmability through their examination of both the data analysis procedures and the results. The outside auditor represented a person with an area of expertise in qualitative research. The auditor is distinct from the peer debriefer in that the auditor reviewed all information after the fact while the peer debriefer examined all information during the process. The auditor checked instrumentation, significant statements, transcripts, formulated meanings, themes, narrative descriptions, and the researcher’s reflective journals. Overall, the auditor confirmed the trustworthiness of this research study and wrote a letter to this effect (see Appendix K).

Reflective journaling improved the trustworthiness of this research study through dependability, confirmability, triangulation, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reflective journals contained personal reflections, reactions, logistics of the study, and methodological decisions. The reflective journaling also included discussions with the researcher’s dissertation committee members and the peer debriefer.

Summary

The main research question for this study was: What are the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned to the same programs? A series of interviews generated data which illuminated the experiences of counselor education doctoral students who had departed from study. The researcher utilized a phenomenological approach to data
analysis to produce the essence of the participants’ experiences of departing from and returning to study. The next chapter describes the findings of this research study.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The previous chapter provided an overview of the methodological procedure used for this study. The researcher utilized a phenomenological approach to data analysis to produce the essence of the participants’ experiences of departing from and returning to doctoral study. This chapter presents the research findings of this study on counselor education doctoral students who voluntarily departed from study and successfully returned, and is divided into three major sections. The first section introduces the six participants to the reader, including demographic information and an overview of each participant’s experience of voluntarily departing from doctoral study and successfully returning. The second section provides an in depth examination of the data analysis utilized for this research, including examples from the data analysis. The third section provides a description of the research findings on the experience of voluntarily departing from doctoral study and successfully returning.

Participants

The sample included six adult women between the ages of 30 and 50. Five described themselves as Caucasian; one described herself as “racially mixed.” All six participants met the previously stated criteria for participating in this research, e.g., all participants were counselor education doctoral students who voluntarily departed from and successfully returned to their same doctoral program. This section briefly introduces the reader to each of the six participants. Table 1 offers an outline of the six participants.
Table 1

*Demographic Data*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>Highest Education Level</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anne

Anne is a 38 year old Caucasian woman. She is married with no children and works as an adjunct counseling instructor at a college near her residence. She graduated in the winter of 2008 with her doctorate in counselor education and supervision. Anne described receiving her doctorate as a “very meaningful experience, especially after thinking I would never finish.” Anne received her master’s in counseling but reported knowing that she “really wanted to become a lawyer.” Anne stated that she initially sought a doctorate in counselor education after she applied to the top five law schools in the country and was rejected by all of them, but “I knew I wanted to go into a higher degree than the master’s degree in counseling.”

Anne was the first participant interviewed. Both the first and the second interviews with Anne took place in the researcher’s counseling office. She arrived for the first interview on time and was relaxed and personable, stating “I have been looking forward to telling this to someone.” Anne was thoughtful with each question presented to her, as evidenced by her intentional pauses before answering, and provided long and detailed answers. Anne was relaxed and friendly during the second interview, as evidenced by frequently telling jokes, and she remarked how participating in the study was “a cathartic experience.” At the conclusion of the second interview Anne spoke about the importance of this research:

Students who have gone through this, like me, they really need to have this chance to tell their story. But more than that, counseling faculty need to read this
as well, because I think there is a disconnect between faculty and students about this issue.

Anne described departing from study as a way to reduce frustration she had been experiencing in her life, commenting “Just darn it already! I want(ed) to be done with this.” Prior to departing from study, Anne experienced a confluence of negative events both personally and academically. Anne reported, “The physical health issues I was experiencing, the physical pain, along with the counseling department being in chaos, it was just too much.” Anne reported this confluence of negative events built up until she reached a point of wanting to be done with the doctorate program “so I could get my old life back.” Anne described her return to the doctoral program as being motivated by several factors, including “feeling like a part of me was missing” and also not wanting to be a full time master’s level clinician, reporting “Well, I didn’t like counseling at the master’s level full time, quite honestly.”

Gem

Gem is a 33 year old single female with no children who described herself as “racially mixed.” She is a full time student and reported she is “close to finishing” her doctorate in counselor education. Gem reported that a doctorate “was a goal of mine, it was something I knew I was going to do since high school.” Gem observed that after obtaining a master’s degree in counseling, she knew she wanted to teach, “and a doctorate in counselor education was the next logical step.”

Gem was the second participant interviewed. Because of Gem’s significant geographic separation from the researcher, the first and second interviews with Gem
occurred over the phone. Gem was friendly during the first interview, laughing frequently and asking the researcher questions. Gem provided concise answers to questions and typically did not elaborate after her initial response. During the second interview, Gem reflected on the brevity of her answers and commented, “I guess that is just how I answer things. I think I have always been that way. But maybe I’m a little nervous too about these bad things I’m saying about my program and professors.” During the second interview Gem expounded on her first interview answers and provided more detail and description.

Gem reported that prior to her departure from doctoral study she experienced a period of inexplicable confusion, stating “It was very confusing; it was a very confusing time…even looking back now, I’m not sure exactly what was going on.” Gem also observed that the confusion eventually led to depression and an inability to sleep and focus:

It started as confusion. There was just a lot of confusion and not knowing what was going on, and as a result, I think confusion led to depression, and then led to the inability to sleep and focus, which led to the leave of absence.

Gem’s return to doctoral study occurred when she reached a point of feeling peaceful and grounded in her life. She described returning to doctoral study as “emotionally hard, but something I wanted to do because it was still my goal.” Gem commented on departing from doctoral study:

One of the comments that were made by one of my professors upon my return was that I seemed more relaxed…I know within myself I felt simply more
grounded, and, more centered…just there was more peace in my life…I’m very focused, very grounded, and I think that came out of the time I spent away, but, although it was difficult, it allowed me the space to get back on track.

Daphne

Daphne is a 30 year old Caucasian woman, married with no children. Daphne currently works as a therapist with children and adolescents. Daphne entered into a counselor education doctoral program after experiencing what she described as the negative lifestyle of being employed at a community mental health agency: “I just couldn’t work at the agency anymore, I kind of hated it. And I thought teaching is something I would enjoy.” Daphne reported that she is halfway through her dissertation and will graduate in either May or August of 2009.

Daphne was the third interview, and both interviews with Daphne took place at the researcher’s counseling office. Daphne was open and forthright during both interviews, as evidenced by her willingness to discuss painful and private personal experiences. Daphne spoke at length during the first and second interviews about the importance of this research, and expressed a desire to see the results of this study:

I was really glad when I saw you were doing this study, because I haven’t seen anything about this subject, even though I know a lot of doctoral students don’t make it through. And I’ve always wondered what others who went through this would say, so that will be interesting.

Daphne departed from doctoral study after the fall semester of her first year and returned to study the fall semester of the following year. Daphne departed from study
because of what she described as a “traumatic event” in her life, which threw her life “into turmoil.” Daphne commented, “My father died unexpectedly and that just threw my family and me into turmoil…it affected me very profoundly.” She consequently experienced anxiety and depression and other significant psychological symptoms that forced her to depart from study:

I got severely anxious after that, and that just progressed into depression. I was thinking irrationally, I could hardly eat…even the smallest tasks became overwhelming, and it got to the point where I just could not function well enough to be in the program. That is when I decided to leave.

Daphne’s return to study occurred after she had been gone for one semester. Daphne’s return was also marked with significant challenges:

Coming back was really tough, because I wasn’t all the way back to feeling like myself. I was still struggling with depression…luckily my professors and the chair of the department were very accepting and welcoming when I came back…without that I don’t think I would have been able to.

Jackie

Jackie is a 34 year old Caucasian female currently in the dissertation phase of her counselor education program. She is single and has no children. Jackie reported she entered the doctoral program after several faculty members in her master’s program encouraged her to apply, stating “When I was doing my master’s program in counseling, it was suggested and talked about with some of the faculty, and I was interested.” She also described the doctorate as being congruent with her desire to “someday be a
professor.” Jackie currently works as a therapist at a community mental health agency as she finishes her dissertation.

The first interview occurred in Jackie’s counseling office. For the purpose of convenience, the second interview was conducted over the phone. Jackie reported anxiety prior to the first interview, stating “I am nervous about this. I haven’t really talked about the whole thing with anyone, and even though I know it will be confidential, what I say won’t be all positive.” Jackie responded to initial questions with short answers and did not respond to probing questions. As the interview progressed, Jackie appeared to relax, as evidenced by lengthier answers and increased laughter. During the second interview Jackie was relaxed and open, expounding on emergent themes from her first interview.

Jackie departed from study after she passed her comprehensive exams and prior to completing her internship. She identified a personal tragedy in her family as the inciting event that prompted her to depart, but added that several other personal tragedies had occurred in her life prior to and after her departing:

My brother was diagnosed with cancer right before I finished my internship...prior to that my parents’ house burned down…after I departed my niece died…and you know, after she died there was this grief, but also a reflection of not believing that all that happened to me in such a short period of time.

Jackie reported that because of the “overwhelming nature” of the tragedies, “my focus was no longer on the doctorate and I realized I wasn’t going to be able to meet the deadlines my advisors wanted.” She described departing from study as a “personal
disappointment” and an event that “changed my priorities.” Jackie reported that she returned to doctoral study when she felt her life had become calm again:

I think things felt calmer in my life, where I actually felt like I had come out of whatever kind of fog I’d been in, with grief. And then being around (school) where I was working, being around people who were also working on that, so that cohort part came back…you know, being around people where you can have that kind of conversation.

Alexis

Alexis is a 50 year old married Caucasian female with no children. She is currently an assistant professor in counseling and anticipates completing her doctorate in May of 2009. She reported first being interested in being a professor after being inspired by one of her former professors while completing her undergraduate degree:

I was at a conference, I’m pretty sure it was the precursor of ACA…I went with a lot of my colleagues, and the dean of students was with us, and we were driving in our van, and we got to talking just about his experiences, so I think that was what got me thinking that I would like to be a professor.

Alexis explained that she entered a counselor education doctoral program later in life “when the opportunity presented itself.”

Alexis was the fifth participant interviewed. Because of the significant geographic separation between Alexis and the researcher, both interviews were completed over the phone. Alexis was open during the first interview and seemed relaxed, as evidenced by her casual tone and ease with answering questions. Her answers were detailed and
moderate in length. During the second interview Alexis expounded on her first interview answers and reflected on emergent themes.

Alexis departed from doctoral study because of a combination of personal and academic factors. She described being concerned for both her physical and emotional health, both of which were in decline prior to departing from study:

I was having physical difficulties, which was confusing at the time…I was not eating and I was not sleeping well, and I went into what I thought was a depressive funk…what I discovered later on was that my thyroid was way off.

Alexis also identified the counseling department as an unsafe place to be, professionally and personally:

And kind of also to get away from the (academic) environment. The department, the people, didn’t feel safe. Probably just not, from my perspective, a professionally and personally safe place to be…I just didn’t have the emotional resources to gut it out.

She described her return to doctoral study as a time when she felt “physically and emotionally recharged.” Alexis also noted that upon returning her cohort and a portion of the faculty were different and improved:

So the second time around there were different professors there and there was a different cohort there and it was a much better experience…I just didn’t have to mess with the same previous issues…there was not the personality weirdness with professors, and, it was just what I considered to be normal.
Diane

Diane is a 31 year old Caucasian female. She is married with one child and currently works as an outpatient therapist while working on her dissertation. Diane started her doctorate in counselor education because she always wanted a doctorate and because her professors in her master’s program encouraged her. Diane reported:

I think I always kind of thought I wanted to get my PhD…and a lot of the professors were writing notes on my papers about it during my master’s program…so I applied and got admitted and started the program.

Diane was the sixth and final participant interviewed. The first interview with Diane occurred at the researcher’s counseling office. Diane arrived for the first interview on time and reported feeling “relaxed and nervous at the same time.” Diane provided sufficient detail and was open when answering questions, but expressed “I feel cautious and kind of nervous because I’m being pretty negative about my professors and the counseling department.” For the purpose of convenience, the second interview with Diane was completed over the phone. She stated she felt “much more relaxed than the first time” and readily reflected on emergent themes from the first interview.

Diane described the time leading up to her departure from study as overwhelming both physically and emotionally, stating “I do think that I did get just completely overwhelmed.” Her decision to depart was informed by a combination of both personal and academic factors, including poor physical health and anger toward the counseling department:
Looking back I think the number one thing was my declining physical health…I also remember feeling very unappreciated (by the faculty)...I really felt disrespected…I was angry, like I really was, I felt angry towards the program...maybe because of the disrespect thing.

Diane’s return to the doctoral program was “positive overall,” but marked by encountering faculty who doubted her ability to be successful:

I felt like when I made the decision to take my comps, and I told them, they were like, no you’re not. I felt like before I returned they were skeptical of me being able to really do it, I could feel that from them, and that made me angry. That was really unhelpful.

Summary of Participants

Each participant articulated a unique experience of voluntarily departing from doctoral study and successfully returning. The uniqueness of each participant’s experience was also characterized by commonalities with other participants, leading to emergent themes more similar than different. Data analysis utilized participants’ verbatim statements to generate common themes across participants. The next section details the data analysis process that generated the emergent themes and provides examples from the data analysis.

Data Analysis

This section provides an in depth examination of the data analysis procedure utilized in this study. This in depth examination provides the reader insight into how data analysis was conducted, and demonstrates how the final themes were generated. This in
depth analysis includes a brief reiteration of the data analysis procedure utilized, followed with specific examples from the data. These emergent themes suggest a common essential experience, or the essence of the participants’ experiences, of departing from and returning to doctoral study.

Data Analysis Procedure and Examples

This research utilized a qualitative phenomenological design. The data analysis process mirrored Creswell’s (2007) suggestions for such a design and was comprised of four major steps: (a) analyzing the data for significant statements, (b) formulating meanings from the significant statements and categorizing them into themes, (c) generating an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and (d) reducing this description into a narrative of the fundamental essence of departing from doctoral study and then successfully returning. The fundamental essence is comprised of verbatim quotes from the participants and broadly represented by the major themes presented.

Within a week after each interview, the researcher completed a verbatim transcription of the interview. Each transcription was checked for accuracy and read multiple times so the researcher was able to internalize a complete sense of the interview. Data analysis began when the researcher surveyed participant transcriptions and isolated significant statements within each. The criterion for significant statements was twofold: (a) a direct response to an interview question, and (b) if the direct response illuminated the experience of departing from and returning to doctoral study. Significant statements were verbatim quotes, were circled within the transcription, and subsequently entered into a table in Microsoft Word. Entering the significant statements into Microsoft Word
assisted in organizing the data. Horizontal mapping (Creswell, 2007) was utilized to ensure that significant statements were nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping, eliminating redundancies. The significant statements provided the starting point for the data analysis.

Formulated meanings were extracted from participants’ statements. Formulated meanings represented the underlying meanings of the participants’ verbatim quotes. Table 2 provides select examples of statements of each participant and demonstrates the transmutation of the statements into their related formulated meanings. Each participant was then interviewed a second time, and the second interview was then transcribed and analyzed utilizing the same procedures described for the first interview. Summaries of the first interview and second interview were merged to represent a composite narrative description of each participant’s experience of departing from doctoral study and successfully returning. These comprehensive narrative descriptions for each participant were then analyzed and reduced to themes. Table 3 provides brief sections of the narrative descriptions for each participant and their corresponding themes. Themes for all participants were then examined and commonalities emerged across participants, producing the final major themes representative of all participants.

An outside auditor was utilized to assess the results of the data analysis and also strengthen the dependability and confirmability of this study. The outside auditor represented a person with an area of expertise in qualitative research. The auditor was distinct from the peer debriefer in that the auditor reviewed all information after the fact while the peer debriefer examined all information during the process. The auditor checked instrumentation, significant statements, transcripts, formulated meanings,
Table 2

*Examples of Significant Statements and Related Formulated Meanings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Significant Statement</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>But I have to be honest, systemic deficiencies with the way the department was run</td>
<td>The counseling department had flaws, which made departing easier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gem</td>
<td>So I just stayed home</td>
<td>I felt like a failure after I departed and stayed away from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>It was hard, being around them and listening to their conversations</td>
<td>Former classmates reminded me of the shame of departing from doctoral study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>My world sort of fell apart when my brother got sick</td>
<td>A family tragedy profoundly affected my life to the point that I could not focus on the doctoral program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>I had made the decision that I would not have high expectations of anyone</td>
<td>High expectations when I initially started doctoral study contributed to my frustration with the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>I felt really proud of myself</td>
<td>Successfully returning proved to me that I overcame and that I could do it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

**Narrative Descriptions and Corresponding Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Narrative Description</th>
<th>Corresponding Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Anne’s departure from and return to doctoral study had a significant personal impact on her, including feelings of failure, depression, and anxiety</td>
<td>Departing and returning are salient personal events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gem</td>
<td>The way in which faculty responded to Gem’s departure and return had a profound effect on her experience, both positive and negative</td>
<td>Faculty responses are noticed and important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>Daphne’s struggle with depression and anxiety directly resulted in her inability to persist with doctoral study.</td>
<td>Departure is informed by personal factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>An unfriendly and unsupportive counseling department made it easier for Alexis to make the decision to depart from study</td>
<td>Departure is informed by academic culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
themes, narrative descriptions, and the researcher’s reflective journals. Overall, the auditor confirmed the trustworthiness of this research study and wrote a letter to this effect (see Appendix K).

**Summary of Data Analysis**

This research utilized a phenomenological design to analyze the data. This section provided a reiteration of the research design along with verbatim examples of the data analysis. These verbatim examples were provided to assist the reader in conceptualizing the data analysis process as well as to provide the reader insight into how the major themes were reached. The next section presents the major themes of this research.

**Returning Counselor Education Doctoral Students**

The guiding research question for this study was: What are the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned to the same programs? Themes derived from the phenomenological data analysis suggest there is a common essential experience of departing from doctoral study and returning.

This common essential experience is comprised of four major themes: (a) departing and returning are salient personal events, (b) faculty responses are noticed and important, (c) departure is informed by personal factors, and (d) departure is informed by academic culture. This section of the chapter provides each of these themes and resultant subthemes. Table 4 provides a synopsis of returning counselor education doctoral students.
Table 4

*Returning Counselor Education Doctoral Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Departing and returning are salient personal events</th>
<th>Faculty responses are noticed and important</th>
<th>Departure is informed by personal factors</th>
<th>Departure is informed by academic culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative reactions to departing and returning</td>
<td>Unhelpful responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive reactions to departing and returning</td>
<td>Helpful responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact on significant others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Departing and Returning are Salient Personal Events

A universal theme encountered was that departing and returning to doctoral study were salient life events for each participant. Departing from and returning to doctoral study evoked intense reactions from participants and from significant others in the participants’ lives. Participants experienced both negative and positive reactions to departing from and returning to study, significantly impacting themselves and significant others. Table 5 provides an overview of participants’ reactions to departing from study. Table 6 provides a summary of participants’ reactions to returning to study. Three subthemes emerged within the main theme: (a) negative reactions to departing and returning, (b) positive reactions to departing and returning, and (c) the impact on significant others. This section articulates departing and returning as salient personal events by describing each subtheme.

Negative reactions to departing and returning. All participants experienced a multiplicity of intense negative reactions to departing from doctoral study. Anne’s departure from doctoral study incited numerous negative thoughts and feelings. Anne began describing her reaction to departing from study with “I think I became a little despondent, you know, maybe a little depressed.” Anne reported feelings of failure, stating “I link if I don’t finish something to failure, or not working hard enough.” In addition to feeling depressed and a failure, Anne described several other negative reactions to departing from study: “A level of anxiety I’ve never experienced in my entire life,” “I really went into myself and became isolated,” and “when I departed, I no
Table 5

*Experiences with Departing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Anne</th>
<th>Gem</th>
<th>Daphne</th>
<th>Jackie</th>
<th>Alexis</th>
<th>Diane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of failure</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resentment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferiority</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation from others</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 (continued)

*Experiences with Departing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Anne</th>
<th>Gem</th>
<th>Daphne</th>
<th>Jackie</th>
<th>Alexis</th>
<th>Diane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealousy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitterness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity crisis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminished hope</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paranoia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling grounded</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling centered</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 (continued)

*Experiences with Departing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Anne</th>
<th>Gem</th>
<th>Daphne</th>
<th>Jackie</th>
<th>Alexis</th>
<th>Diane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling blessed</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal freedom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

*Experiences with Returning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Anne</th>
<th>Gem</th>
<th>Daphne</th>
<th>Jackie</th>
<th>Alexis</th>
<th>Diane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional pain</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling overwhelmed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paranoid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowered expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased comfort with cohort and professors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 (continued)

*Experiences with Returning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Anne</th>
<th>Gem</th>
<th>Daphne</th>
<th>Jackie</th>
<th>Alexis</th>
<th>Diane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vindication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excited</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
longer had that identity to cling to. So, I would say, quote on quote, major identity crisis.”

As Anne concluded her description, she focused on experiences after her departure of being around doctoral students who had formerly been her cohort. Anne’s description revealed a complex psychological reaction of anger, jealousy, resentment, feeling inferior, and pretense:

However, I was very good at masking anger. I was always in a one down position with those who were in my cohort and who had finished, with a feeling or even a, a façade if you will, of sadness. But I think there was a little bit of jealousy and a little bit of resentment that went along with that anger piece.

Similar to Anne, Gem experienced feeling like a failure for the first time in her life, and recalled feelings of depression and anxiety. Gem’s feelings of failure emerged as she reported, “The departure felt like, like I quitted [sic], and that wasn’t something that I ever knew before.” Gem recalled feelings of depression and anxiety as she commented, “Um, there was lots of sadness, um, depression, anxiety…all that stuff.” As Gem reflected, she stated that the feelings of depression and failure led to confusion and stagnation: “Yeah, very stuck, not knowing what to do or where to go or how to, what tools I needed to get through the process.” Gem demonstrated the intensity of her psychological turmoil as she commented, “when I was in it, it was hell. You know, going through the process, it was gruesome…it was hell, you know.” In the end Gem reported that the overarching theme for her feelings and thoughts during that time were conflict and confusion:
Confusing, it was a very confusing time. Lots of questions about whether or not it was the right decision, whether or not I should return…I think that entire experience was just a time of great confusion and it was conflictual. Yeah, there was inner conflict.

Daphne departed from study amidst acute anxiety brought on by a traumatic event in her life. Daphne stated, “Yeah, when my dad died suddenly, it just threw me a huge curveball. It devastated me and my family.” Like Anne and Gem, Daphne experienced anxiety and depression, but she was not certain that departure caused those feelings, stating “Yeah, I mean, I think leaving made me feel depressed and anxious about things, but I was already feeling that way.” Daphne described departing from study as “amplifying” the feelings of anxiety and depression she was already feeling. For Daphne, the overriding feelings associated with departing were shame, failure, and insecurity:

I mean, I loved being a doctorate student. I loved telling people I was getting my doctorate, you know, it made me feel good about myself. So, here I was, just yanking myself out of the program, having to tell faculty that I wasn’t well, and some students too. When I finally made the call to my advisor, telling her I was leaving, I remember hanging up the phone after that conversation and lying on my bed and just sobbing…feeling ashamed and like I was a loser…I definitely felt worse about myself.

Daphne also reported experiencing anger and resentment after she departed from study. Daphne remained friends with students in her cohort after she departed and described the
impact spending time with them had on her, commenting “it was hard, being around them and listening to their conversations. I felt angry and resented being the outsider.”

Jackie described departing from study as “stressful in the beginning because it was in the forefront of my mind.” She recalled that prior to departing from study “more things in my life were unfolding, I fell further and further behind.” Jackie finally reached a point when she knew she would not be able to keep up with the academic demands of the doctorate and that she had to “step away for a while.” After making the decision to depart, Jackie felt disappointed and out of control:

I think it made me feel disappointed in myself, it was one of those things where, I just felt like before that I had always been in control of my life…all of a sudden I got hit with some things that, they weren’t in the plan…just disappointed that I wasn’t able to…I wasn’t able to keep up.

Jackie also recalled feelings of sadness and diminished hope, remarking “I think sadness, for me it was a loss, because I started to lose hope about completing it.”

Alexis departed from study after experiencing poor physical and mental health, combined with an “out of control” cohort and “unsupportive faculty.” Alexis remarked that “a lot of my cohort was men, and they had a party culture that they brought into the program, and I wasn’t comfortable with that.” Alexis also reported that “the faculty was just surviving…they didn’t have time for students.” She felt that departing from doctoral study “was a sad time, for that, for that span of time that I was out.” Alexis also observed that she felt a sense of failure and quitting when she departed from study, commenting “A
sense of failure and that I didn’t complete something, and that I couldn’t somehow figure out a way to manage and survive an experience.”

Like many of the other participants, Diane experienced a sense of failure and disappointment in herself after departing from doctoral study, stating “Complete disappointment in myself, for sure…and I felt like a failure, definitely a sense of complete self-failure.” Similar to Anne and Daphne, Diane went through feelings of inferiority and insecurity, observing “Um, insecurity, you know, it did make me very insecure about myself, I think, inferior.” Diane’s feelings of insecurity and inferiority were also accompanied by worry about what faculty members were thinking: “and paranoia, I’m telling you, I can’t even begin to tell you the extent to which I thought the faculty was just sitting around talking about me. It was crazy, just way too much anxiety about that.”

Participants also expressed various negative reactions to returning to study. Anne experienced disappointment and hurt when she returned to doctoral study:

I felt kind of disappointed, you know, just like, oh you know, it’s the same daily grind, you know…why did I come back? Life totally went on without me, I mean, beyond what I ever could have imagined. And, so I think there was a little bit of, it’s weird to say, but I was a little bit hurt that there wasn’t more concern. That’s how I felt.

Gem described returning to doctoral study as emotionally difficult, commenting “it just took everything, every fiber of my being to walk back on campus, to walk back to my college, to walk to my floor, to walk back to my department, to look at people again,
to have conversations.” She also conveyed this difficulty when describing an event which took place shortly after she returned: “I asked my cohort if they could stay after one of the classes so I could share with them, um, and so I had an opportunity to do that. It was painful. I cried. Yeah, it was very painful.” Additional feelings Gem reported when she returned were fear, anxiety, and overwhelming pressure, observing

I felt very nervous returning, I felt anxious, I felt fear, then I did feel fear, I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to make it…I felt pressure, I mean I took a full load in the summer and I had all these incompletes…that was a lot of pressure.

Like Gem, Daphne experienced fear and anxiety when returning to doctoral study, commenting

I had been away for a semester and a summer, and I had my first meeting with the department chair after I had emailed him I was returning. I was so on edge that morning I threw up. I was so nervous and afraid about funding, what he would say to me, you know, the questions he might ask, all of it.

Daphne also described feeling “slightly paranoid” about her return to doctoral study. Daphne remarked “I was coming back, and my exit had been marked with so much shame, and of course I was really thinking about what students and faculty members thought about me, and my ability to come back.”

Jackie and Diane, like Gem and Daphne, both experienced anxiety when returning to doctoral study. Jackie stated, “It was anxiety provoking, um, I’m not sure what the reaction was going to be.” Diane commented, “I’m a little anxious about the prospect of proposing and defending and all the hoops.”
Positive reactions to departing and returning.

Participants did experience positive reactions to departing from study, although not as many when compared with negative reactions. Gem discussed several positive reactions to departing from doctoral study. She observed that she was able to use the time to “feel simply more grounded, and, more centered…just there’s more peace in my life.” Gem also discussed departing from study from a retrospective sense, stating “it was a positive experience. I’ve gleaned a great deal of, um, blessings, really, if there’s a word I can use to describe the experience…being on the back end of it I can really see the purpose behind it.”

Like Gem, Alexis described departing from doctoral study as a beneficial decision: “I think for my physical and emotional health it was a good, a good decision, um, it, it gave me some time and space to really think through some issues…it was a good decision overall.”

Alexis also articulated a sense of relief when she made the decision to depart from study, commenting “I can remember packing up my office, there was a sense of relief that I didn’t have to mess with any of the stuff anymore.”

Diane was the only other participant to express a positive reaction to departing from doctoral study. She reported that departing from doctoral study had positive effects on her personal life, stating that it was fabulous, because once I just detached myself from the program, and gave myself permission to not care and not worry about it anymore, then, you know, I
was able to just make the decision to work full time, and I was able to get pregnant, and that was the best thing we ever could have done.

Two participants experienced positive reactions to returning to study. Alexis remarked, “So the second time around there was different professors there and there was a different cohort there.” Alexis commented “the different professors and different students were not just different, they were better, more professional, in my opinion.” Alexis observed that “the different professors and cohort made such a positive impact on my ability and ease of returning to school…it was a very happy time for me.”

Diane was the other participant who had positive reactions to returning to doctoral study. Diane reported, “You know what, for me it’s been really good.” Diane continued: I was really proud of myself, that I went back and that I successfully completed comps. It was a sense of I told you so…yeah, there was a sense of vindication…I do feel like they believe me now, when I say I’m going to finish…I’m excited.

*The impact on significant others.*

Half of the participants expressed how their departure from doctoral study impacted significant others in their lives. Anne reported that departing from doctoral study impacted her significant others “Significantly…when I told my mom her initial reaction was a little bit of disbelief and it was written all over her face, I thought she was disappointed.” Anne described her friends as “disappointed” and her husband as “supportive but concerned…it affected the quality of my relationships, mainly with my husband…there would be some arguments about just move on already…I was angry at times, I was okay with a lot of conflict in the marriage.”
Gem described departing from doctoral study as impacting significant others “greatly, a lot of people were confused, like me.” She reported how several significant others in her life “shared a lot about, you know, just how that affected them, um, you know, what that meant for them, to have had me leave.” Gem spoke of “the difficulty” significant others went through “watching me go through a breakdown like that; I was always the strong one, the one who had it all together. When they saw me go through this, it kind of shook them up.” Gem described her family and friends as “confused” and stated “there were lots of questions, lots of unanswered questions for those people in my life.”

Daphne discussed how departing from doctoral study incited “a lot of worry” from significant others. Daphne remarked, “My family and friends, etc., had these ideas about me, and me all of a sudden leaving school wasn’t one of their ideas. It really made a lot of them pretty concerned.” Daphne spoke mostly about her mother and her spouse, recalling that they both had witnessed me agonize over the decision of departing, you know, should I or shouldn’t I, and neither of them had known what to tell me to do, so when I left and really crashed, I could just tell how worried they were about me. Daphne also remembered her inner turmoil affecting her relationships with significant others: “I was just not happy, I was not well, and departing amplified everything, and I was very difficult to get along with, and I made a lot of people I really cared about miserable.”
Alexis recalled that her departure only affected her husband. She reported that her husband “was fine either way, if I stayed or left…I think, if he, if he were here talking to you, he’d probably say he felt helpless, he just didn’t know how to help.”

**Summary of Departing and Returning are Salient Personal Events**

Each participant articulated their individual story of how departing and returning affected them. The individuality of each participant’s story was also marked by commonalities with other participants. All participants expressed strong reactions to departing and returning, whether positive or negative. Participants also described the considerable impact departing and returning had on significant others. These strong participant and significant others reactions suggest that departing and returning to doctoral study are vital decisions that have personal and interpersonal implications.

**Faculty Responses are Noticed and Important**

The second major theme explains how the participants experienced faculty members responding to their departures from and returns to doctoral study. Recalling the experience of departing and returning, participants offered multiple examples of how faculty responded to their decisions, resulting in two subthemes. During each participant’s departure and return to study, one or both responses from faculty were experienced: (a) unhelpful responses, and (b) helpful responses. This section provides a summary of the responses faculty demonstrated to students who departed from study and returned.
Unhelpful responses.

Anne reported that she was struggling prior to her time of departure and that a portion of the faculty did not demonstrate the bedrock values of the counseling profession. Anne remarked that “some of the faculty, when they discovered I was struggling, really reacted in a, what should I say, a non-counselor manner.” Anne observed:

How can people expect us to model behaviors that they do not emulate themselves…at the time I was angry and I thought, get your act together, to put it bluntly, and, if you can’t model empathy, or unconditional positive regard, the other Rogerian kinds of things, then stop teaching it in your classes. Because I don’t see it coming from you in terms of modeling.

Anne reported that a lack of caring on the part of some of the faculty simplified her decision to depart. Anne remarked, “So, that really helped me to make my decision, because I was kind of angry, literally. I felt invalidated.”

Gem experienced questioning by some faculty members that she perceived as unhelpful. Gem recalled, “But some of the faculty had questions, like, I hear you’re leaving, what’s going on, what are you gonna do when you leave? And I had no answers to those questions, it just added to my confusion.” Gem pointed out those members of the faculty made some comments about her departure “behind my back.” Gem reported that she heard from “certain individuals” that some faculty had made statements such as “she better not come back” and “if she comes back we’ll make sure she doesn’t finish.” Gem described those comments as “a motivator for me, but obviously not helpful.”
Jackie experienced what she perceived as pressure from her faculty advisor when she departed from study. She commented:

she would tell me that she would like to meet with me again…which felt like pressure…because emotionally I didn’t feel like I had the energy to do it, it was like, oh man, now I’m disappointing her, and I’m disappointing myself, so it felt like pressure.

Jackie also felt “unsettled” by the faculty when returning to doctoral study:

I would be sitting in the office waiting for a meeting, they walked past me and said hi as if I had been there last week…it was just bizarre. Like I had just been there, you know, like they had just had lunch with me.

Alexis, like Anne, experienced uncaring faculty when she departed from study. Alexis reported, “this has been my impression of the faculty, of the program, all along, is, people are busy, they’re just surviving, they don’t have time or energy to give really to their students…it just felt very noncaring.” Alexis described the attitude of the faculty toward her departure as, “We’ll deal with you if we have to, but it was very minimal.”

Diane described the faculty as “grumpy” relevant to her decision to depart from study. Diane reported, “I definitely think they were incredibly disappointed with me…that I was making excuses.” Diane discussed that her faculty advisors were also unhelpful when she made the decision to return to study:

When I made the decision to return…to take my comps, and I told them, they were like, no you’re not. And I felt like before I returned they were skeptical of me being able to really do it, and that made me angry. That was really unhelpful.
Helpful responses.

Although Anne did experience unhelpful responses from faculty members, she also experienced helpful responses. When considering departure, Anne reported one professor in particular called her into their office and said, “I don’t want this to happen.” She commented, “what struck me…that day was how genuinely concerned she was about my success.” Like Anne, Gem experienced unhelpful and helpful responses from faculty members as she departed from study. As Gem described responses from faculty members that were helpful, she remarked, “Some were very supportive, I mean, majorly supportive. By saying, you know, do what you gotta do, you have to take care of yourself.” When thinking about her time of returning to study, Gem recalled the helpfulness of the program coordinator:

He kind of, he was working with me to get me back to where I was at the beginning in terms of my financial needs, and he’s been just amazing, like, navigating my course load so I can finish up and all that other stuff.

Gem also remembered that overall, the faculty members were “supportive, for the most part” when she returned to study.

Daphne was the only participant who experienced only helpful responses from faculty. Daphne observed:

The faculty, the department, was awesome, from my leaving all the way through my return. When I first started telling them I was leaving they listened and expressed caring for me, telling me that I needed to take care of myself. When I
contacted them to tell them I was coming back, they welcomed me with open arms. And I got full tuition remission and a fellowship again.

Daphne remarked how important the helpful responses from the faculty were: “if they hadn’t been so positive, leaving and coming back, I really don’t know how I would have gotten to where I am today.”

Alexis experienced a helpful response from some faculty members upon her return to study. Alexis pointed out,

when I was there before I departed, you could pass a professor in the hallway and they wouldn’t even acknowledge you. At least when I returned you could have a conversation…at least they would say hello, how are you doing?

Diane also articulated feeling helpful responses from the faculty, commenting “I think that they were proud of me, you know…I felt a sense of, it’s good to see you back in the loop.” Diane noted the dichotomous nature of the faculty responses, observing “on the one hand they were really frustrating; on the other, they expressed some things that were very helpful. It was weird.”

**Summary of Faculty Responses are Noticed and Important**

Participants expressed how faculty responded to their departing from and returning to study. Participants experienced either helpful or unhelpful responses from faculty. All participants were aware of and easily recalled how faculty responded to their decisions to depart and return. The responses of the participants demonstrate that faculty members are uniquely suited to respond to doctoral students struggling to persist.
The third major theme was the idea that departing and returning to study is informed by personal factors. This theme illuminates the context in which each participant departed from and returned to study. This third major theme describes the various personal factors the participants experienced relative to departing from doctoral study.

Anne discussed dealing with “very, very serious female problems at the time…they thought I had cervical cancer.” Anne reported that she had been experiencing health problems prior to her departure, suffered significant physical pain, and underwent an emergency hysterectomy. Anne reported that because of the emergency surgery she experienced surgical menopause, stating “so gee, can you imagine my emotions?” Anne reported that in addition to physical problems she was “still struggling with the reality that I was not a successful attorney from a successful school.” Lastly, Anne observed that although she had never identified with being a mother, “when I had the surgery that was it, not even an option anymore, so I was grieving that as well.”

Gem stated that she went through a period of confusion and inner conflict prior to departing from study, commenting

I was just inexplicably confused, and not knowing what to think and I needed to do something to help me understand…I needed to take a leave to figure out what was going on…I didn’t know what was going on.

Daphne discussed her life prior to departure as “traumatized.” Daphne iterated experiencing a personal trauma “that just made all the wheels fall off.” Daphne recalled
that “the psychological, emotional pain, whatever you want to call it, became so huge for me; there was no way to stay in school.” Daphne described her personal trauma as “overwhelming” and “it consumed me…things were so intense that school became a distant thought.”

Similar to Daphne, Jackie experienced several traumas in her personal life. Jackie reported:

my parents’ house burned down, and it was a total loss… …my niece died, and that was just a whirlwind of, you know, getting a call saying she’s not gonna make it through the night…then my sister-in-law’s brother died...my brother was diagnosed with cancer.

Jackie stated that the combination of personal tragedies brought her to a point of “just not being able to do school anymore.”

Alexis, like Anne, experienced significant health challenges prior to departing from study. Alexis articulated that “I was having physical difficulties, which was confusing at the time and didn’t get straightened out until later on.” Alexis reported she was not eating and not sleeping and “I went into what I thought was a depressive funk.” Alexis stated that her annual physical found what was wrong, “and after the physical side got straightened out everything became much easier.” Like Alexis, Diane also experienced health problems. She stated, “Right before the end of the semester…I had a really bad relapse, like physical…it was crazy messing with my mood and emotions.” Diane reported at the time, she was not aware of how much of an impact her poor physical health had on her departure, but looking back, “that was the biggest factor.”
Informed by Academic Culture

The fourth and final major theme revealed that academic culture also played a role in influencing departure from study. Many of the participants discussed their perceptions of the counseling departments they were associated with. Anne recalled that prior to her departure

There was actually a lot of departure of faculty at the time. And, I had really become close with my dissertation advisor at the time, and then she left…in her own words, for a better opportunity. And I really struggled with that.

Anne reported the counseling department also experienced the death of one of the faculty, commenting “I saw him on a Friday and he died that Saturday…that was a shock to say the least. And then from there, in terms of advisor, I was in limbo…and I didn’t like it, to be very honest.” Anne concluded by remarking that “it was a very tumultuous time for the department.”

Gem remembered, “the department was short staffed…we’ve hired since then like three or four new faculty members…and like I said earlier, I was experiencing some faculty members being cutting about my leaving.” Gem reported that not having enough professors and lack of support from some faculty members “was not great in keeping me to stay.” Alexis described her academic struggles in terms of an “out of control cohort,” a “nonresponsive faculty,” a “clueless advisor,” and an “out of control department chair.” Regarding her cohort group, Alexis observed:

It was predominantly male, and I got along with everyone, but it seemed like this group of males, they developed this group thing of a lot of wild drinking,
partying, and sometimes that was brought into the culture of our cohort…because they’d go out and drink, and then come back drunk from lunch and that would be part of the class, and, they would go straight into supervising their master’s level students, and, there was some extramarital stuff going on…it was just kind of embarrassing.

Alexis reported that when she went to the faculty with her concerns, “what I got back was, oh, it’s just your religious convictions, and I was like, no it’s not, I see there is a professional behavior standard that needs to be upheld.” Alexis encountered difficulties with her advisor as well, remarking “I didn’t have her as a professor until my advanced practicum…she didn’t show up for the first class, a three hour class, and she did that a couple times that semester.” Alexis also recalled how during their first meeting together “I just felt she wasn’t listening to me…she kept asking me to repeat things…it was like she wasn’t even able to grasp what I was saying.” Finally, Alexis explained that her department chair also contributed to her discomfort with the department:

He would be the one that would go to these conferences drinking very heavily, and some of his students would come back and say, he was just kind of embarrassing, and so, it was kind of like, okay, if your department head is an alcoholic, then, so he would have parties at his house and have all the students over and they would get all drunk and, and that just kind of carried over into the professional life and the cohort group.

Diane also experienced discomfort with her counseling department prior to departing from study:
I remember feeling very unappreciated, and, this is going to sound so petty, but I just remembered like, I was very active in the honors society, and, I just remember everybody came to me for everything, which was fine, everything from going to the grocery store to buy things for all the events, to being the one that was there early to set up…so then there was another student who won’t do anything like that, and just chooses to not be involved, I mean not involved in anything…but when the time comes for students to be recognized, that student is recognized…so that was really, really a slap in the face. I really felt disrespected.

**Summary of Personal Struggles and Academic Struggles**

All the participants experienced personal struggles prior to departure from study. The universality of personal struggles experienced by the participants suggests that departure from study may often be accompanied by personal challenges. Four of the six participants experienced academic struggles while struggling to persist with doctoral study. Academic struggles included unresponsive faculty, feeling disrespected by faculty, and unprofessional behavior of cohort and faculty. The impact these academic struggles had on participants intimates that academic culture has a bearing on persisting with study.

**Supplementary Data**

Additional data was gleaned from the analysis that was of importance. Because this data was not relevant to the research question of this study, it was not categorized as a major theme. However, the data is worth presenting as all the participants reported about it and voiced the importance of it.
Suggestions for Faculty

Anne spoke of “not seeing anything in my department programmatically” to assist students struggling to persist with doctoral study. Anne reported that many students she has spoken with, including participants in her dissertation, told her “they just wanted someone to check in with them.” Anne further explained:

Not just a didactic where we go to your class, talk about comps, that kind of thing, but a true, whether it’s an informal, ABD support group meeting, with a faculty member…but the bottom line? They wanted faculty to be involved.

Anne also reported that “I really think…it’s an issue that faculty, department chairs, need to discuss because it could be something so simple.”

Gem spoke in generalities regarding what counseling faculty may do to assist struggling students, but suggested that faculty involvement is important. She stated, “I think just being supportive…be available to your students.” Gem further reinforced the importance of faculty availability:

And I think give them a voice and be available. Our department, you know how it is, everybody is so busy doing a plethora of things, and, I remember I sought to speak with one of my professors before leaving, I just could not, I could not get him. I could not connect…to me, that was ludicrous.

Daphne observed that her faculty members “did all the right things, at least for me.” Daphne reported that if she were to give suggestions for faculty, “it would be for them to do what my faculty members did: be supportive, be understanding, and of course non-judgmental.” Daphne reported that “every faculty member I encountered during that
time was helpful and understanding…from when I first told them I was leaving to when I came back.” Jackie also suggested that faculty should be supportive, stating “it’s nice to feel like you’re being supported and people understand…so I think it’s important to respect the decision, and um, being supportive.” Jackie also spoke about the need to feel connected:

Well I think it’s, working on your dissertation is sort of an isolating experience…just being around people who understand what I am trying to do…so maybe, you know, somehow linking folks together, create a way to stay connected, I think.

Jackie concluded by saying that “faculty should encourage balance…doctoral study isn’t set up that way…there should be some sense of balance, and I think that programs should do that more and encourage students to do that.”

Alexis spoke pointedly regarding how faculty should approach students struggling to persist, encouraging that faculty members take time with their students:

I just think with students you need to treat them like human beings, be cordial to them, and say hi, how are you doing…as a professor now, I do take the time to say something to them, and if I sense things are not going well, I pick up on that and I’ll sit down and say, is there any way I can help? And maybe I can’t, but the response I’ve got back is, thank you for at least asking.

Diane discussed that counseling faculty may want to consider other ways of looking at their treatment of students:
You have to recognize that yeah, there are some students that, this is the number one priority in their life, and that’s great. But there’s another whole group of students that have other stuff that is fulfilling in their lives, and they have other responsibilities and obligations, there is a whole other group of students that has health issues, and all that other stuff has to be considered when you think about what kind of student that person is. You just can’t measure by one measuring stick. And I think that faculty thinks they are doing that, and maybe they are, but they aren’t doing it well enough…but when faculty focuses the most on those first types of students, other students become disillusioned. And I know this from both sides of the coin, because I was both of those students.

Diane reported that “I was the preferential student, yeah, and it feels good to be that student, but if you fall off the pedestal it’s a long way down.” Diane commented that counseling faculty may also want to consider “checking in” with students who are struggling or have departed. As Diane discussed this point, she admitted that her advice to counseling faculty may not be realistic: “And maybe it’s unrealistic to have those expectations, you know, maybe faculty would say, you’re a doctoral student, find your own way to motivate yourself, we’re going to focus on our new students. Call me when you want to meet.” Finally, Diane discussed the importance of keeping doctoral students engaged:

You may want to find a way to keep students engaged once they finish their coursework. I don’t know how you do that…if they can just find a way to keep you engaged, even if they make it, you have to present once a semester, or give us
a syllabus. It would keep me involved and I’d have to see them and it’s going to make me want to be doing something…if you want high completion, higher retention, you may want to consider this.

Suggestions for Students

Anne spoke at length regarding what students struggling to persist may want to consider. Anne’s recommendations for struggling doctoral students were existential in nature and involved self-questioning: “What does the experience mean to you? What’s the larger, contextual meaning of obtaining a doctorate? I would want them to ask themselves those questions.” Anne continued, commenting “What does it mean to depart? Tell me what you mean by departure. What was going through your mind, or what does it feel like to consider departing from study? I would want them to ask those questions as well.” Anne explained her rationale behind her questions:

Because for me, nobody asked me what it meant to me. And for me, it could have—I’m not saying it would have prevented my departure—but by people just saying, we accept your decision to leave—nobody asked me what it all meant to me. I don’t know what I would have said back then, but I would have been open to someone asking me those questions, because I had a whole host of emotions I didn’t want to deal with…it would have shown me that they cared about me.

Gem had different suggestions for doctoral students struggling to persist. She remarked, “I’d tell them to take a break. And to also seek the support of those around them…because it can feel like a very isolated experience.” Gem finished by stating “We have it within us to kind of navigate what our specific areas of need are…and whatever
that is for that individual person is what is necessary.” Daphne also discussed taking a break, commenting “I took my break and it wasn’t the end of the world. At the time I thought it was, but it wasn’t. There is always time.” Similar to Gem, Daphne also suggested that struggling students reach out: “I was ashamed and hurting, but I was afraid to tell the faculty. But I did, and it was the best thing I could have done. Also, my friends and family too.” Jackie imparted some brief advice for struggling students, stating “I think that they need to do what feels right to you. And you have to take care of yourself.”

Alexis reflected Jackie’s point of doing what feels right: “the decision has to be theirs and feel like the correct decision.” She also reflected Daphne’s statement concerning taking time off, saying “If you do leave, that’s not the end of the world. You always have the option to reapply back here, or go to another program.” Alexis concluded by exhorting struggling students to “take care of yourself.”

Diane spoke about being secure in life to be successful as a doctoral student: “I think my biggest advice is you have to be comfortable in your life, whatever that may be, I think you have to be comfortable in your life to be successful with doc study.” Diane also spoke about setting limits, stating

Maybe people depart from study because they find it hard to give 100% at home and 100% at work and 100% in the program, and I don’t think you have to do that. I think that you give what you can, and you do it well.

Diane ended by adding on to the concept of setting limits: “I think I would also tell students that you have to pace yourself, you can’t go gung-ho the whole time because you’re going to run out of stamina.” Diane stated, “It’s fine to be a great student and it’s
fine to have a great vita, but that comes over time and you don’t have to do it all right away.”

Summary of Supplementary Data

Participants expressed a variety of recommendations for students and faculty. Suggestions included counseling faculty should be available to students, be supportive, demonstrate understanding, and develop ways to keep students engaged. Participants recommended that students struggling to persist with study take a break, take care of self, do what feels right, set a reasonable pace and boundaries, and reach out to those around them. The amount of recommendations suggests that both faculty and students can take steps to improve.

Summary

This chapter presented the research findings from this phenomenological inquiry on counselor education doctoral students who voluntarily departed from study and successfully returned. Themes derived from the examination suggest that there is a common essential experience when departing and returning to doctoral study. This common essential experience is made up of four major themes: (a) departing and returning are salient personal events, (b) faculty responses are noticed and important, (c) departure is informed by personal factors, and (d) departure is informed by academic culture. The subsequent chapter inspects these themes relative to what is already known about doctoral students who depart from and return to study, and emphasizes the role of this research study. Limitations to this research are also presented. The researcher then offers suggestions for future dialogue on students departing from and returning to study.
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION

The results of this phenomenological study provide an in-depth picture of the experience of voluntarily departing from doctoral study and successfully returning. This in-depth picture has been absent from previous investigations of student retention and attrition. As presented in the previous chapter, a common essential experience of departing from study and returning emerged that is comprised of four themes: (a) departing and returning are salient personal events, (b) faculty responses are noticed and important, (c) departure is informed by personal factors, and (d) departure is informed by academic culture.

All participants conveyed that departing from and returning to study were significant events in their lives, and expressed a variety of reactions, both positive and negative. Participants also communicated the importance of how faculty members responded to them when departing and returning, suggesting that faculty members are uniquely positioned to respond to doctoral students departing from and returning to doctoral study. Finally, participants departed from doctoral study because of academic culture, personal factors, or a combination of both.

The purpose of this chapter is to articulate the meaning of the data. This chapter: (a) positions this study’s results alongside research literature on retention, attrition, and the student experience in graduate school, (b) investigates the contributions of the research findings, (c) considers how the research findings illuminate the profession of counselor education, (d) examines limitations of the current study, (e) examines
delimitations of the current study, and (f) offers a description of the researcher’s experience.

Results Relevant to the Research Literature on Retention, Attrition, and the Student Experience in Graduate School

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned. Because no research was encountered in the literature on doctoral students who had departed and returned, the aim of this study was to initiate an investigation of that perspective. This study did not aim to produce generalizations beyond the research sample.

In spite of this, it is essential to compare what was discovered regarding doctoral students who departed and returned with what is thought to be known about retention, attrition, and the student experience in graduate school. Positioning the research findings alongside the current research literature increases the value of a qualitative study (Merriam, 2002). Several of the major themes and subthemes that emerged in the current research are consistent with previous research literature on retention, attrition, and the student experience in graduate school.

*Departing and Returning are Salient Personal Events*

Lovitts (2001) reported that doctoral students who depart from study experience a myriad of emotional consequences such as depression, anxiety, and hopelessness. These intense reactions to departing from study were mirrored by the findings of this research study. Each participant of this research study perceived departing from and returning to
doctoral study as a significant event in their life. Participants experienced a multiplicity of reactions to departing from study, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, anger, fear, shame, bitterness, and relief. Participants also experienced a multiplicity of reactions to returning to doctoral study, including but not limited to disappointment, fear, anxiety, pride, excitement, vindication, and paranoia. The variety and intensity of participants’ reactions demonstrates that departing from and returning to doctoral study were watershed moments for all participants.

*Faculty Responses are Noticed and Important*

A large amount of literature was encountered that asserted the influence that faculty member’s behaviors and attitudes had on their doctoral students. Valero (2001), Nerad and Miller (1996), and Golde (2005) stated that a positive relationship between doctoral students and their faculty advisor(s) positively affected time to degree completion and student persistence. Rapoport (1998) reported that high PhD producing faculty tended to provide more intellectual support for their students, co-author work with their students, and refer to students as their friends and invite their students into their homes. Ivankova and Stick (2007) asserted that faculty members who were receptive, responsive, and encouraging toward their students encouraged student persistence, and Lovitts and Nelson (2000) reported that the quality of the relationship between faculty advisor and doctoral students most impacted attrition. Anderson and Swazey (1998) discussed the deleterious effects doctoral students experienced when confronted with faculty who exploited them and expected their responsibilities as students to supersede all other responsibilities. Finally, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) focused on what helps
students to persist to degree completion, and asserted that experiencing quality relationships with faculty members was a factor in a doctoral student’s decision to persist with study.

The findings of the above studies are consistent with the results of this research. All participants in this study remarked on the manner (positive and negative) in which faculty members interacted with them during their departure from and return to study. Faculty responses to departing and returning were significant for participants and either positively or negatively impacted each participant’s experience of departing from and returning to study. The criticalness of faculty responses points to the reality that faculty are uniquely positioned to affect both the experiences and the ultimate success of their students.

Departure is Informed by Personal Factors

No studies were revealed in the review of the literature that addressed the role personal factors played in doctoral student departure. This was because the literature reviewed concerning doctoral student retention and persistence discussed the affect of outside factors, such as departmental climate (Boyle & Boyce, 1995) and doctoral student relationships with faculty (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). The design of this study and open ended nature of questions presented to participants created a space for participants to articulate all factors related to their departure. All participants of this research departed from study at least partly because of personal events in their lives, including but not limited to family illness, a death in the family, and participants experiencing physical
health issues. These findings from this research demonstrate the significant impact that personal life events have on the ability of doctoral students to persist with study.

*Departure is Informed by Academic Culture*

Research in the literature examined the impact academic culture had on the persistence and experiences of doctoral students. Boyle and Boice (1995) conducted a study of the factors affecting the success of graduate students, finding that a positively perceived departmental atmosphere was a significant factor in predicting the success of graduate students. Adler and Adler (2005) reported that doctoral students struggled when encountering academic departments characterized by faculty who did not get along and who engaged in secretive politicking and backstabbing. The results of these studies are consistent with the finding of this research. Several participants experienced departments that were uncaring, unorganized, unresponsive, and short staffed, and reported that these negative qualities of their departments expedited their decisions to depart from doctoral study. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the participants’ experiences of departing from and returning to study.

*Contributions of the Research Findings*

The research findings of this study have generally matched what is known about doctoral student retention and attrition in the research literature. The following section reviews additional findings relative to the experience of departing from study. Also, this study examined doctoral students who returned to study after departing, something which was not encountered anywhere in the research literature. The following section examines...
Figure 1. Visual representation of participants’ experiences of departing and returning
this unique aspect of this research study. Finally, this section examines the dynamics of some of the participants during the interviewing process and discusses how these dynamics support the utilization of a qualitative methodology.

The Impact of Personal Factors

No research encountered in the literature reported on how a challenging personal event might impact a doctoral student’s ability to persist with study, with some participants citing personal events as the exclusive reason for departing. All participants in this research reported on the significant impact unexpected personal events had on their ability to continue with doctoral study. Personal events ranged from a death in the family to physical health challenges. While this finding was intuitive and not unexpected, it does reveal an important reality for counselor education faculty members and counseling departments to consider. Many of the participants spoke of a lack of support from counseling faculty relevant to their personal challenges, and also spoke of faculty who believed that doctoral students should only be focused on and concerned with their doctoral program. Participants who reported experiencing this from faculty members and their departments expressed the negative affect this had on their decision to persist or depart from study, and in some cases how a lack of support made their departure from study easier.

A subtheme that emerged within the major theme of personal factors was the impact on significant others. No other studies reviewed in the research literature commented on how departing from doctoral study could impact significant others. In this current research study, half of the participants articulated how their departure impacted
significant others in their lives. Participants spoke of how significant others exhibited disbelief, disappointment, support, concern, and confusion in response to their departure from study. Participants also commented on how departing from study had a toxic affect on their relationships with significant others, citing increased conflict. Finally, participants expressed that it was difficult for significant others to watch them go through departing from doctoral study because of the intense distress participants exhibited. This subtheme of the impact on significant others suggests that the experience of departing from doctoral study does not exist in a vacuum for those who depart. Students who depart not only must navigate the intense personal psychosocial consequences, but also may encounter difficulties with their significant others.

Departing as Positive

Half of the participants experienced some positive reactions to departing from study. No research literature was discovered articulating these positive reactions to departing from study, although this is probably because research literature focusing on doctoral student persistence and departure focuses on the negative consequences to students and higher education. It is worth noting these positive experiences based on both the uniqueness of them and the reasonable assumption that many doctoral students who depart from study are not only affected negatively.

Gem used the time away from study to become more centered and regain her sense of peace and stability. Gem also reflected on the existential affect on her departure from study, stating that “being on the back end of it I can really see the purpose behind it.” Alexis commented that her departure from study was a time she could use to focus on
improving her physical health and think through issues she was facing, reporting that “it was a good decision overall.” Diane was the final participant who expressed positive consequences related to departing from study. For Diane, departing resulted in the freedom to become pregnant and start a family, something Diane reported she would not have considered if still immersed in her doctoral program.

The participants who expressed positive reactions to departing from doctoral study illustrated that departing is not an exclusively negative event. It is worth mentioning that all three who experienced positive reactions also experienced significant negative reactions, particularly Gem and Diane. These findings demonstrate the complexity and variability within the subject of doctoral student departure, for both the student departing and those who may attempt to understand and assist such students.

*Academic Culture as Influential, Not Causal*

Another element of this research that emerged was the combined impact personal and academic culture had on persistence and departure. No studies encountered in the research literature provided a discussion on the combined affect personal factors and academic culture have on persistence and departure. In this research, no participant departed from study exclusively because of academic culture, but several participants expressed how academic culture influenced their decision to decide to depart from study. While this is not to say that doctoral students do not ever depart solely because of academic reasons, the participants in this research did not. Specifically, participants reported unresponsive faculty, uncaring faculty, and unorganized faculty, and how these negative characteristics either expedited their departure or made their departure
unnecessarily more difficult. This finding also provides information for counselor educators and counseling departments to consider when discussing retaining and graduating students. Positive responses by counseling faculty toward struggling students might be able to prevent their departure completely, or at least provide support for the student and not contribute to an already typically negative experience.

Departing and Successfully Returning

No studies were encountered in the research literature that discussed the phenomenon of successfully returning to doctoral study after voluntarily departing. Exploring the experience of doctoral students who departed and returned placed this research in a singular position.

Overall, participants expressed negative reactions to returning to study. These negative reactions included disappointment, hurt, fear, anxiety, and paranoia. Many of these negative reactions resulted from participants not knowing how they would be received or perceived by faculty and students upon their return, or how students and faculty perceived them once they integrated back into study. Negative reactions also stemmed from the practical concerns of participants, such as funding, being able to complete assignments, and feeling behind and feeling pressure to catch up. In general, many of the participants who reacted negatively to returning were experiencing emotions relating back to the original shame and failure they experienced when departing from study. For example, Daphne stated, “I was coming back, and my exit had been marked with so much shame, and of course I was really thinking about what students and faculty members thought about me, and my ability to come back.” Another participant, Anne,
expressed how disappointed and hurt she was that no concern was shown to her by faculty or students upon her return to study. Jackie reported feeling “unsettled” by the faculty upon her return and stated:

I would be sitting in the office waiting for a meeting, they walked past me and said hi as if I had been there last week…it was just bizarre. Like I had just been there, you know, like they had just had lunch with me.

In examining the reasons underlying the negative reactions to returning, almost all were directly associated with external factors relating to the counseling department or participants perceptions of the counseling department. Like previous findings, this suggests that counseling faculty and counseling students are uniquely positioned to influence the experiences of doctoral students returning to study. Counseling faculty and students might consider being intentional with students returning to study, including being proactive toward these students and reaching out to them in a reassuring manner.

Not all participants experienced negative reactions to returning. One participant, Alexis, expressed a positive reaction to returning to study, and one participant, Diane, reported feeling positive and negative reactions to returning. Alexis expressed that returning was a happy time for her because of a different cohort, different professors, and because she lowered her expectations of her faculty. Diane commented that for her, returning to study was marked with pride and vindication. For Diane, the feelings of pride and vindication were relevant to her professors, who, she expressed, doubted her ability to successfully return to study. Both participants’ positive experiences in returning to study were grounded in characteristics associated with the counseling department, a point
which reaffirms earlier assertions from this research and the research literature regarding the influence faculty members and departmental atmosphere may have on doctoral student persistence.

The Emergence of Supplementary Data

All participants in this research voiced strong opinions regarding what faculty and students should consider for increasing the chances of doctoral student success. While other research in the literature made recommendations concerning faculty (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Rapoport, 1998), the results of this research provide more in-depth insight for faculty and provide new information specific to students.

Suggestions for students.

None of the research literature included significant or specific information aimed at assisting students struggling to persist with study. This research created a space for participants to articulate their recommendations for students who may be in jeopardy of departing from study. Anne encouraged students who are struggling to persist to ask what departure would mean to them, so that students would be able to reflect and critically think through their decision before making it. Gem encouraged struggling students to take a break, seek the support of those around them, and do whatever is necessary to get back on track. Daphne also recommended struggling students take a break because “I took my break and it wasn’t the end of the world,” and, “if I hadn’t taken time off and done what I needed to do to take care of myself, as soon as I did, I don’t know if I could ever have finished my PhD.” Daphne also echoed Gem’s exhortation to seek the support
of those around them, and Alexis and Jackie reported that struggling students need to do what feels right to them. Finally, Diane urged struggling doctoral students and doctoral students in general to set limits, pace themselves, and do what they can and do it well.

It is intuitively reasonable to state that many doctoral students will face both personal and academic challenges in doctoral study. This research and the research literature (Adler & Adler, 2005; Conti, 2001; Herzman, 2003) confirms this intuition. The recommendations for struggling doctoral students from the participants of this research suggest that doctoral study and departing from doctoral study can be powerful experiences. Individuals considering doctoral study may be well served to learn about the dynamics of doctoral study, including academic expectations, workloads, and the department within which they will be studying.

_Suggestions for faculty._

Anne discussed “not seeing anything in my department programmatically” to assist students struggling to persist with study, and observed those doctoral students just wanted faculty members to check in with them. Gem pointed out that faculty need to be available to their students, and Jackie believed that faculty should encourage their students to be balanced between personal life and school. Similar to Gem and Anne, Alexis encouraged faculty members to check in and be available to students, stating “take the time to say something to them…say, is there any way I can help?” Diane echoed the need for faculty to check in and also asserted that faculty treat all their students equally, whether that student has made the doctoral program their life or is only attending doctoral study part time. Diane also spoke of keeping doctoral students engaged once they finish
their coursework, with examples such as being required to give a presentation once a semester, or having a post-coursework syllabus requiring them to stay formally involved with doctoral study. Finally, Jackie spoke of the isolating nature of dissertation work and posited that faculty could create a way for students to stay connected with each other and the program after comprehensive exams were completed.

Anne, Jackie, Alexis, Diane, and Gem all discussed ways faculty might improve addressing struggling doctoral students. In all their comments, these participants expressed a desire for faculty to be responsive, proactive, fair, and supportive to students, and demonstrate concern for the success of their doctoral students. Participants stated that faculty could achieve this in small ways (asking if they can help) and larger ways (keeping students engaged post-coursework). It is reasonable to extrapolate from these participant statements that counseling faculty could positively affect doctoral student success by gestures as simple as taking the time to speak with students about their academic progress and any difficulties their students might be having. This is congruent with other results from this research, including how impacted participants were by the ways in which faculty responded to their departures from and returns to study, and is further confirmation that faculty members possess significant influence on the experiences and successes of their students.

Daphne reported a completely positive experience concerning her interactions with her faculty. Within her experience were revelations of how faculty might want to consider responding to struggling doctoral students. Daphne articulated a counseling faculty who were supportive, understanding, and non-judgmental, consistent from her
Daphne also reported that her counseling faculty members were helpful to her when she returned to study and respected her decision to depart. Daphne stated, “If my faculty wouldn’t have been consistently and absolutely wonderful, I don’t know how I would have been able to come back, especially in light of the fact that I was still struggling when I returned.”

Daphne’s experience with her counseling faculty members confirms the recommendations made by other participants and recommendations from the research literature regarding how faculty might respond to struggling students. In essence, counseling faculty should demonstrate the values of the counseling profession they lead and represent: warmth, empathy, being supportive, and demonstrating a non-judgmental attitude.

Another variable that emerged from this research was the explicit and implicit expectations that doctoral students brought with them when they began doctoral study. Some were explicit, as expressed by one participant in this research who stated that upon returning to doctoral study she had shed all expectations of faculty and was just going to “get my degree and get out of there.” Other participants implicitly revealed their expectations through expressions of disappointment and anger toward faculty. Faculty need to consider that most students enter doctoral study with expectations of what the experience will be like, and when or if those expectations are not met doctoral students may quickly become disenchanted with their program. One action counseling faculty could take would be to meet with their doctoral student advisees and have an open and honest discussion about what expectations the student has of doctoral study. Faculty
members could then address the student’s expectations as appropriate or unrealistic, which would potentially lessen the negative reaction a doctoral student may have when encountering difficulty. Another benefit of such a meeting would be for the faculty to discuss their roles as advisors and clarify what that would look like to the doctoral student. This kind of discussion with the student would also address the expectations the doctoral student had for their faculty advisors and clarify to the student what to expect.

**Appropriateness of a Qualitative Methodology**

Half of the participants expressed nervousness about discussing their departure from and return to study. Gem reported, “But maybe I’m a little nervous too about these bad things I’m saying about my program and professors.” Jackie commented “I am nervous about this. I haven’t really talked about the whole thing with anyone, and even though I know it will be confidential, what I say won’t be all positive.” Diane remarked feeling “cautious and kind of nervous because I’m being pretty negative about my professors and the counseling department.” These participants all felt more relaxed as the first interviews proceeded and even more so during the second interviews. As Gem, Jackie, and Diane relaxed, their answers reflected their relaxation through increased honesty and transparency about their experience of departing and returning. This suggests that the choice of a qualitative methodology utilizing multiple interviews was ideal for achieving the purpose of this study, as a different mode of study may have resulted in stunted answers and/or incomplete information regarding the experiences of doctoral students who departed and returned.
The nervous and cautious attitude expressed by participants of this research also corresponds with information gathered from the research literature. Lovitts and Nelson (2000) reported that doctoral students in their study recognized the potential, perceived or real, of negative consequences for criticizing their program. Doctoral students in Lovitts and Nelson’s study remarked that faculty conceptualized a successful doctoral student as someone who was cheerful and compliant, and those students were more likely to receive monetary assistance, superior teaching assignments, and excellent letters of recommendation. This research confirmed that doctoral students do fear negative consequences for speaking poorly of their counseling departments and counseling faculty, even when assured confidentiality. Doctoral students who feel this way almost certainly would feel inhibited in taking their concerns and/or criticisms to faculty members, regardless of how important the student may feel the concern is. This continues to confirm earlier statements in this research and the research literature of the powerful influence faculty members have on their doctoral student’s experiences and eventual success.

How this Research Impacts the Profession of Counselor Education

The research findings have pedagogical implications for the profession of counselor education. This section briefly provides pedagogical recommendations for counselor educators; specifically, how counselor educators should address students struggling to persist with study. Recommendations within this section are theories at this point, and continued research on doctoral student persistence and attrition is imperative.
This section also includes recommendations for future research concerning doctoral student retention, persistence and attrition.

**Pedagogical Recommendations**

Most recommendations from this research focused on behaviors and attitudes of counseling faculty toward their students. These recommendations focused on counseling faculty being more responsive, caring, empathetic, and proactive toward their students, particularly students that are struggling. These participant recommendations were similar to recommendations in the research literature. Two sample recommendations from the literature came from Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) and Nyquist et al. (1999). Hoskins and Goldberg encouraged counselor education faculty to engage in relationship building with doctoral students in order to increase student persistence, and Nyquist et al. encouraged faculty to be available to their students and model the values they teach. The results of this research confirm these assertions, and the recommendations from the literature and the results of this research are natural extensions of the essential identity of counseling, counselors, and counselor educators (Hansen, 2003) and makes intuitive sense in light of the present difficulties within doctoral study (Adler & Adler, 2005; Conti, 2001; Herzman, 2003). The profession of counseling was founded on humanistic principles emphasizing subjectivity, potential for actualization, and the healing powers of the counseling relationship (Hansen). Furthermore, counseling is primarily concerned with positive human change (Van Hesteren & Ivey, 1990) and recognizes growth potential in humans based on client strengths. Indeed, the counseling profession and those
within it must embrace these humanistic values in order to distinguish themselves from other helping professions (Hansen).

This research has illuminated the reality that some students struggling to persist with study do experience these values and some do not. For example, Daphne reported experiencing these values from her faculty and expressed the profound positive impact it had on her departure from and return to study, stating “If my faculty wouldn’t have been consistently and absolutely wonderful, I don’t know how I would have been able to come back, especially in light of the fact that I was still struggling when I returned.” Conversely, Anne reported that her faculty acted in a “non-counselor manner” and observed:

How can people expect us to model behaviors that they do not emulate themselves…at the time I was angry and I thought, get your act together, to put it bluntly, and, if you can’t model empathy, or unconditional positive regard, the other Rogerian kinds of things, then stop teaching it in your classes. Because I don’t see it coming from you in terms of modeling.

Counselor education faculty members are leaders of the profession and are required to model the values of the profession. It is the belief of this researcher that the unique professional identity and values of counseling, and therefore by extension counselor educators, must be considered when examining doctoral student retention within counselor education. The humanistic values which form the bedrock of the counseling profession should be evident when examining the departmental climate in counselor education programs and the relationships and interactions between counselor education
faculty and doctoral students. Counselor education doctoral students who are struggling with persisting with study should directly experience these values on both the departmental level and the level of individual faculty. Counselor educators, therefore, bear particular responsibility for demonstrating these values when engaging with doctoral students as teachers, advisors, and mentors, and the results of this research and the research literature identifying the importance of departmental climate and student-faculty relationships and interactions further buttresses this point.

Counseling faculty, and in particular counseling faculty at Research I schools, with greater expectations for scholarly publishing, are admittedly busy and sometimes overwhelmed by the demands of being a scholar-teacher. This sometimes overwhelming busyness undoubtedly negatively impacts the ways in which counseling faculty interact with their students, and it is the belief of this researcher that in most cases, counseling faculty do not intentionally set out to negatively impact a student’s experiences and degree completion. Because of this likely unintentional feature underlying counseling faculty negatively impacting students, it is imperative for counseling faculty to exhibit awareness and intentionality with students, to ensure that students are experiencing the bedrock values of the counseling profession.

Another pedagogical recommendation is for counselor educators to include discussions with their doctoral students in the counselor education curricula. These discussions could focus on the challenges of doctoral study and the reality of doctoral student attrition. It is the opinion of this researcher that these discussions could occur at the beginning of the doctoral program during the doctoral residency seminar class.
Placing these discussions at the beginning of the doctoral program would proactively identify the challenges of doctoral study and give students informed consent about the challenge they are undertaking. Discussions with doctoral students could include elements from the literature such as statistics regarding doctoral student retention and attrition and the possible psychosocial consequences of departing from doctoral study. Having these discussions in the doctoral residency seminar class would also provide an opportunity for speakers to come in and share personal experiences. Speakers could include current or former students who have departed and returned, students who permanently departed, or students who struggled and almost departed from doctoral study. These speakers could provide powerful and real life experiences about the challenges of doctoral study and incite valuable discussion.

Finally, counselor educators and counselor education departments may want to consider beginning a dialogue on instituting a mechanism or mechanisms designed to keep students engaged with each other and the faculty, during coursework and especially after comprehensive exams and coursework are completed. Lovitts and Nelson (2000) noted in their research that the lowest rates of doctoral student attrition were in the sciences where students worked in laboratory groups and participated in group research, and the highest rates of attrition were found in the humanities where learning and research were mainly individualized and secluded. Participants in this research also spoke of the importance of being engaged with others. Anne suggested a support group for doctoral students; Jackie described dissertation work as “an isolating experience” and suggested “somehow linking folks together, create a way to stay connected, I think.”
Diane explicitly stated “find a way to keep students engaged once they finish their coursework…if you want high completion, higher retention, you may want to consider this.” The research literature and this research point to the probable positive influence such a mechanism or mechanisms would have on doctoral student persistence and success. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of an emergent model of addressing doctoral students struggling to persist.

Future Research

Doctoral student retention, persistence, and attrition are complex and nuanced topics to investigate. Because of this, many different aspects of these complex topics could be studied from many different angles. The experience of counselor education doctoral students who voluntarily departed and successfully returned was the focus of this research study. Useful and important information was revealed from this research, but much more research is required to further develop an understanding of why doctoral students depart from study and what can be done to increase doctoral student persistence.

One participant in this research had only positive interactions with her counseling faculty, both during her departure and her return. Through her positive experiences, valuable information was gathered regarding what her faculty did right and how that impacted her experience and success. This information could be described for faculty as “what to do,” as other participants who encountered unhelpful faculty revealed “what not to do.” This participant’s positive experiences along with previous research (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009) informed Figure 2, and future
Figure 2. Visual representation of proactive and corrective models for struggling students
research isolating students who struggled to persist and had exclusively positive experiences with their counseling department and faculty members could add more valuable information to the “what to do” category.

Another different angle to approach this topic would be from the perspective of counselor educators and department chairs. It is reasonable to assume that faculty members and department chairs discuss matters such as retention and graduating their students, and therefore would have a multiplicity of opinions and ideas concerning these issues. Studying retention, persistence, and attrition from the perspectives of counseling faculty and department chairs could have the potential to begin a dialogue in counseling departments and in the literature aimed at addressing and improving doctoral student experiences, retention, and success.

A final line of inquiry for future research could focus on the expectations doctoral students bring to doctoral study and how those expectations affect their experiences and ability to persist. One participant in this research articulated that her doctoral program was not as she expected, and explicitly stated that upon returning to doctoral study she had shed all expectations of faculty and was just going to “get my degree and get out of there.” It would be reasonable to consider that had that participant initially entered into doctoral study with low or no expectations, she may have never departed in the first place. Therefore, it would perhaps be fruitful to explore doctoral student expectations prior to entering study, as professors, counseling departments, and students all might benefit from this information.
Limitations

This research had several limitations. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of counselor education doctoral students who voluntarily departed from study and successfully returned. No males were included in this research, as none responded to the CESNET-L email soliciting participants. Consequently, a male perspective is unknown relative to departing from and returning to study. Also, participants were articulating events that occurred in their past, particularly their original departure from study. The passage of time may have had the effect of detracting from their ability to provide a thick and rich description.

Another limitation to this study were the cautious attitudes and nervous feelings expressed by half of the participants. These participants were reticent to express negative descriptions of their faculty and counseling departments, despite the assurance of confidentiality. Participants also expressed worry about being perceived by this researcher as a “whiner” or “being trivial or petty.” Although all of these participants eventually relaxed and became more forthright, it is likely that some or all of these participants failed to provide complete transparency regarding their faculty members and counseling departments. Because of this, essential information may have been omitted from their responses that would have been valuable for the purpose of this study.

Researcher’s Experience

The experience of the researcher is very important to qualitative research, and it is essential to note the researcher’s individual reactions to the topic of departing from and returning to study. I first became interested in this topic after my own experience of
departing from study after the first semester of my first year of doctoral study, and returning after being gone for one semester. For myself, departing from doctoral study was one of the most difficult experiences I had encountered up to that point in my life, and being away and returning were also extremely difficult. Through my own experience I quickly determined how critical of a role my faculty played in my experiences of departing and returning, and eventually my success.

My interest was also informed by informal conversations I had with other students who had struggled with study, departed from study and returned, or departed from study permanently (none of these students participated in this research). Through conversations with those students, conversations with participants in this research, and the research literature, my experience and intuition has been confirmed about the difficulty of departing and returning, and also the singular role counseling faculty and counseling departments play in the process.

I was also encouraged to hear the stories from participants in this research, and struck by their forbearance in the face of hostile, unresponsive, unsupportive, and uncaring faculty. Those participants who encountered those challenges still successfully returned to study, and it is a testament to their perseverance and commitment. For my part, my experiences with my faculty were overwhelmingly positive, from my initial decision to depart through my decision to return. I often questioned if my counseling faculty had been hostile or unsupportive, would I have been able to complete my PhD? I am thankful I have no answer to that question.
Summary

This final chapter investigated the research findings relevant to the research literature, discussed contributions of this research study, and recommendations for future research on doctoral student retention, persistence, and attrition. Based on data analysis, the researcher revealed for major themes articulated by the participants of this study: (s) departing and returning are salient personal events, (b) faculty responses are noticed and important, (c) departure is informed by personal factors, and (d) departure is informed by academic culture.

These themes across participants do not exclude the fact that each participant had unique experiences of departing from and returning to doctoral study. The experience of departing from and returning to study is intense and personal for each individual who experiences it, and this uniqueness adds to the rich descriptions provided by the participants of this study. The results of this research offer much needed insight into the experience of departing from and returning to doctoral study. It is the desire of this researcher that this research will incite dialogue and further research on this topic.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
November 10, 2008

David Burkholder
CHDS

Re: #08-716: "Returning Counselor Education Doctoral Students: Issues of Retention and Perceived Experiences"

Dear Mr. Burkholder:

I am pleased to inform you that the Kent State University Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved your Application for Approval to Use Human Research Participants as Level II research through the expedited review process. This was approved on November 10, 2008. Approval is effective for a twelve-month period, November 10, 2008 through November 9, 2009.

Federal regulations and Kent State University IRB policy require that research be reviewed at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but not less than once per year. The IRB has determined that this protocol requires an annual review and progress report. The IRB will forward an annual review reminder notice to you by email as a courtesy. Please note that it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to be aware of the study expiration date and submit the required materials. Please submit review materials (annual review form and copy of current consent form) one month prior to the expiration date.

HHS regulations and Kent State University Institutional Review Board guidelines require that any changes in research methodology, protocol design, or principal investigator have the prior approval of the IRB before implementation and continuation of the protocol. The IRB must also be informed of any adverse events associated with the study. The IRB further requests a final report at the conclusion of the study.

Kent State University has a Federal Wide Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP); FWA Number 0001853.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 330-672-2704 or tfreder2@kent.edu.

Sincerely,

Tonya Frederick, R.N., B.S.N.
Research Compliance Administrator

Cc: Dr. Jason McGlothlin
    Dr. Martin Jencius

Division of Research and Graduate Studies
Office of Research Safety and Compliance
APPENDIX B

CESNET-L EMAIL
Greetings,

I am writing to ask for assistance in recruiting individuals willing to participate in my dissertation study regarding retention and attrition issues among counselor education doctoral students.

Participants in the study must be/have been counselor education doctoral students who voluntarily departed from their program of study and then successfully returned to that same program. Participants must have departed from study a maximum of four years prior to this research and participants must have returned to study at the same program a minimum of one year prior to this research. Participants must be willing to engage in two interviews, one 90 minutes in length and one 60 minutes in length. Individuals who complete both interviews will receive a $50.00 Visa gift card.

If you are willing to forward a message to students and/or practitioners or would like more information regarding the study, please contact me directly at dburkhol@kent.edu or (740) 398-0872.

I appreciate your time, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

David Burkholder
Doctoral Candidate
APPENDIX C

COVER LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS
Cover Letter to Participants

Dear (Participant Name):

My name is David Burkholder and I am a doctoral student at Kent State University. I am currently working on my dissertation in Counselor Education and Supervision and am recruiting volunteers for a research study on the experience of voluntarily departing from doctoral study and then successfully returning. I am investigating this topic as I am professionally and personally interested in how doctoral students who have chosen to depart from study experience their departure. I am also interested in the experiences of doctoral students as they reenroll in doctoral study. I hope that you may be interested in participating in this study.

This packet includes a Screening Form for you to complete and mail back to me if you decide to take part in this research project. This form is designed to ensure that you meet the criteria for the research study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please return the completed Screening Form in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. After I receive your information and ensure that you meet the criteria for this research study, I will contact you to schedule the first interview. The interview will be held at a day/time most convenient for you. The location of interview will be determined. I am looking to have between three and ten participants for this study; thus, even if you meet the criteria for the study, you may not be scheduled for a first interview depending on how many responses I receive.

This packet also includes a list of topic areas for questions to be asked during the first interview. This form provides you with the opportunity to know the topics that will be discussed during the first interview. Please note that all interviews may include other questions or topic areas depending on your responses. You will sign the Consent Forms for the research study and for audio-taping at the beginning of the first interview.

At the end of the first interview we will schedule for the second interview. This interview is to discuss what I learned from our prior conversation and for you to provide new or additional information on the experience of departing from doctoral study and then successfully returning. You will receive the $50 Visa gift card at the end of the second interview.

If you have any questions about the study or these forms, please do not hesitate to contact me at (740) 398-0872 or dburkhol@kent.edu. You may also contact my dissertation advisors, Drs. Jason McGlothlin or Martin Jencius at (330) 672-2662. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Kent State University. If you have any questions about the rules for research at Kent State University, you may contact Dr. John L. West, Vice President and Dean, Division of Research and Graduate Studies at (330) 672-2704.

Sincerely,

David Burkholder

Doctoral Candidate
Screening Form

Instructions: This form is designed to gather information to determine whether you will meet the criteria for the proposed research study. Please answer all questions with a checkmark or by filling in the blank. All answers will remain confidential. Please do not write your name on this form. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns about this form. Thank you.

Participant number: ______

Screening Questions:

1. How did you hear about this study?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

2. Are you/were you a counselor education doctoral student who voluntarily departed from study and then successfully returned?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

3. Was your point of departure a maximum of four years prior to participation in this research?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

4. Was your point of return to doctoral study a minimum of one year prior to participation in this research and a maximum of three years prior to this research?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

5. Did your return to doctoral study occur at the same institution from which you departed?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
6. Were you continuously enrolled in doctoral study for a minimum of one semester/quarter prior to the point of your initial departure?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
____________

7. Would you be able to participate in 2 audio-taped interviews, one lasting approximately 90 minutes and one lasting approximately 60 minutes?

Yes______ No______

Please list the days/ times most convenient for you to meet for the first interview:
Monday______________________________________________________________
Tuesday _____________________________________________________________
Wednesday ___________________________________________________________
Thursday ______________________________________________________________
Friday _________________________________________________________________
Saturday _____________________________________________________________
Sunday _______________________________________________________________
APPENDIX E

TOPIC LIST FOR FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Topic List for First Interview Questions

1. What led you to become a doctoral student in counselor education and supervision?

2. Describe the overall experience of departing from and returning to doctoral study.

3. How did the experience of departing and returning impact you?

4. How did the experience affect significant others in your life?

5. What was occurring in the context of the college/university prior to your departure from study?

6. What was occurring in the context of your personal life prior to your departure from study?

7. How would you describe the faculty in your program relevant to your decision to depart from study?
Consent Form

I want to do research on the experiences of counselor education doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from study and then successfully returned. I want to do this because I am personally and professionally interested in counselor education doctoral students who have gone through these experiences. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews, one lasting approximately 90 minutes and one lasting approximately 60 minutes. These interviews will be audio taped and will be scheduled at a time most convenient for you.

All audiotapes will be destroyed at the end of the research project and only limited demographic information and a chosen name will be included in the final project. All information will be kept in a secure location and will only be accessed by this researcher. The findings of this research will be published in a doctoral dissertation in Counselor Education and Supervision, submitted to a scholarly journal, and for a proposal at a state, regional, or national presentation.

If you take part in this project you will have the opportunity to reflect on your experience of departing from doctoral study and then successfully returning. Examples of questions include: “How did the experience of departing from doctoral study impact you?” “How did the experience affect significant others in your life?” and “What was occurring in the context of your personal life prior to your departure from study?” Taking part in this project is entirely up to you, and no one will hold it against you if you decide not to do it. If you do take part, you may stop at anytime.

If you want to know more about this research project, please call me at (740) 398-0872 or my dissertation advisors, Drs. Martin Jencius and Jason McGlothlin at 330.672.2662. The project has been approved by Kent State University. If you have questions about Kent State University’s rules for research, please call Dr. John L. West, Vice President and Dean, Division of Research and Graduate Studies (Tel. 330.672.2704). You will get a copy of this consent form.

Sincerely,

David Burkholder, Doctoral Candidate

CONSENT STATEMENT(S)

I agree to take part in this project. I know what I will have to do and that I can stop at any time.

__________________________________________
Signature

__________________________________________
Date
APPENDIX G
AUDIOTAPE CONSENT FORM
Audiotape Consent Form

I agree to audio taping at______________________________
on___________________________________________________.

______________________________________________________  Date
Signature                                            Date

I have been told that I have the right to hear the audio tapes before they are used.

I have decided that I:

_____want to hear the tapes   _____do not want to hear the tapes

Sign now below if you do not want to hear the tapes. If you want to hear the tapes, you
will be asked to sign after hearing them.

David Burkholder may/ may not use the tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies
may be used for:

_____this research project

______________________________________________________  Date
Signature                                            Date

Address:
APPENDIX H

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions: This questionnaire is designed to gather important information about you. Please list your answers. All answers will remain confidential. Please do not write your name on this form. Your answers may be explored further during the first interview. Thank you.

Participant number: _____

1. Gender: ______________________________________________________

2. Age: _________________________________________________________________

3. Education: __________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. Current Occupation: __________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5. Marital status: __________________________________________________________

6. Racial/Ethnic Identity: ________________________________________________

7. Religious Affiliation: _________________________________________________
APPENDIX I
MENTAL HEALTH AGENCY INFORMATION
Mental Health Agency Information

Summit County, Ohio
Portage Path Behavioral Health
340 S. Broadway St., Akron, OH 44308
(330) 253-3100 or (800) 828-4508

Portage County, Ohio
Coleman Professional Services
3920 Lover’s Lane, Ravenna, OH 44226
(330) 673-1347 or (877) 796-3555
APPENDIX J
FOLLOW UP EMAIL
Dear Participant:

The following are resultant themes and subthemes that emerged from my data analysis. This is an opportunity for you to review the themes and give any feedback.

Theme 1: Departing and returning are salient personal events
Subtheme 1: Negative reactions to departing and returning
Subtheme 2: Positive reactions to departing and returning
Subtheme 3: The impact on significant others

Theme 2: Faculty responses are noticed and important
Subtheme 1: Unhelpful responses
Subtheme 2: Helpful responses

Theme 3: Departure is informed by personal factors

Theme 4: Departure is informed by academic culture

Hope this email finds you well.

David.
APPENDIX K
AUDIT LETTER
To: The Dissertation Committee of Mr. David Burkholder  
Mr. David Burkholder  
From: Dr. Chris Janson  
Re: Audit of Dissertation  

I have performed the role of external auditor of the dissertation procedures for David Burkholder's dissertation entitled *Returning Counselor Education Doctoral Students: Issues of Retention and Perceived Experiences*.  

My qualifications as external auditor include my Ph.D. in Counselor Education. As part of my Ph.D. program, I received advanced training in qualitative research approaches and methodology. I am now an Assistant Professor in the School Counseling Program at the University of North Florida. I currently serve on dissertation committees at the University of North Florida, one of which I co-chair. Additionally, I have used and am currently using phenomenological approaches with some of my own research. Those qualitative research projects use subject interviews and thematic analysis. I also serve as a reviewer for *Urban Education*, with a focus on qualitative and mixed research methodologies.  

As external auditor, I am not affiliated with the dissertation committee. My role was to assess the trustworthiness and confirmability of both the research process and end product. As such, I was responsible for reviewing the literature used to support the research question, the choice of methodology, research design, the researcher's assumptions, the sampling procedures and selection of participants, data collection and analysis processes, and the methods employed to assure trustworthiness and credibility.  

The audit process involved Mr. Burkholder sending me on April 7, 2009 documents, via email, he had prepared as part of his research for my review. These documents included his literature review, the development of his research question, his rationale for the methodology, his assumptions about the research topic, the selection of participants, data gathering processes, data analysis procedures, methods of establishing trustworthiness and credibility, and parts of his results section. Mr. Burkholder also provided me with documents and data sources used to support his assertions. These included a digital copy of a sample interview, copies of all interview transcripts, formulated meanings and emergent themes from the interviews, notes from member checks, and his reflective journals. The materials Mr. Burkholder provided were extensive and thorough. In my view, he has enacted meticulous and systematic methods to ensure my assessment of his research process and subsequent product for their trustworthiness and confirmability.
Given the phenomenological nature of his study, my research audit should encompass a series of questions for me to address (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miller, 1997). These questions relate to concerns regarding methodology, clarity of data, emergent themes and concepts, alternate inferences or unused data, the imposition of the researcher in the process, evidence for triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. I found Mr. Burkholder’s choice of a phenomenological approach for this qualitative study to be appropriate for his inquiry into his question exploring the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and then successfully returned to the same program (Moustakas, 1994). He appropriately applied this methodology through multiple participant interviews and member checks. His materials demonstrated with clarity how the data were organized from interview tapes, to transcripts, to significant statements, to formulated meanings, to analysis of underlying themes. Mr. Burkholder selected and accurately labeled quotes from the interviews that clearly elucidated themes. Without difficulty, I was able to recognize how the identified themes were derived from content in the interview transcripts. He organized participants’ significant statements and extracted formulated meanings through the construction of tables in order to construct larger concepts and themes from the data. In my assessment, there were no examples of the exclusion of data related to the research question. All unused data related instead to the contextual information regarding the interviews and expressions related to relationship building during the interviews. Furthermore, I saw no indications of possible alternative inferences nor did I see indications of “negative,” or inconsistent, evidence. I found Mr. Burkholder to be clear of imposing his own language into the analysis through the use of multiple participants, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling.

I found Mr. Burkholder’s dissertation research to be skillfully and effectively constructed methodologically. Confirmability is ensured through the robust trail of data that supports his appropriate analysis of that data from which conclusions were drawn. In total, I was impressed with his sound research procedures and insightful conclusions.

Sincerely,

Chris Janson
Assistant Professor
SOAR School Counseling Program
Department of Leadership, Counseling, and Instructional Technology
University of North Florida
(904) 620-1520
c.janson@unf.edu
References


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Committee Report # 1072. (1963). Should the congress enact the proposed programs of facilities and scholarship aid to higher education? *Congressional Digest, 42*(2), 44-46.


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