THE EXPERIENCE OF COMPLETION:
FEMALE COUNSELOR EDUCATION GRADUATES’ PROCESS
OF DEGREE ATTAINMENT

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

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August 2013
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This research was a constructivist grounded theory study exploring what experiences facilitated doctoral degree completion for female CES degree recipients. Researchers have discovered that women doctoral students are at greater risk for not completing their doctoral degrees. Additionally, there is a dearth of information related to how CES women doctoral graduates persist to degree completion. Therefore, the research question that guided the current study was: What doctoral education experiences facilitated degree completion for CES women doctoral degree recipients?

The researcher utilized purposeful sampling and sought a diverse sample of volunteer participants. Six female participants, one of whom was a woman of color, were selected for the study. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed consistent with the process of grounded theory. The theory, themes, categories, and subcategories emerged from the data.

Data revealed the overall theory to be: The Process of Completion as an Inter-Connected System of Experiences with Self and Others. The two main themes included in the theory were: (a) Relationships as Sources of Support and Catalysts for Growth and (b) Navigating Obstacles. The categories that comprise the theme Relationships as Sources of Support and Catalysts for Growth were: (a) Personal Growth
and Development Occurs through Relationships with Others and (b) Professional Growth and Development Occurs through Relationships with Others. The categories that comprise the theme Navigating Obstacles were: (a) Navigating Systemic Obstacles and (b) Navigating Individual Obstacles. The results of this research were discussed in relation to existing literature and implications for the CES field were identified.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My process of doctoral degree completion, the very process under investigation in this study, could not have taken place without acknowledging the individuals who I have met along my journey. These relationships fostered the spirit of inquiry, growth, and perseverance within me. As a result, there are several people to thank.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the participants for taking the time and energy to discuss their doctoral education. Unbeknownst to them, their stories of success provided me with the necessary support that helped carry me to completion. I thank them for being courageous, dedicated, and smart female role models.

I am forever grateful to my patient, kind, and detail oriented co-advisors, Dr. Jane A. Cox and Dr. Lynne Guillot Miller. Their dedication to my study helped me be a more thoughtful and intentional writer. Their guidance encouraged me to remain true to my research. I also want to thank Dr. Tracy Lara for reading my dissertation and providing feedback that assured sound research practices. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Brandy Kelly for serving as my peer reviewer and for helping me consider multiple perspectives.

My early lessons in perseverance were taught by my mother, who, as an immigrant to a new country, instilled in me the value of hard work, of sacrifice, and the belief that anything is possible if we try hard enough. Thank you for being my number one cheerleader and for believing in me. I also thank my husband, whose patience and kindness knows no limits. Without him and his support, I would not be here today.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Doctoral education retention and attrition are important areas of exploration within higher education. Attrition has been high at all stages of doctoral study (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992) with rates of 40%-60% across all fields (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nettles & Millett, 2006). For several decades, researchers have examined the reasons why so many doctoral student hopefuls fail to persist to graduation (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde, 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Women and minority doctoral students, in particular, are at greater risk for not completing their doctoral degrees (Council of Graduate School, 2008). Findings reveal that reasons for attrition and retention are complicated and unique to the individual student. Existing literature offers several causes for attrition and retention in various disciplines (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nettles & Millett, 2006); however this area of inquiry requires further discussion in the field of counselor education and supervision (CES).

Understanding the negative effects of attrition is vital to the future of our society. Not only does failure to obtain a doctoral degree leave the student personally disappointed, it represents a noteworthy loss to society in untapped human potential (Golde, 2005). As society becomes increasingly more complex, the skills and talents of doctoral degree recipients become exceedingly more valuable (DiPierro, 2007). Those with doctoral degrees help advance fields such as the sciences, education, government, and public health sector, amongst others. Consequently, the withdrawal of doctoral
students from various programs of study results in an exacerbated shortage of educated professionals and scientists (Abedi & Benkin, 1987). In addition, the lack of representation of gender and race, especially within certain fields such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), exemplify the need to investigate doctoral education retention (DiPierro, 2007).

Several interrelated academic, personal, and organizational factors affect degree completion across disciplines. The quality of the departmental culture and the quality of interactions with peers and faculty all affect degree completion (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001). Personal characteristics such as motivation, persistence, and active integration within the doctoral program lead to successful retention and completion for all doctoral students, regardless of gender (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Lovitts, 2001). Women doctoral students have expressed markedly different experiences from men throughout their doctoral education (Hall & Sandler, 1984; Margolis & Romero, 1998) warranting an exploration of gender differences affecting student integration and socialization. Involvement with female mentors and identification of female role models are strong indictors of doctoral completion specific to female students (Ellis, 2001).

The CES field, in particular, requires attention in the attrition area. There is a dearth of information related to how CES women doctoral graduates persist to degree completion, including personal and program factors encouraging completion. The doctoral student experience in the counselor education literature has been addressed to some degree (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2006).
2009), but none of these studies specifically described women counselor education graduates’ experiences of their doctoral degree and what experiences facilitated completion. This study examines several facets of doctoral attrition and retention relevant to women doctoral graduates from CES programs, focusing primarily on those experiences that facilitated doctoral degree completion. Exploring the experiences that contribute to women doctoral students’ persistence to graduation can assist future doctoral students and CES programs to prepare proactively for success.

The following sections describe the purpose of this study and the literature on factors influencing attrition and retention. The literature provides an overview of how financial assistance, faculty and peer relationships, departmental characteristics, and the relationship between integration and persistence affect retention. The reader also will find a section on attrition initiatives that universities and the federal government are using in response to the attrition dilemma within higher education. Finally, an overview of existing counselor education doctoral degree literature is provided.

**Purpose of Study**

Understanding experiences that further, and conversely, hinder, doctoral completion in all disciplines is important for several reasons. First, doctoral education attrition is not well understood, partially because “research on graduate attrition has not been guided either by a comprehensive model or theory of graduate persistence or by the methodological strategies that have been successfully employed in the study of undergraduate persistence” (Tinto, as cited in Bair & Haworth, 2004, p. 231). Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1993) focused on undergraduates, who, for the most part,
represent a relatively homogenous, traditional group of students: most are 18 to 22 years old, single, residential, and full time students. Doctoral students, on the other hand, are a much more diverse group. Their ages may range anywhere from 20 to 60, they often have children, are partnered, and may take care of elderly parents. This lack of homogeneity amongst doctoral students makes theory building complicated and makes it nearly impossible to offer generalizations (Gardner, 2009).

Research has demonstrated the personal cost to doctoral students and their respective departments when they fail to complete their degree. Lovitts (2001) described doctoral students as personally devastated, depressed, and sometimes suicidal, when leaving a doctoral program. Lovitts’ conclusion that, “the most important reason to be concerned about graduate student attrition is that it can ruin individuals’ lives” (p. 6) articulates the significance of this dilemma. Society, faculty, and the department of the departing student also feel this loss. Society loses the most highly trained individuals who help promote and further our knowledge of various phenomena. Faculty members suffer when they expend considerable time and energy in working with doctoral students, and the academic department incurs financial loss through the dissemination of fellowships and assistantships given to students who do not complete their degree (Lovitts, 2001).

Literature reveals that the nature and quality of student-faculty relationships influences student integration, commitment to the program, and, ultimately, retention (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). As a result, low retention rates in departments can signify serious concerns about departments or universities (Golde,
2005). A lack of student integration into academic departments can leave one to question how departments promote activities that enhance the student-faculty relationship. Universities or departments must acknowledge their role in attrition and explore efforts that can prepare students for success, such as encouraging positive faculty-student relationships.

Across varying disciplines, women doctoral students are at greater risk for not completing their doctoral degree than men, with attrition rates for women being higher. According to the national study, “Completion and Attrition: Analysis of Baseline Demographic Data from the Ph.D. Completion Project,” which analyzed over 19,000 doctoral students from 24 universities, 55% of women versus 58% of men finished their doctorates after 10 years (Schmidt, 2008). Gender differences were noted in late completion (after year seven), where 25% of women who completed their degree within 10 years did so after year seven, compared to 18% of men (Council of Graduate School, 2008). Extensive time spent in school correlates with high attrition rates and limits contributions that women can offer their profession (Bair & Haworth, 2004). In one study of education doctorate recipients of whom women comprised 64.5% of the graduates, the median time to degree from baccalaureate to a doctoral degree was 19.4 years for women (Hoffer et al., 2001). Although somewhat dated, another study found that men took an average of 1.2 years less to complete their doctoral degree than women (Abedi & Benkin, 1987).

A review of the existing counselor education research reveals various aspects of the CES doctoral experience. These include: how CES students can advocate for
themselves (Newgent & Fender-Scarr, 1999; Protivnak & Foss, 2009), the vocational aspirations and self-efficacy related to doctoral work (Poidevant & Loesch, 1991), the significance and development of the CES doctoral degree (West, Bubenzer, Brooks, & Hackney, 1995), and the facilitation of mentorship for women doctoral CES students (Bruce, 1995; Casto, Caldwell & Salazer, 2005). Two studies (Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009) qualitatively explored the various experiences of CES doctoral students, but did not link their findings with retention. One qualitative study focused on CES doctoral students and degree completion (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005), but is not specific to women. The literature on what experiences contribute to women CES doctoral students’ persistence to graduation is absent.

Gaps in the CES literature provide the rationale for this study. Protivnak and Foss (2009) encouraged future researchers to engage in more in-depth qualitative studies exploring the experiences of CES doctoral students and urged future researchers to study those doctoral students who have successfully completed their degree. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) encouraged future researchers to explore the voices of more diverse samples of CES doctoral students (e.g., students of color, international students). To answer these calls to further research and to address the gaps in the literature, this study explored the experiences of women CES doctoral degree recipients during their doctoral education.

**Research Question**

The guiding research question for this study was: What doctoral education experiences facilitated degree completion for CES women doctoral degree recipients?
**Barriers and Facilitators Identified in the Literature**

The literature reveals several constraining and facilitative factors affecting the attrition and retention of doctoral students (Bair & Haworth, 2004, Lovitts, 2001). Reasons for attrition are multifaceted and unique to the student. The decision to withdraw from a doctoral program entails a dynamic interplay between individuals’ perceptions and experiences of their doctoral program and personal circumstances. Understanding what influences attrition and retention can support students and academic programs when faced with frustrations during the doctoral process. Several of the more prevalent issues found to affect attrition include financial support and aid; faculty and advising relationships; departmental characteristics; peer relationships; and the relationship between integration and persistence (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

**Financial Support and Aid**

The Council of Graduate School’s PhD Completion Project reported that 80% of doctoral students cited “financial support” as a main factor aiding completion (Jaschik, 2007). In Nettles and Millett’s (2006) comprehensive study of over 14,000 doctoral students from 21 institutions, financial assistance was one of the predicting factors of doctoral education attrition. Financial assistance included having a fellowship, teaching assistantship, or research assistantship. The accrual of educational debt as a doctoral student was also a predicting factor of attrition. The type of financial assistance provided and the respective academic department of the student resulted in varying degrees of retention. Other researchers found that those with financial aid support (e.g., teaching...
assistantships or graduate assistantships) were more likely to finish their doctoral degree (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Additionally, the type of financial support offered also affected the doctoral student experience (e.g., students who held departmental assistantships or fellowships were more likely to complete their degrees than students who relied on other types of funding, such as loans; Bair & Haworth, 2004). A study looking at completers versus non-completers revealed that students given full fellowships (financial support that did not require teaching, research, or other forms of labor) were less likely to be integrated into the department, had less contact with their peers and faculty, and may have felt isolated and alone, resulting in program withdrawal (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Lovitts and Nelson (2000) suggested that isolated individuals drop out of their program because they may not have the opportunity to develop their professional identity and sense of belonging. In contrast, another study revealed that doctoral students in the Science, Engineering and Math (SEM) fields who relied on self-help aid (loans, federal work study) persisted less towards degree completion than those students with various forms of gift aid (grants, tuition waivers, and scholarships; Fenske, Porter, & DuBrock, 2000).

Family or financial concerns and employment-related time constraints were major hindrances to completion (Germeroth, 1990; Kluever, 1997). Bowen and Rudenstine’s (1992) analysis revealed that doctoral students who relied on personal financial resources had higher attrition rates and took a longer time to degree attainment than those who received some form of aid. This supported Abedi and Benkin’s findings (1987) that doctoral students’ sources of financial support were the most important predictor of total
time to doctoral degree acquisition. These authors discovered that doctoral students who supported themselves and their family through off-campus employment took longest towards degree completion, possibly affecting their retention status. These findings are contrary to Ivankova and Stick’s (2006) findings that employment does not greatly affect student persistence in an educational leadership doctoral program.

Administrators of early retention initiatives, keenly aware that finances affected doctoral students’ completion rates, offered grants and aid to individual students in need, however, grant recipients did not have higher rates of completion or shorter times to degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). A different approach, led by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s Graduate Education Initiative (GEI) project, offered financial assistance to 54 departments in the Humanities and Social Sciences to help students with dissertation fellowships, tuition remission, or summer support (Ehrenberg, Jakubson, Groen, So, & Price, 2007). These funds, allocated to students on an incentive basis, encouraged students’ timely completion of their doctorates. For example, the student earned financial assistance when passing certain milestones (e.g., comprehensive exams). In addition, the academic program implemented changes related to advising, curriculum, and examinations. For example, faculty received stipends to teach summer dissertation workshops that improved timely completion of the degree. Survey data over a 15-year period compared the 41 academic departments receiving funding with the 44 academic departments that did not receive funding. Students who were part of the departments receiving funding cited clearer expectations of programs, improved advising, and
increased encouragement to finish dissertations quickly as main contributing factors for timely degree completion (Ehrenberg et al., 2007).

Financial concerns also affect women’s ability to persist to degree completion (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Moyer, Salovey, & Casey-Cannon, 1999). The women in Moyer et al.’s (1999) study voiced their difficulty in balancing their personal financial needs while maintaining their scholarship and academic requirements. As a result, these women worked several part time jobs to help support their family while completing doctoral studies. For the single women with children, financial concerns negatively affected their doctoral experiences. Seagram, Gould, and Pyke (1998) noted that women received more financial support from their families than males did, although these findings did not affect time to degree completion.

Maher et al.’s (2004) study on degree progress of women doctoral students revealed that financial concerns plagued women who were considered both “early finishers” (p. 390; completed doctoral degree in less than 4.25 years) and “late finishers” (p. 390; took 6.75 years or more to complete doctoral degree). In this particular study, the majority of early finishing women were on leave from a career, resulting in added stress to complete in a timely manner. Late finishing women experienced a lack of assistantships, outside employment unrelated to their degree progress, and erratic funding from the college that was detrimental to their degree progress.

Wall’s (2008) qualitative exploration of women doctoral students’ experiences revealed that participants viewed their gender as an influencing factor in determining the amount and type of financial assistance offered toward their doctoral education. Results
revealed that some women who had previously worked in higher management capacities now held menial administrative jobs in exchange for financial assistance during their doctoral education. Respondents believed that such decisions about job tasks were gender-based. These experiences altered their perception and experience of the doctoral program, sometimes in negative ways.

Within the counselor education literature, researchers acknowledge the difficulties inherent in financing a doctoral education and balancing lifestyle expenses (Boes, Ullery, Millner, & Cobia, 1999). They encouraged doctoral students to seek out assistantship opportunities, as well as to continue clinical work while pursuing the doctorate. As evidenced by the research, the financial state of doctoral students can be either a motivating or constraining factor in degree completion.

**Graduate Faculty and Advising Relationships**

In the PhD Completion Study, 63% of doctoral graduates ranked advising and mentoring as a main factor in promoting degree completion (Jaschik, 2007). Faculty advisors assist students in understanding future roles and responsibilities as researchers and teachers, guide them through coursework and dissertations, and often assist with job placements (Lovitts, 2001). In Bair and Haworth’s (2004) meta-synthesis of the attrition literature, one of the single most important predictors of student retention and persistence across all studies related to the relationship quality between doctoral students and their advisor(s) or faculty. Positive advisor-student relationships can affect the doctoral experience, leading to shorter time to degree and lower attrition rates (Bair & Haworth,
Inadequate advising, lack of attention and energy on the advisor’s part, and inaccessibility of the advisor and faculty to students help explain student departure (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Golde’s (1998) exploration of factors influencing first-year doctoral attrition revealed advisor mismatch, whereas students and advisors had dissimilar working styles and students had difficulty communicating with their advisors, as a main factor for student drop out. Nerad and Miller (1996), in their study on departed doctoral students, revealed an atmosphere that conveys a lack of caring and guidance towards the doctoral student. Because of this, students may feel that they are wasting the faculty’s time and resources, and in conjunction with other variables such as financial problems, may decide to withdraw from the program (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

Mentoring relationships, and social and academic interactions between faculty, advisors, and students were found to be significant predictors of doctoral degree completion in a study of 14,000 doctoral students from 21 institutions (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Similarly, faculty advisor relationships with students were the most important reason for students to continue or withdraw from their programs of study because concerned faculty members could help support students who may be experiencing self-doubt and, as a result, floundering (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). During the later stages of graduate school, healthy faculty-student relationships were the greatest predictor of completion (Tinto, 1993), and explicit dissertation and programming guidelines provided by advisors or faculty members improved doctoral graduation rates (Ehrenberg et al.,
Close proximity to university resources, such as the library, and contact with advisors also facilitated dissertation completion (Kluever, 1997). Completers, compared to non-completers, were twice as likely to be very satisfied with their advisor’s contributions to their intellectual and professional development (Lovitts, 2001).

Faculty characteristics such as a caring attitude, patience, and concern about the student’s development, in addition to having a quality relationship with the student, led to successful degree completion (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Other desirable advisor characteristics reported by doctoral students included: assistance with career development, a personal approach to academic advising, and interest and support beyond purely academic concerns (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). For example, supportive faculty initiated interactions focused on collaborating with students, integrating them into the professional community, and assisting with the job search process (Lovitts, 2001). Behaviors such as these led to doctoral student satisfaction with their advising relationships (Zhao et al., 2007), possibly contributing to retention.

Mentorship and helpful advisor qualities share overlapping characteristics. Those qualities found most helpful in faculty also describe ideal mentors, such as recognizing students’ potential and believing in them (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008). Though the methods of mentoring are diverse, the goal is the same: increased effectiveness regarding student retention, developmental gains, competence, satisfaction, job acquisition, and subsequent career advancement (Bruce, 1995). Nettles and Millett (2006) found that in the engineering, education, and social science doctoral fields, both degree acquisition and faster time to degree correlated with having a mentor. In Nyquist and Woodford’s (2000)
Re-Envisioning the PhD project, surveyed doctoral students felt mentoring needed to begin earlier in doctoral programs; be more systematic; involve a multiple mentor model; and include teaching, curriculum concerns, and career planning. Providing written guidelines for mentors was also recommended (Nyquist & Wulff, 2000).

Mentoring that encourages doctoral students to engage in research and other scholarly endeavors may be effective in increasing retention. Advisor mentoring improves doctoral students’ self-efficacy for research-related tasks, resulting in students’ increased feelings of motivation and productivity (Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006). The literature demonstrates that doctoral students who have a more comprehensive understanding of research, and are involved in the academic community, report a better educational experience (Ellis, 2001; Lyons & Scroggins, 1990). Doctoral students deepen their scholarly identities as faculty engage students in research endeavors and other collaborative activities, such as presentations or co-teaching opportunities (Gardner, 2009). In addition, faculty members who are actively involved in scholarship, are accessible to students, and encourage students to engage in scholarship themselves may help promote student integration into the doctoral program (Weidman & Stein, 1993).

More creative academic mentorship programs exist with the goal of improving the doctoral student experience, and ultimately, retention. Mentoring doctoral students who engage in teaching experiences with faculty members at both home and partnering institutions is a key concept of the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program (Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, Sims, & Denecke, 2003). This program links doctoral programs with smaller liberal arts, community, and historically Black colleges and universities. The
collaboration between doctoral students, faculty members, and the respective institutions creates opportunities to understand teaching expectations and faculty life at other institutions (Gaff et al., 2003). Doctoral students benefit from mentorship in the areas of teaching pedagogy and applying teaching techniques to diverse settings and student populations. Faculty mentors observe the doctoral students teach, provide structured feedback, and offer consultation as needed (Nyquist & Wulff, 2000). The relationship-building between students and faculty, while experiencing integration, assists doctoral students in feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance, ultimately aiding in their desire to persist throughout their studies (Golde, 2005).

Research reveals that differences exist between male and women doctoral students and their relationship with faculty (Nettles & Millett, 2006; Seagram et al., 1998; Zhao et al., 2007). In one study, female doctoral students from 11 disciplines and 27 universities reported less satisfaction with their academic advisor when compared to male doctoral students (Zhao et al., 2007). In another study, females reported less favorable faculty interactions in the education field than males did (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Seagram et al.’s (1998) analysis of time to completion and gender differences among doctoral students in the Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Humanities, revealed that men had better supervisory relationships with faculty and were more likely to collaborate on research with their advisors than were women. In addition, more male doctoral students than women doctoral students were satisfied with their advisors, had greater levels of satisfaction with the overall quality of advising, and experienced less conflict with their faculty advisors. Men, more so than women, were less likely to report slow
feedback from advisors, experience internal conflict among advisor committee members, or believe that their gender affected their degree progress. Despite these apparent obstacles, the women in a study by Seagram et al. (1998) did not take longer than men to complete their doctorate, leading to the conclusion that women doctoral students may use other, internal characteristics to facilitate degree completion when faced with an unsupportive academic environment.

In a study specific to women, 160 doctoral graduates identified factors that facilitated or constrained time to degree completion (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004). These factors helped distinguish between “early” (completed their doctorate in less than 4.25 years) and “late” (took 6.75 years or more to finish) finishers. Having a helpful advisory committee was identified as a facilitating factor in degree completion for women doctoral students. Factors mentioned as constraining degree progress “a lot” or “some” for late finishers included having a poor working relationship with their advisor. Naturally, early finishing women experienced more positive working relationships with faculty than late finishing women did. In addition, identifying and working with available resources and supports was a critical factor for enhancing degree progress by early finishing women. For example, early finishing women sought out helpful advisors and asked for support more than late finishing women (93% versus 56%; Maher et al., 2004). Helpful advisors were described as “advocates” and “removers of roadblocks to degree completion” (Maher et al., 2004, p. 397).

A lack of role modeling and mentorship for women contributes to less favorable conditions for women pursuing a doctorate than for men (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992).
Ellis (2001), in her qualitative study exploring the impact of race and gender on doctoral program satisfaction and degree completion, found that all doctoral students studied (both Black and White) thought faculty mentoring was critical for successful academic and social integration and program satisfaction. Improved women mentorship can occur by having more women faculty mentors and more guidance from senior faculty on how to be an effective mentor (Moyer et al., 1999). In exploring women doctoral students’ successes, Ferreira (2006) had women doctoral students provide model advisor descriptors. These included: being personable, providing quality feedback, having empathic qualities, and displaying good managerial skills.

Some researchers took a unique approach to understanding doctoral student attrition by including the viewpoints of faculty (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). For example, Lovitts (2001) surveyed and interviewed not only departed non-graduating students, but also graduate advisors and faculty members, and found several different and contradictory reasons behind doctoral students’ premature departures from their programs of study. The majority of graduate advisors (two thirds of the respondents) reported that the students themselves were responsible for their attrition (such as being academically unprepared or unmotivated for doctoral work), whereas the other third focused on situational factors (such as financial pressures or relocation stressors). All of these reasons place the responsibility for departure on the student. These findings are similar to the more recent work by Gardner (2009), who explored faculty advisors’ perspectives on how doctoral students demonstrate success, revealing that faculty focused on the students’ levels of motivation, drive, intelligence, and focus.
D’Andrea (2002) interviewed 215 faculty members from 42 colleges of education and had responses similar to Gardner (2009) and Lovitts (2001). Faculty believed that students do not finish the doctoral degree because of poor writing, thinking, and planning as it relates to the dissertation. Faculty also identified several personal characteristics as hindrances to completing the doctoral degree, including perfectionism, dependency on advisor(s), and unrealistic thinking about dissertation requirements. In addition, the faculty in D’Andrea’s (2002) study believed that life situations, such as financial and relationship stressors, may contribute to student attrition. In their study of doctoral attrition and retention, Nerad and Miller’s (1996) faculty participants suggested that alleviation of attrition concerns could be addressed through better admissions procedures, where student fit could be more thoroughly assessed.

**Departmental Characteristics**

Bair and Haworth’s (2004) meta-synthesis on doctoral student persistence and attrition revealed that the program of study and departmental culture influenced persistence and attrition. Similarly, doctoral students in Lovitts’ (2001) study cited department characteristics, such as overly competitive academic environments; perceived discrimination based on sex, gender, or religion; and a sense of isolation as barriers to completion.

Specific departmental characteristics influence student attrition and retention. For example, the size of the academic program may affect integration and persistence. Findings revealed that programs with larger cohorts had lower completion rates and longer times to degree than programs with smaller cohorts (Bair & Haworth, 2004). In
addition, a lack of graduate program flexibility has been a detriment to finishing (e.g., the availability of courses can affect students’ progress towards degree).

One departmental characteristic that influences integration includes the departmental climate, defined as “the general environment and atmosphere present in the department” (Nerad & Miller, 1996, p. 71). Academic climates can be warm or chilly, friendly or inhospitable, depending on the interactions of those who make up the environment. Lovitts (2001) found a strong correlation between departmental climate and attrition rates. For example, students’ perceptions of unfriendly classroom or departmental climates resulted in less student involvement. This is important because doctoral students who interact informally with faculty, engage in departmental activities, are knowledgeable about program expectations, demonstrate a clear relationship between program roles and personal goals related to future employment settings, and are satisfied with their doctoral studies are more likely to persist to degree completion (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Lovitts, 2001). In one study, women, more so than men, voiced their perceptions of the unfriendly departmental climate they experienced and stressed the desire to receive more feedback and encouragement from faculty (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

Student satisfaction with their program of choice begins with the admissions process. Nyquist and Wulff’s (2000) recommendations during the admissions process include providing doctoral students with explicit expectations regarding the admission process, conducting methods of assessment, and offering focus groups and discussions related to program match and expectations. The student gains knowledge from structured activities organized by the academic department. The implementation of a
comprehensive graduate orientation, which explains the departmental requirements, helps socialize students to the academic culture and alleviates students’ anxieties related to expectations (Gardner, 2009). Such practical information provides students with the necessary information needed to make an informed decision about their doctoral program.

Specific to women doctoral students, Maher et al. (2004) provided several suggestions to assist with the admissions process. One solution included educating women students on the realities of graduate school by providing in-depth orientations on the nature of the doctoral program. The organization of formal peer mentoring programs where senior doctoral students share their knowledge of the program can help support newer doctoral students.

A helpful admissions process leading into the first year in a doctoral program can partially help doctoral students learn the expectations of the profession by making a realistic appraisal of whether they can competently carry out the duties of the profession (Weidman et al., 2001). Doctoral students learn new vocabulary, roles, agendas, and procedures during this first year. Information is one-directional with students as seekers of knowledge (Weidman et al., 2001). Doctoral students gain awareness of why they chose this profession over others and learn to identify more fully with their chosen profession and understand how others view them as future professionals (Weidman et al.). Doctoral students become “aware of the behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive expectations held for a role incumbent” (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 12).
While progressing through the doctoral program, a lack of program structure and uncertainty of how students fit within this structure may lead to frustration and a sense of isolation, causing some to withdraw (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006). Likewise, too much structure can hamper the creativity of students, creating anxiety and a distaste for departmental practices (Lovitts, 2001). In both cases, students may become frustrated with the process and decide it is not something in which they want to invest their time and energy.

Other students may attribute their sense of inadequacy to themselves, rather than the situation. In a study conducted by Lovitts (2001), departed students cited several personal reasons for their departure, including feeling inadequate and unsupported by their academic department. According to Lovitts, academic departments might influence doctoral students to utilize self over system blame in explaining their departure. These feelings of inadequacy stem from having a dependent relationship with faculty and not having clear expectations of or guidelines for doctoral work. Gardner (2009) found similar results, with students identifying personal problems (health concerns, burnout, and stress) as the main attrition attribution and departmental issues ranking second (poor advising or lack of financial support from the department).

Factors hindering progress towards degree at this early stage include: students having unclear expectations about the program; taking too many courses; hearing conflicting requirements, expectations and guidelines within the program; and experiencing unstable funding and sporadic supervision (Ehrenberg et al., 2007; Gardner, 2009). Researchers have identified several departmental characteristics that can improve
student integration and persistence. Lipschutz (1993) recommended doctoral programs increase their flexibility by identifying alternative course availability and delivery formats; by helping students explore acceptable research topics and paradigms; and by providing adequate access to faculty and campus facilities, such as computer labs. Lovitts (2001) emphasized the need for doctoral programs and advisors to identify those students who may not be as well integrated as others, offer them opportunities to become more integrated by redistributing teaching and other work/academic opportunities, and engage them more fully in the academic culture.

Departmental characteristics that impede personal, academic, and social development affect women students in negative ways (Hall & Sandler, 1984). Researchers have noted that inequities exist amongst those who do not fit the academic profile, typically one of a White male (Ward & Bensimon, 2002). Ward and Bensimon stated, “Historically, higher education has been and continues to be a male dominated enterprise. As a result, academic culture and the socialization that accompanies it reflect the experiences of men” (p. 432). Since White males continue to hold the majority of administrative and full professorship positions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), decisions made will reflect a belief system not necessarily shared by all within the program (i.e., those who are not White males). Women doctoral students who, because of their gender or race, did not “fit the mold” (Gardner, 2008, p. 130) of their academic department experienced negative interactions with others, resulting in feelings of “differentness” (p. 130) and a decreased willingness to integrate within the department.
As a result, women experience potentially less doctoral program satisfaction as they navigate a traditionally gendered organization (Wall, 2008).

The classroom environment was an important factor for the women doctoral students in Ellis’ study (2001). In particular, Black and White women had more concerns about the classroom environment than Black or White men. Women had less positive classroom experiences than men did and felt uncomfortable voicing their opinions or disagreeing with faculty members. Women students, more so than men, complained about the lack of attention paid to group work, racial differences, and cultural differences within the classroom. In addition, women doctoral students experienced “the absence of a sense of community” (p. 38) within their program, citing a sense of isolation from others.

This sense of social isolation refers to an individual’s lack of meaningful relationships with others (Hortulanus, Machielse, & Meeuwesen, 2006) and is a contributor to attrition (Golde, 1998). Social isolation has been characterized as a byproduct of doctoral education when students enter doctoral programs and, uncertain of their roles and responsibilities within it, feel confused, apprehensive, and isolated (Ali & Kohun, 2007). Feeling uncomfortable within this new environment, doctoral students experience role ambiguity and uncertainty of purpose. The competitive nature of a doctoral program leaves many to silence their concerns and questions, resulting in more confusion and ultimately, isolation (Lovitts, 2001).

A sense of isolation characterizes the “candidacy” stage (after completing all requirements except for dissertation; Gardner, 2009). Because they are no longer
attending classes and have limited peer interactions, doctoral student isolation increases during dissertation phase when traveling the lonely road of independent scholarly work. The role of the dissertation committee and major advisors begin to shift during this final stage as the student becomes less dependent on them and more of an independent scholar (Gardner, 2009). Dissertation support groups and intensive workshops can help provide some structure to the doctoral student during this ambiguous time (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

Ali and Kohun’s (2007) framework for reducing social isolation results in several remedies based upon the stage of the student (preadmission to enrollment, the first year of the program, second year through candidacy, and dissertation stage) and involves the academic department. Departmental activities include orientations; formal social and introduction events; cohort approaches; icebreakers; collaborative models; topic presentation with feedback; and structured advisor selections during dissertation phase (Ali & Kohun, 2007). If not fully integrated into the academic community, little opportunity for collaboration occurs and isolation ensues. Making a more concerted effort to engage isolated doctoral students can improve the doctoral education experience, increasing retention (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are a valuable aspect of the doctoral experience, substantiated by Bair and Haworth’s (2004) meta-synthesis of 118 qualitative and quantitative studies on doctoral student persistence and attrition. Their findings revealed that degree completers were more likely to interact with their academic peers than were non-completers.
Similarly, Nettles and Millett (2006) found that students who completed their doctoral degree had more interactions with their peers and more satisfying relationships with them than those who did not complete. Peers assist each other with writing assignments, comprehensive examination preparation, and other academic requirements (Lovitts, 2001). Informally, they provide a sounding board for one another and may share information on faculty, course work, and resources for teaching. Peers often provide friendship and, in some cases, mentoring.

Mentorship can occur among fellow students and does not need to reside solely within the faculty-student relationship. Peers can engage in meaningful mentorship opportunities with one another. Co-mentoring, which is based on feminist principles that emphasize, “the importance of cooperative, egalitarian relationships for learning and development” (McGuire & Reger, 2003, pp. 54-55), can be used in conjunction with faculty mentoring. Such a model helps students mentor each other without solely relying on their advisors or other faculty who may have other obligations. This allows for each person in the relationship to be both teacher and learner, underscoring the non-hierarchical relationship (McGuire & Reger, 2003). More advanced students can eventually become peer mentors to newer students, increasing social integration for both parties (Gardner, 2009). This relationship, in addition to strong faculty relationships, may help students feel more connected to their program of study.

Gender differences amongst peer interactions exist. Women experienced higher peer interactions than men in all programs of study except education (Nettles & Millett, 2006). In a study specific to women doctoral students, help and support from other
women doctoral students was a statistically significant facilitating factor in degree completion (Maher et al., 2004).

When peer interactions are supportive and cooperative, students gain a sense of community with their peers and feel more connected to their department, program, and educational goals. In a study by Dorn, Papalewis, and Brown (1995) involving education doctoral students, the researchers discovered, overwhelmingly, that social interaction, peer mentoring, and group cohesiveness positively influenced persistence towards degree completion. Doctoral students committed to the “team” (p. 308) found motivation in other students to complete their degree. The authors recommended that doctoral programs encourage social interaction, establish strong cohort models, foster collegiality, and promote collaboration. Informal social interactions (e.g., brown bag lunches, athletic, or recreational events) amongst peers build social integration (Lovitts, 2001). Having a graduate student office space to share is a significant way to increase peer involvement. Supportive feelings towards each other help doctoral students develop a sense of connection and purpose, resulting in increased integration, persistence, and eventual degree attainment.

**Persistence**

Persistence, as defined within the doctoral education realm, is “the continuance of a student’s progress toward the completion of a doctoral degree” (Bair & Haworth, 2004, p. 8). A review of the literature on graduate student attrition and retention acknowledges that persistence contributes to degree completion. The persistence literature demonstrates how positive faculty interactions (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Ellis, 2001), departmental
culture (Bair & Haworth, 2004), peer relations, mentoring (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Dorn et al., 1995), and student participation in various departmental and professional activities influence degree persistence (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Kowalik, 1989). As a result, persistence is a subjective term and may evolve based upon changes in the student’s goals, values, and experiences. Characteristics of persistence are not variables that stand in isolation, but are influenced by the student’s environment. The dynamic interplay between student characteristics, departmental characteristics, and integration may partially explain how and why persistence occurs. As previously demonstrated, faculty and peer relationships, financial assistance, and departmental characteristics affect retention. The following section describes several personal characteristics of doctoral students that affect retention.

Personal and psychological variables contribute to persistence. Bair and Haworth’s (2004) meta-synthesis of 118 research studies on doctoral attrition found that the four personal qualities of self-concept, goal directedness, student motivation, and well-being are the main factors found in the literature contributing to persistence in doctoral programs. Students who were highly and internally motivated; had positive self images; and did not experience significant health or personal crises were more likely to finish their doctoral degree (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Specific to women, Maher et al.’s (2004) study of “late” (took 6.75 years or more to finish) finishing women doctoral students revealed that self-confidence issues related to obtaining the doctoral degree constrained their degree progress “a lot.”
Gardner, Hayes, and Neider (2007) qualitatively identified what doctoral students and faculty believed to be the necessary dispositions and skills that people pursuing doctoral degrees in education should possess. Several themes emerged describing the habits and skills these individuals should have, including (a) the quest for knowledge; (b) scholarly independence, including autonomy, self-motivation, and self-direction; and lastly, (c) humility, which included openness to feedback, receptivity to new ideas, and an ethical approach to research.

Persistence assists doctoral students throughout the doctoral educational experience, including dissertation. Not completing the dissertation leaves a student ABD (all but dissertation; doctoral candidates who completed all other degree requirements except the dissertation). Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) discovered that approximately 15-25% of doctoral students who began their dissertation never finished. During dissertation, education doctoral students, both ABD students and graduates, cited persistence as a significant help during their dissertation process in helping them advance in their work (Kluever, 1997). In other dissertation-related research, comparisons on the personality characteristics of procrastination and perfectionism of ABD students and doctoral degree graduates found that ABD students struggled more with procrastination than graduates, leading to the conclusion that procrastination impedes dissertation completion. There were no differences found between the two groups on perfectionism (Green, 1997).

Several themes emerged in Maher et al.’s (2004) study of doctoral women that helps explain early versus late degree completion and relates to persistence. One of these
themes, a “commitment to timely degree completion” (p. 395) was shared by 100% of early finishers versus 36% of late finishers. Participant responses suggested that early finishers saw themselves as “goal oriented” (p. 395) and “disciplined” (p. 395), with clear goals for their research agenda and plans to accomplish it. Employment related factors, such as a job offer pending degree completion, motivated other women in the study to complete more quickly. Financial reasons, such as the need to finish school and resume working, motivated a majority of the early finishing women. In addition, 25% of late finishing women were more comfortable in the student role and faced less urgency in completing their studies. They also agreed more often to the statement that “making a habit” (p. 397) of being a doctoral student constrained their degree progress a lot or some (25% of late finishers versus 4% of early finishers).

Clearly, students enter their doctoral programs with a variety of background characteristics, including family background, socioeconomic status, race, gender, prior schooling, and different professional goals for their degree and their education. These, in combination with their adaptive capacities, socialization experiences, integration, and understanding of graduate school, combine to determine their levels of persistence (Lovitts, 2001).

**Retention Initiatives**

Those institutions that fail to invest their time and resources into understanding how their doctoral programs influence student attrition may lose those students to other institutions that do invest time and resources into accountability measures (DiPierro, 2007). Several federal education entities, recognizing the attrition crisis, developed
programming initiatives that seek to understand how doctoral programs can be more effective in preparing and retaining doctoral students (Council of Graduate School, 2008; Nyquist & Wulff, 2000; The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2005).

The PhD Completion Project provided financial assistance to universities in an effort to promote nation-wide discussion on attrition (Council of Graduate School, 2008). These universities provided data on the causes of, and possible solutions to, attrition through campus-wide studies. For example, grant funding was allocated to the University of Missouri for the implementation of a campus-wide study that helped increase awareness of doctoral completion rates across campus, examine key factors that influence attrition, and produce a more comprehensive exploration of doctoral completion and attrition (Council of Graduate School, 2008).

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (2005), in conjunction with over 20 graduate education programs, created “The Responsive PhD” initiative, an attempt at establishing dialogue about graduate education. The “Responsive PhD” describes “best practices” for doctoral programs, including utilizing doctoral alumni in mentorship capacities and encouraging program transparency about career possibilities for doctoral degree recipients. Increasing the diversity of the student body to reflect current society was also a priority (Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2005). Some of the programs or courses implemented by participating schools included the “Summer Web Workshop Series,” where students learned web-based presentation and instructional technology, and the “Exhibit and Exchange Student Lecture Series,” where doctoral students could display their research findings. Such activities helped
foster integration and student satisfaction with the academic program, key ingredients to
doctoral retention.

In a similar endeavor, The Graduate Center for Research, Writing and Proposal Development at Western Michigan University developed a list of best practices for preventing doctoral attrition, based on a university-wide study (DiPierro, 2007). These recommendations for improving attrition, not exhaustive in their entirety, included noting trends in time to degree; encouraging early development of dissertation topics; conducting entry and exit interviews with students; focusing on recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups; educating students on average lengths for each phase of the doctoral program; and developing orientation programs for students.

Partly due to precarious financial situations and the limited resources of overwhelmed faculty, institutions are finding creative ways to incorporate retention improving activities. One of those recommendations, providing information on different career options, is evident in University of Montana’s “How to be a Professor” course. This course assists doctoral students in understanding what options they have as future faculty (Somers-Flanagan & Christian, 2007). The goal of this course is to “assist students in better understanding the responsibilities and challenges that faculty face and to encourage consideration of diverse career options” (p. 23). Weekly topics include models of excellent teaching; philosophy of science and learning; diversity and structure of academia; building an identity as a faculty member; tenure and promotion; and other areas of interest to future faculty members. Students found the class informative in giving them a better understanding of future career options and realistic academic
expectations (Somers-Flanagan & Christian, 2007). This course fulfills one of Golde’s (2005) recommendations that academic departments help students understand how their current goals within their training fit with their future goals, increasing their sense of belonging and hopefully, decreasing attrition.

**Counselor Education Doctoral Literature**

A review of the counselor education literature reveals several studies that explore the educational experiences of CES doctoral students, but none specific to women. Only two studies (Burnett, 1999; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005) specifically addressed doctoral program completion, although others have retention implications (Boes et al., 1999; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Magnuson, 2002; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). The counselor education literature, similar to the general doctoral education literature, reveals certain themes that affect retention: (a) department-student match, (b) faculty advising relationships, (c) peer relationships, and (d) personal characteristics. A brief discussion of these studies follows.

The influence of departmental characteristics on doctoral student experiences was evident in Protivnak and Foss’ (2009) large-scale qualitative study. This study explored the most helpful and difficult parts of a CES doctoral program for 141 doctoral students of which 74.5% were women. Participant responses focusing on academics included perceptions of program curriculum, comprehensive exams, and dissertation. Students voiced frustration over the confusion, lack of guidance, and lack of structure they felt while completing program requirements. Students offered suggestions about ways to
improve the process, including program orientations and explicit guidelines related to course planning.

The culture of the department affected participants’ doctoral education (Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Students who described themselves as different from the dominant academic culture in values, customs, and cultural background felt isolated and anxious about not fitting in. For example, students who came from more collectivist backgrounds felt pressure to assimilate into an environment that emphasized the individual. Similarly, those from a minority background felt out of place in a dominant White academic culture. This mismatch in cultural values affected program satisfaction for some students in negative ways.

Boes et al. (1999) also stressed the importance for students to enroll in CES doctoral programs that match their personal values and goals. A student who identifies herself as a Cognitive Behavior (CBT) counselor would not necessarily relate to faculty, other students, and an academic culture that identifies otherwise. Boes et al. also advised readers to consider location, finances, and degree emphasis (e.g., EdD versus PhD) when choosing a program.

Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) further explored student-program match by interviewing 33 CES doctoral students from 17 programs regarding their decision to persist or depart from their program of study. Students who perceived a match between themselves and their program were more likely to persist to completion. A key determinant of persistence in this study related to students’ goals and expectations of the program and the faculty members goals and expectations of the program. For example,
students were privy to the realities of their future profession through observation of faculty members’ multifaceted academic roles. These experiences, whether co-teaching courses or collaborating on more clinically oriented tasks, ultimately helped shape or clarify goals students had originally set out for themselves. For some, this meant a confirmation that they were in the right place, while others struggled and ultimately left their CES doctoral program to pursue other endeavors (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005).

Student expectations, and whether or not the program met those expectations, were important as they related to persistence. Unexpected changes in faculty, curriculum, or expectations of the program itself caused some participants to rethink their decision to pursue the doctoral degree. Unmet expectations caused frustration, giving students the opportunity to compare their personal goals with the goals of the program. If these goals did not match one another, students questioned their desire to persist (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005).

Faculty relationships were important themes in two CES studies (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) explored students’ quality of relationships with peers, faculty, and the degree of “connection” experienced with faculty (p. 183). As a result, students “identified positive faculty relationships as important to their persistence” (p. 183). “Friendly and supportive” (p. 183) faculty attributes characterized these positive relationships. Those students that experienced a lack of connection with faculty members often resorted to leaving their program of study. Students in this study offered several suggestions for building supportive relationships between faculty and students, including (a) maintaining open
lines of communication, (b) collaborating with students on research, and (c) sponsoring brown bag lunches and informal get-togethers. All students in the study felt that their relationships with faculty, rather than with peers, influenced persistence.

Faculty mentoring received by the student was an important aspect for many of the respondents’ doctoral experiences in the study by Protivnak and Foss (2009). Many of the respondents cited mentorship as the most helpful aspect of their doctoral experience. Although some students experienced positive mentorship from within the department, others felt the need to secure mentors from other disciplines. Students cited a desire for more mentoring, and specifically for more women role models. Likewise, Bruce (1995) found that role modeling provided by women faculty was the most influential factor contributing to the development and mentorship of two women counselor education students.

Another important aspect of doctoral student experiences is the support system of the student, including peers. The participants in Hoskins’ and Goldberg’s study (2005) described how important peer relationships were in helping them persist. Protivnak and Foss (2009) found students appreciated family member’s provision of emotional, financial, and physical support, but also relied on the support of their peers. Respondents placed emphasis on the desire for more emotional support and encouraged doctoral students to improve upon this area by developing informal support groups and by collaborating with other professionals outside of their department (Protivnak & Foss, 2009).
One example of peers providing support during dissertation is in Burnett’s (1999) study. This study explored the benefits of the Collaborative Cohort Model (CCM) in which counselor education doctoral candidates, guided by a faculty member, engaged in dissertation support groups. Peers met in person, or by teleconference, to review one another’s writing, give feedback, and engage in discussions related to research design, writing mechanics, and other topics related to their dissertation. Respondents reported favorable feelings towards this model, felt less isolated, and gained emotional support to continue with their doctoral degrees.

Finally, Protivnak and Foss (2009) explored themes related to personal issues, which involved motivation, transition into a doctoral program, time management, and financial and health concerns. Several of the respondents shared how life events affected their doctoral program experience in negative ways (e.g., delaying a necessary surgery for fear of falling behind on coursework). Lack of time and finances were worrisome to students, in addition to family and outside work responsibilities. The participants discussed the difficulty of juggling multiple roles of partner, parent, employee, and student, all while attempting to transition into a doctoral program. Although this study does not make comparisons to retention, these experiences illustrate challenges doctoral students face when completing their program of study.

Other counselor education research explores the early experiences of women counselor educators and their suggestions for how doctoral programs can help develop more well-rounded future educators. For example, Magnuson (2002) explored the experiences of first-year women counselor educators and identified several themes within
the respondents’ answers regarding issues related to career satisfaction, their levels of stress and anxiety, and individual experiences of connectedness. These themes ranged from complete satisfaction to no satisfaction in their current position and participants vacillated in degrees of connectedness and anxiety. Participants suggested that doctoral programs in counselor education should focus more on preparing their graduate students for teaching expectations, classroom management, and tenure and promotion issues.

Little attention has been paid to the experiences of women counselor education doctoral students as they complete their doctoral degree and what doctoral education experiences assist in this endeavor. This is surprising, given that the future of the counseling profession rests on the successful education and training of doctoral students in counselor education programs (Maples & Macari, 1998). This dissertation aims to add to the limited research in this area.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided the reader with research regarding experiences that facilitate and impede doctoral degree attainment. Research suggests that retention of the doctoral student is a multifaceted endeavor that must take into consideration individual experiences. Much influences the experience of doctoral students as they finish their degree: financial support and aid, peer and faculty relationships, departmental characteristics, integration, social isolation, and persistence.

Women doctoral students face several challenges that are unique to them: a lack of role models and mentors in a male dominated academic culture; poor integration; and
personal responsibilities that may lengthen their time to degree, all possibly correlating with attrition. Despite these obstacles, many persevere and graduate.

The counselor education literature on doctoral training reveals several aspects of doctoral students’ experiences. Although research specific to retention efforts is limited and none focuses solely on women doctoral students, counselor educators are continuing to investigate the experiences that influence student retention. This review demonstrates the need to develop theory specific to women counselor educators and the experiences they believe facilitated degree completion. Therefore, the research question guiding this study was: What doctoral education experiences facilitated degree completion for CES women doctoral degree recipients? The purpose of this study was to generate a theory grounded in the participants’ views on what helped them persist to degree completion.
CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter on doctoral student retention identified a number of factors influencing program completion, including financial support and aid, peer and faculty relationships, departmental characteristics, integration, persistence, and social isolation (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Female doctoral students face significantly different experiences than their male counterparts during their doctoral work, affecting their ability to persist (Maher et al., 2004). The counselor education literature does not adequately explore the experience of completion for female counselor education doctoral students and specifically, what experiences they believe facilitated their program completion.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the current study was to generate an emergent theory describing the experience of degree completion for female counselor education doctoral degree recipients. An assumption was that females had qualitatively different experiences during their doctoral program than males and that these experiences possibly affected degree attainment. Gardner’s (2008) study on doctoral student socialization revealed the disparate experiences male and female doctoral students have during their education. The question that guided the current study was: What doctoral education experiences facilitated degree completion for CES women doctoral degree recipients?
Qualitative Inquiry

Creswell (2007) defined qualitative research as beginning “with assumptions, a worldview . . . and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) added that qualitative researchers try to interpret, and make sense of, ideas and meanings that people have. Qualitative inquiry helps one to understand the complexity of a detailed issue (Creswell, 2007) and is a type of research that creates “findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 10-11). Additionally, qualitative inquiry helps to give voice to those disempowered (Creswell, 2007). The current study, focusing on female counselor education doctorates, attempted to understand and explore how the doctoral program experiences of the women studied led to degree completion.

Using only one theoretical approach limits the amount and kind of information shared with the rest of the world. Qualitative inquiry is useful as a way to follow up on quantitative research, offering new interpretations and creating linkages among models from both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2007). For example, much of the literature on doctoral attrition and retention is quantitative in nature (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1999; Lovitts, 2001). Researchers are beginning, however, to explore the experiences of counselor educators and counselor education doctoral students in qualitative ways and encourage future researchers to build upon their findings, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Golde, 1998; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Magnuson, 2002; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Qualitative research is
especially useful for developing theory when inadequate theories exist for certain populations (Creswell, 2007). As mentioned previously, no current theories exist on how female counselor education doctoral degree recipients experience their doctoral degrees. The current study qualitatively explored the experiences that led to degree completion.

**Grounded Theory as Qualitative Inquiry**

Grounded theory was the method of inquiry used for the current study. Other qualitative approaches, including phenomenology and case study, were considered by the researcher. The desire to create a theory reflecting the voices of female doctoral graduates and the experiences of their doctoral education was the reason grounded theory was chosen. Grounded theory is a systematic method of qualitative inquiry that generates theory “grounded” in the data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2).

When using grounded theory, data collection, analysis, and theory production occur simultaneously (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The generating of theory is at the core of grounded theory research and allows for the explanation of behaviors or processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theory generating involves the use of comparative analysis, which refers to the constant comparison of incoming data with existing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Comparative analysis is used to, among other things, verify theory and generate theory, as the data is collected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theory develops inductively through a concurrent process that requires systematic analyzation, coding and conceptualization of the data; new data are continuously compared to existing concepts until no new concepts emerge, leading to theory (Fassinger, 2005).
Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory partly based on the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism, which assumes that individuals construct their realities and come to understand meaning through social interactions. Symbolic interactionists assume that “reality and self are constructed through interaction and thus rely on language and communication” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7). As a result, interactions among individuals are interpretable, creating opportunity to change action, meaning, and behavior as interpretations change (Charmaz, 2006). Akin to its symbolic interactionist and pragmatist roots, newer variants to grounded theory have emerged reflecting more constructivist leanings that emphasize researcher-participant interaction, researcher reflexivity, and giving voice to participants’ experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005). In the current study, constructivist grounded theory fits with understanding the experiences of doctoral program completion, which are affected by relationships and interactions with others, and views of the self.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Charmaz’s (2006) postmodern perspectives of grounded theory reflect an outlook that includes diverse worldviews and multiple realities. An emphasis exists on exploring process, focusing on action, and creating abstract understandings of the data. Grounded theories, according to Charmaz (2006), are constructed through “our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (p. 10). Using this approach, an interpretation of reality, not an exact portrayal, is offered. As a result, the researcher is a co-constructor of knowledge with the participants. Knowledge is constructed through language and discourse between researcher and participant. For
example, the direction of the interviews, tone of the questions, and eventual analysis results were influenced by the researcher’s stance as a clinician coming from a strength-based perspective. The researcher’s interview style included use of the therapeutic skill of reframing, which influenced the participants to consider alternative and often, positive things, they did to overcome obstacles during their doctoral degree. This helped the women consider themselves differently, as perhaps more competent and worthy, ultimately affecting the researcher’s responses, questions, and eventual shaping of the data and demonstrating how knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participant.

Constructivist grounded theory bears similarities to more traditional approaches to grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Many basic grounded theory techniques, such as coding, sampling, memo-writing, and constant comparison of data, are consistent across the different approaches to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Differences between constructivist and more traditional approaches to grounded theory become apparent throughout coding and analysis. Researchers using constructivist grounded theory, as opposed to more traditional grounded theory, “assume that neither data nor theories are discovered” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Instead, theory development occurs because of interactions between the subject and researcher. As a result, our past and present experiences and perspectives influence the interactions between researcher and participant, affecting data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). These experiences, in essence, help shape the types of questions asked and the focus of the emerging theory.
Drawing from its symbolic interactionist roots that emphasize the meaning-making individuals ascribe to social situations based upon their prior experiences (Blumer, 1969), constructivist grounded theory data analysis evolves from the dynamic interaction between researcher and participant (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher’s viewpoints, values, and previous experiences and relationship with the participants are a part of, and result of, theory construction. For example, the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ recollection of their experiences during their doctoral education are major aspects of the data analysis. Both researcher and participant affect the dynamic interplay during data collection, resulting in a co-construction of reality (Charmaz, 2006).

The current study’s purpose was to provide an exploratory understanding of how females experienced their counselor education doctoral programs and how those experiences led to program completion. As a female counselor education doctoral student, the researcher held certain beliefs about doctoral education, how personal experiences influenced the researcher’s doctoral education, and how that knowledge shaped her inquiry about doctoral education. Practicing self-reflexivity can help make these assumptions explicit, creating the space necessary for theory to emerge (Burck, 2005). The use of a peer reviewer assisted the researcher in remaining self-reflexive, along with the use of process notes and memoing (Burck, 2005). These self-reflective practices continued throughout data collection and analysis in an attempt to honor the voices of the participants while also acknowledging the interactional effect of researcher-participant.
Procedures

Purposeful Sampling

Purposeful, or purposive sampling (Merriam, 2002) was used in the current study. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to seek participants in a deliberate manner that helps to understand a particular experience (Polkinghorne, 2005). Purposeful sampling also seeks variation amongst perspectives in addition to identifying common patterns within the perspectives (Patton, 1990). Maximum variation, a type of purposeful sampling, allows for multiple perspectives on the same dimension to be explored (Creswell, 2007). This process allows for the most divergent forms of the experience to inform and build theory (Polkinghorne, 2005). Inclusion criteria were developed for the current study to select participants who were able to speak about their doctoral program from a variety of perspectives (e.g., racial and regional diversity). For example, although the women in the current study commonly shared the experience of completing a CACREP-accredited counselor education and supervision doctoral program, participants were women with various professional roles (faculty member and/or clinician) and were diverse in nature. Their varying perspectives illustrated the differences amongst diverse female doctorate recipients as well as the similar experience of completing a CACREP-accredited counselor education doctoral degree. Differences in professional roles, race, region, and doctoral program experiences provided a variety of viewpoints, leading to theory building.

The researcher posted an email inquiry on several counselor education listservs, including: CESNET (Counselor Education and Supervision Network), ACES NFIN
(Association for Counselor Education and Supervision New Faculty Interest Network), and regional ACES listservs (e.g., Rocky Mountain ACES, North Central ACES) that sought a racially and regionally diverse sample of volunteer participants who met the inclusion criteria. This inquiry described the purpose of the research and solicited participants (see Appendix A). If this approach had not produced an adequate sample of diverse participants to help fulfill saturation requirements, the researcher was prepared to contact faculty of several CES doctoral programs who were known to have a diverse student body and request suggestions of potential participants.

Because qualitative research does not aim for generalizability, sample sizes can be quite small, allowing the researcher to explore a particular phenomenon in depth (Creswell, 2002). A good informant is someone with the knowledge and experience under investigation (e.g., the experience of completing a CES doctoral degree), is verbal, reflective, has the time to invest in the project, and is willing to be interviewed (Morse, 1986, 1991b, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Unlike in quantitative research, appropriateness and adequacy of data refers to the amount of data collected, rather than the number of subjects (Morse, 1986, 1991b, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The process of participant selection continued until six women were identified who met inclusion criteria, were diverse in culture, region of where they completed their doctoral degree, and professional roles, and provided verbal consent to participate in the study. This sample size of participants was chosen because the researcher believed that six participants could provide a thorough understanding of the process under investigation (e.g., the experience of completion) and offered opportunities for the
researcher to make comparisons between the participants, creating a more comprehensive understanding of the experience under different conditions. Participant diversity helped provide an “information rich” (Patton, 1990, p. 229, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) sample that assisted in reaching saturation. The researcher was prepared to interview more participants if saturation was not reached with this sample by having a wait-list of potential participants that met inclusion criteria. The researcher consulted with her dissertation advisors to determine who best fit the inclusion criteria and contributed to the variety of participants (e.g., cultural and regional diversity, professional roles) sought for this study.

Those who expressed interest in the study were contacted by email to set up a brief screening phone call to confirm inclusion criteria and clarify researcher expectations of the participants (see Appendix B). Those who provided verbal consent to participate were asked for their preferred telephone number, email address, and postal mailing address for use in future communications. Following this screening phone call, the researcher sent chosen participants the informed consent form (see Appendix C) and audio consent form (See Appendix D). Participants mailed the consent forms back to the researcher in a self-addressed stamped envelope. Once the researcher received consent forms, the researcher contacted participants by telephone or email to set up initial telephone or in-person interviews, depending on their location and ease of access to the researcher. Interviews were set up within one to two weeks of telephone contact. The researcher also sent an email to those not fitting criteria, thanking them for volunteering for the study (see Appendix E).
Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria helped ensure that participants in this study consisted of females from across the United States who had experienced a counselor education and supervision doctoral program. To meet criteria for the study, the researcher sought participants who (a) were female; (b) held a doctoral degree in counselor education; (c) were within two years departure from their doctoral education experience; (d) graduated from a CACREP-accredited doctoral program; and (e) were currently employed as a counselor educator and/or clinician (i.e., at least one participant who identified primarily as a clinician and at least one who identified primarily as a counselor educator). The researcher also sought a diverse group of participants. Women of color have verbalized markedly different experiences during their doctoral education (Ellis, 2001). As a result, one participant was a woman of color who could speak to these experiences and strengthen the emerging theory. Finally, regional diversity was sought by having three out of the five ACES regions represented where the women completed their doctoral degree (North Atlantic ACES, North Central ACES, Western ACES, Rocky Mountain ACES, and Southern ACES). To help acquire a diverse sample, the researcher posted the request for participants on several national and regional CES listservs.

Only females who graduated from CACREP-accredited counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral programs (i.e., not social work, counseling psychology, or other behavioral health related doctoral programs) within the past two years were included in the study. This time period gave participants the benefit of distance and reflexivity, while also ensuring their ability to recall their doctoral experiences. Although some
differences exist amongst all doctoral programs, graduates from CACREP-accredited programs will experience some consistencies in program design and curriculum. This inclusion criterion created the opportunity to explore how doctoral graduates from CACREP-accredited programs experienced their doctoral program and how that affected program completion.

**Researcher Qualifications and Involvement**

The researcher in this study was the key instrument for collecting data (Creswell, 2007). As primary researcher, care must be taken to remain reflexive and self aware as to assumptions, values, beliefs, and how these might affect the focus of the data. The researcher is a Caucasian, middle class female who is first generation American. The experience of being first generation American who spoke English as a second language shaped the researcher to be particularly sensitive to non-dominant cultures and issues related to oppression. As a child of an immigrant mother, the researcher observed the discrimination her mother experienced, as well as her efforts in overcoming it. These experiences helped create an interest in the empowerment of women. In the current study, the researcher assumed that female counselor education doctorate recipients, despite having varied and possibly unfair experiences based upon gender, are able to persevere through their doctoral program to degree completion. Various life experiences (e.g., employment as a crime victim advocate) helped shape the researcher to see herself as an advocate of oppressed and marginalized groups. The research on doctoral education indicates oppressive tendencies within higher education (Ellis, 2001). As a result, the women in this study might have experienced oppression during their doctoral
program that shaped their experiences. The researcher is a doctoral candidate in a CACREP-accredited Counselor Education and Supervision program at Kent State University and is a Licensed Professional Counselor in the states of Ohio and Georgia.

Because of her current doctoral candidate status, the researcher’s own doctoral program experience has created assumptions and beliefs about doctoral education. These experiences helped facilitate an understanding of program expectations and degree completion requirements. Numerous opportunities to engage in academic related endeavors (i.e., co-teaching opportunities, presenting at conferences, co-authoring manuscripts) helped solidify an understanding of what doctoral work entailed. In addition, modeling by peers and faculty shaped an understanding of role expectations. The researcher’s doctoral program experiences contributed to her socialization as a future counselor educator. These experiences ultimately shed light on the process leading to degree completion. Naturally, the researcher was highly interested in learning about how other females experienced their doctoral work and what experiences they believed helped them to succeed.

**Data Collection Protocol**

Approval for the research study was sought and granted by the Kent State University Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) prior to making contact with the participants (see Appendix D). Once approval was secured, the researcher posted an email inquiry on several counselor education listservs, including: CESNET (Counselor Education and Supervision Network), ACES NFIN (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision New Faculty Interest Network), and regional ACES listservs (e.g.,
Rocky Mountain ACES, North Central ACES), and sought a diverse sample of volunteer participants who met the inclusion criteria. This inquiry described the purpose of the research and solicited participants.

The researcher asked each participant to complete a demographic form during the first interview (see Appendix F). At least two interviews were held with each participant. A digital recording device attached to the telephone was used to record all interviews with participants.

Electronic folders on both the researcher’s computer and backup jump drive were designated to hold all interview data. The personal computer and jump drive were accessible only to the researcher and both were password protected. Also, the electronic folders were password protected. Only the researcher knew the passwords to the jump drive and computer hard drive.

During and following each interview, the researcher wrote process notes (described later in this chapter). Process notes helped the researcher clarify and separate personal beliefs from the research process (e.g., researcher assumptions of interview answers). The researcher listened to all recorded interviews and performed the transcribing herself.

Within one week of transcribing the interviews, the researcher created a memo (described later in this chapter). A member check was conducted after each round of interviews were transcribed and memos were completed. Data consisted of the transcribed and analyzed interviews, including member check interviews, process notes, and feedback from the peer reviewer.
Semi-structured interview format. Interviews are a primary method to collect data in grounded theory studies (Creswell, 2007). Although there are several ways to conduct interviews, the current study utilized a semi-structured format. This enabled the researcher to help the participants focus on the topic, while also allowing them to voice their thoughts unencumbered. Although specific questions were asked to explore the experience under investigation, the researcher did not overly direct the conversation (Polkinghorne, 2005). Rigidity and control by the researcher reduces participants’ abilities to share their stories in an open manner and results in a decreased understanding of how the participants make sense of their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Grounded theory literature emphasizes the use of open-ended questions, followed by minimal prompts in a supportive environment (Fassinger, 2005). Useful prompts focus more on process (e.g., having the participants elaborate on their thoughts) versus content (e.g., summarizing their words; Fassinger, 2005). Constructivists’ focus on process fits this style well. Constructivist grounded theorists use questions that focus on participants’ situations and definitions of terms, and try to illicit the assumptions and meanings of their experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Initial interviews, approximately one hour in length, followed by additional interviews helped further build the emerging theory. Protocols for each interview followed a specific format.

Round I interview protocol. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded that their information would be kept confidential, that all identifying information would be concealed, and that pseudonyms would be utilized. Rapport was established with the participant by engaging in pleasantries and clarifying the research
question. Because hesitancies and thin or less detailed responses from participants are typical at this stage, building trust with them is especially important at this early stage of data collection (Polkinghorne, 2005). The building of trust creates an environment conducive to more intimate disclosures. The researcher, as co-creator of participants’ stories (Mishler, 1986), affects participants’ retelling of their story by his or her presence, questioning style, intonations, and follow-up questions (Polkinghorne, 2005). Despite this influence, it is important for participants to be the “author” of their story while the interviewer is in the role of a “supportive editor” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 143) who helps participants reach deeper levels of understanding and exploration.

During the first interview, initial interview questions focused on how the participants experienced their doctoral education in general. All of the following questions were asked of all the participants during the first round of interviews:

1. How did you acclimate to your doctoral program?
2. Describe your motivation through the course of completing your doctoral program.
3. What were the nature of relationships you made during your doctoral degree?
4. Discuss how your doctoral program fit with your expectations regarding what you were hoping for in the experience as you progressed through the program.

Subsequent questions used a funnel-like approach (Fassinger, 2005), building off the original open-ended questions with more specific questions related to the experience of completing their doctoral degree. Follow up questions and prompts helped participants elaborate and provide more information. For example, when Kathy was asked about
acclimation to her program, she talked about living far from campus, but being “cohorted” helped with acclimation. The researcher asked her to clarify what it meant to be “cohorted,” which resulted in a meaningful discussion of the importance peer relationships were to this participant.

Round II interview protocol. Round II interview questions were formulated from data analysis of Round I interview answers, along with analysis of memos and process notes. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, follow up interviews provide the researcher with opportunities to explore process related content mentioned in previous interviews (Charmaz, 2006). For example, studying the interview data helped the researcher explore the language and meaning of participants’ responses, creating future opportunities to clarify meaning, rather than make assumptions (Charmaz, 2006). Due to variability of individual participant responses, not all questions were asked of all participants. The following questions were asked of all participants during the second round of interviews and were based upon review of doctoral education literature and the participant’s responses to questions asked during Round 1:

1. What parts of the life of a counselor educator appealed to you, as modeled by your program? What didn’t?

2. Were there any negative relationships with peers and faculty? If so, how did that affect you and your doctoral education experience?

3. One area that wasn’t discussed in our last interview was the experience of being a female in a doctoral program. Were there any experiences that stand out for you as it relates to being female?
The women were asked individual questions based upon their interview during round one and they are as follows:

1. Kathy: You mentioned that this process is very ambiguous, and were told to be comfortable with ambiguity . . . could you elaborate a little bit on what ambiguity means for you?

2. Elizabeth: You mentioned not feeling like yourself during your doctoral program, and that a sense of urgency accompanied that. “I can’t have fun or I am not going to get this finished.” How did that belief play a part in your journey to completion?

3. Samantha: You mentioned feeling out of your comfort zone at the beginning . . . wondering what you were doing there. Despite these feelings, you stayed. Could you speak more to that?

4. Debbie: You mentioned your chair, who encouraged and mentored you. In many ways, she believed in you when perhaps, you didn’t always believe in yourself. You mentioned that she “never pushed you” . . . how do you think your experiences of your doctoral program might have been different if she did “push you”?

5. Molly: You mentioned not being academically challenged, but becoming really dependent on people right off personally . . . how did those two experiences shape your decision to stay?
6. Jamie: You had mentioned acclimating to your program, how did you know that being present in the department was important for you in terms of acclimating?

Finally, the women were asked to clarify or elaborate on statements made previously: “Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your experience of completion better?”

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Data can consist of interviews and process notes (Silverman, 1993). In the current study, the transcripts of each interview, member check interview, process notes, and feedback from the peer reviewer were the raw data. The constant comparative method of data analysis was utilized throughout data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process compares incoming data to existing data in a recursive manner (e.g., comparing early and later interviews of the same participant, along with comparing interviews amongst participants). For example, as the researcher wrote her memos after the interviews, she became aware of recurring topics or themes the participants spoke about. By making comparisons at each level of analysis, the researcher found similarities and differences amongst the data that revealed patterns. Participant responses during the interviews, along with the member check interview, helped to saturate the categories with their properties and dimensions. This process occurred until an emerging theory, grounded in the data, was revealed.
**Data Coding**

Coding is “the process of defining what the data are about” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43) and takes place in between collecting data and theory development (Charmaz, 2006). It requires giving segments of data (e.g., several words or a phrase) a short name that both summarizes and accounts for the data (Charmaz, 2006). Grouping similar concepts into higher order categories helps to organize large amounts of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Categories emerge through the grouping of codes that help to explain the meaning of the particular category. As a result, categories consist of properties, or characteristics, that help define them (Charmaz, 2006). To help reach “robust categories” that are substantial and defined (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96), the properties of these categories need continued elaboration and exploration. The constant comparative method assists in this endeavor.

The constant comparative method, (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where incoming data are compared to existing data in a recursive manner helps to create the emergent theory. Charmaz (2000) noted that the constant comparative method includes comparing (a) data from different participants, (b) data from participants at different points in their interviews, (c) incidents with other incidents, and (d) categories with other categories. The constant comparative method assisted in reaching theoretical saturation.

According to Charmaz, “categories are ‘saturated’ when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories” (p. 113). Strauss and Corbin (1998) added that saturation is also evident
when “the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (p. 212). All categories must be evenly saturated to ensure a balanced and precise theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The saturation of categories leads to diagramming the integrated, emergent theory. To help reach saturation, the researcher returned to the participants with interview questions that clarified and developed the properties of emerging categories. The final product reveals a concept map, a diagram that provides visual representation of categories, their relationships, and the overall theory (Charmaz, 2006).

With simultaneous data collection and coding occurring, the researcher was able to identify categories and their properties that needed further elaboration and verification. The emerging theory continued to be verified and modified throughout participant-researcher interactions (i.e., in the individual interviews) until theoretical saturation was reached (i.e., no new categories emerge from the gathering of further data) resulting in a grounded theory (Fassinger, 2005). Memo-writing also assisted the researcher in identifying tentative avenues to pursue, and helped make comparisons and connections in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

According to Charmaz (2006), grounded theory coding has two main phases: (a) an initial phase where each word or line is named and (b) a more focused phase that locates the most frequent initial codes to begin the process of condensing, synthesizing, and organizing copious amounts of data. Coding used in the current study included initial coding, followed by axial coding and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In vivo codes were also used and are codes that demonstrate meaningful terms used by participants (Charmaz, 2006). Memo-writing was used throughout data
collection and analysis. Although coding procedures are described sequentially, they take place in a recursive manner according to the method of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006).

**Initial coding.** Initial, or open coding, involved labeling the transcribed data using words that summarized and categorized it, while also sticking closely to the data and focusing on the actions or processes inherent in it (Charmaz, 2006). This process entailed initial word-by-word or line-by-line examination of the data in developing preliminary categories (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, & Rusk, 2007). Initial coding allowed the researcher to remain open to investigating theoretical possibilities by interrogating the data for alternative interpretations (Fassinger, 2005). These initial codes are impermanent, grounded in the data, and comparative in nature. Initial coding helped the researcher clarify emerging categories by seeing patterns amongst the data. The initial phase of coding occurred simultaneously with data collection throughout the research process.

The researcher conducted initial coding by scanning the transcribed interviews and categorizing segments of data (several words or a phrase) with a short title that the researcher felt conveyed the meaning of the data. When categorizing and summarizing these segments of data, the researcher asked the question, “What meaning is contained here?” (Rennie, 1994). These codes emphasized action and gave detailed explanations of action, people, and settings (Charmaz, 2006). In doing initial coding, the researcher was breaking the data up into their properties, extracting implicit actions, observing for participant assumptions, and defining the actions of the codes (Charmaz, 2006). The
emphasis of coding during this phase is on process and how that process came to be, and continues to evolve, and what consequences the process has for the participants. During this initial coding phase, significant terms or phrases emerged as having meaning for the participants (Charmaz, 2006). As an example of initial coding, the researcher coded Debbie’s description about her lengthy IRB process as “passing of time,” because the essence of her recollections surrounding the IRB process related to the amount of time it took to get through the process. She conveyed frustration with this process and the amount of time it took for her IRB approval to be granted. This initial code was later compared to other codes related to time and the amount of time it took participants to complete their doctoral degree, or other references to the passing of time.

After establishing some analytic direction, coding becomes more focused and selective (Charmaz, 2006). Codes continue to build upon the initial coding process by becoming more direct and conceptual (Glaser, 1978). This requires the researcher to sift through initial codes, synthesizing and explaining larger amounts of data while making decisions about which initial codes make the most sense (Charmaz, 2006). This process of coding and analysis, emergent in process, helped categorize data. Through this activity, codes that were similar in nature condensed, creating the opportunity for them to become a category. Categories were subject to the constant comparative method, further delineating their properties (Charmaz, 2006).

**Axial coding.** Strauss (as cited in Charmaz, 2006) identified axial coding as building “a dense texture of relations around the axis of a category” (p. 64). Whereas initial coding fractures the data into distinct codes, axial coding brings the data back
together as a coherent whole through the organization of categories (Charmaz, 2006). The purpose of axial coding is to reassemble the data originally taken apart and investigated during the initial coding phase “to give coherence to the emerging analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60).

In axial coding, analysis is specifically focused on emerging categories (Draucker et al., 2007). During axial coding, the relationships among categories (i.e., open codes) are organized grouping them into encompassing categories that subsumes several subcategories (Fassinger, 2005). Subcategories are “concepts that pertain to a category, giving it further clarification and specification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). Links between categories occur on a conceptual level by comparing data and asking the questions of “when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 125). These questions help bring the data back together and “describe the studied experience more fully” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). The answers to these questions result in a subcategory that focuses on the conditions of the circumstances related to the presenting phenomenon, the actions and interactions of the participants, and the consequences of these interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During axial coding for the current study, the researcher used the constant comparative method whereby: (a) categories were compared to subcategories; (b) categories were compared to new data; (c) the density of the categories were expanded by describing their properties and dimensions; and (d) the reconceptualization of the categories and their relationships were explored (Fassinger, 2005).
Using the IRB example from Debbie, initial, impermanent codes related to the passing of time were eventually subsumed into the category of “Navigating systemic obstacles,” which more accurately captured the essence of what Debbie was experiencing (her frustration with the academic IRB system). As data analysis progressed and the constant comparative method was utilized, the researcher noticed that all of the participants spoke about navigating obstacles that were part of the academic system, resulting in these codes to become part of the subcategory, “Academics.” Further analysis helped the researcher identify other subcategories (e.g., Culture of academia and Financial aid) as part of the category, “Navigating systemic obstacles.” The subcategories gave the category further clarification and specification and answered how, where, and when the processes under investigation took place. Finally, the two major categories that emerged, “Navigating individual obstacles,” and “Navigating systemic obstacles,” were encompassed by the overall theme of “Navigating obstacles,” which accurately conveyed the meaning and essence of the categories.

**Selective coding.** Selective coding, the final stage of analysis (Fassinger, 2005), is the “process of integrating and refining the theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143). Integration is a gradual process, beginning with the first steps in analysis and ending with the final draft (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It assists in developing a theoretical framework for the data (Draucker et al., 2007). Throughout the coding process, several categories emerge. Out of this list of categories, a central category emerges that subsumes all other categories (i.e., all other categories must be related to it; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The selective coding stage involves coding that identifies a central category that integrates all
the other categories into “an explanatory whole” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 146). The central category must appear frequently in the data, has the power to pull other categories together as a whole, and be able to explain variation within categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Similar to previous rounds requiring constant comparison, the emerging theory is compared to existing data (Fassinger, 2005). Theory generation evolves from the integration of major categories on a conceptual level (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Sorting and reviewing memos and using diagrams are techniques that aid in integration of concepts. Finally, the theory is refined by filling in poorly defined categories with other concepts, developing the depth and power of the theory. The emerging theory is also validated by comparing it to raw data or presenting it to respondents for their reactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the current study, the emerging theory was shared with participants during the member check interview during which all agreed that the emerging theory did accurately depict their experience of doctoral degree completion.

The theory that emerged from the data, “The process of completion as an inter-connected system of experiences with self and others,” encompassed the themes, categories, and subcategories that resulted from the data. The theory explained how the participants conceptualized the completion of their doctoral education as a process that was highly influenced by others and not without challenges. The themes, categories, and subcategories revealed an inter-connection of experiences that did not exist in isolation. Participants were impacted by others in various ways, which impacted their views of self. The two main themes, “Relationships as sources of support and catalysts for growth” and
“Navigating obstacles” emerged from the researcher reviewing process notes, memos, and creating diagrams that helped to integrate the categories and further refine the theory.

**In vivo codes.** In vivo codes refer to special terms used by participants (Charmaz, 2006) and are an area of attention. These codes signify symbolic markers that capture the essence of the participant’s experience, but do not stand alone, needing integration into the theory (Charmaz, 2006). These terms contain analytic properties, are subsumed into categories that are more substantial, and are subject to constant comparative strategies (Charmaz, 2006). Three kinds of useful in vivo codes include general terms used by participants that are significant in meaning; novel terms that define meaning or experience; and terms or phrases that everyone within this particular population understands (Charmaz, 2006). An in vivo code in the current study related to terms that are commonplace amongst female counselor education doctoral degree recipients, but convey assumptions that are uniquely meaningful to each participant. As an example, participants used the term “cohorts” to explain different ways peer relationships took place during their doctoral education. This code was integrated into the subcategory of peer relationships.

**Memo-writing.** According to Charmaz (2006), “Memo-writing is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (p. 72). Memo-writing allows for the researcher to stop and analyze ideas about codes and occurs immediately alongside data collection and analysis, allowing the researcher the opportunity to code data early on (Charmaz, 2006). The process of memo-writing helps explain the researcher’s hunches, assumptions, insights, and decisions about the
developing theory (Fassinger, 2005). Memo-writing assisted the researcher in remaining transparent and self-reflexive regarding the data.

In the present study, memo-writing consisted of ongoing notes kept by the researcher that detailed the decisions made in the process of collecting and analyzing the data. According to Charmaz (2006), there is not one right way to create a memo, but the following guidelines assist in the creation of an effective memo: (a) study the emerging data; (b) title each memo as specifically as possible; (c) record, from the researcher’s perspective, what is happening with the data; and (d) identify the beliefs and assumptions that support codes. Early memos record what is occurring in the data (i.e., who is saying what and what are people doing). Later, more advanced memos make comparisons amongst the different categories, describe how categories emerge and change, and discuss how a topic looks different from various perspectives (Charmaz, 2006). In the current study, memos helped to: (a) define the analytic properties of each code; (b) make comparisons between the data and codes, and codes and categories; and (c) provide evidence that supported the researcher’s interpretations of the categories (Charmaz, 2006). The memos are a part of the final analysis and memo writing continues throughout data collection. The use of memos also helped the researcher think about the data and discover ideas about it, in addition to finding gaps in the data (Charmaz, 2006). The gaps in the data showed the researcher which categories needed further investigation and analysis. Memos also indicated when a category appeared saturated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
Each memo should have references to the documents from which it was taken (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the present study, to locate data within the transcript, a capital letter (A, B, C, D, E . . .) was used to represent the participant, a roman numeral was used to reference the interview number (Interview Round 1 = I, Round 2 = II, and Member Check = III), and the page and line number from the original data unit was also recorded in the memo. For example, a data unit in the memo from participant B, in Interview Round 2, from page 25, line 12 of the transcript would look like B, II, 25, 12.

The researcher engaged in memo-writing analysis after each interview was transcribed, as recommended by Charmaz (2006). This technique allowed the researcher to return to participants with more focused and detailed questions, allowing for elaboration and clarification of the emerging theories.

**Software analysis.** The researcher organized the data, the coding of the data, and the memos using the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO (8). NVIVO (8) helps organize and analyze large amounts of complex data. NVIVO (8) is a qualitative software program that helped the researcher import and code participants’ transcripts. It also assisted in storing the memos written by the researcher. The researcher in the current study took part in an online NVIVO (8) training course to help familiarize her with the software and use it effectively.

**Trustworthiness Procedures**

Numerous writers (Eisner, 1991; Lather, 1993; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) have translated the concepts of reliability and validity from quantitative research into qualitative terms. Language used in quantitative research (e.g., internal and
external validity, reliability, and objectivity) is not congruent with the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of qualitative research, because qualitative research is characterized by the viewpoint that reality is subjective and collaborative, or co-constructive, in nature (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced new language that expressed the trustworthiness procedures found in more constructivist literature. As a result, qualitative terms such as “credibility,” “authenticity,” and “transferability” have taken the place of “internal validation” and “external validation” from the quantitative world (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). Credibility (akin to internal validity) refers to the degree of fit between the researcher’s interpretations and the respondents’ views (Schwandt, 2001). Member-checking and peer debriefing demonstrate credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Authenticity, a unique characteristic to qualitative research, refers to the researcher’s ability to demonstrate a wide range of different realities with their underlying meanings and values (Schwandt, 2001). Finally, transferability (similar to external validity) relates to the generalizability of findings, but not in the traditional positivist sense since there is no single correct interpretation of truth (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

In grounded theory, the process of the research and the grounding of the study in the data demonstrate research quality (Creswell, 2007). Creswell identified several questions to ask oneself when assessing trustworthiness in a grounded theory study, including (a) does the study of a process, action, or interaction demonstrate the key element in the theory? (b) does the coding process work from the data to a larger theoretical model? (c) is there a figural representation of the theoretical model? (d) is
there a story line that connects categories in the model and that promotes further questions? and (e) does the researcher use reflexivity or self disclosure about their position in the study?

Creswell (2007) recommended that qualitative researchers engage in at least two trustworthiness procedures, described more fully in the following paragraphs. The current study used four procedures (process notes, peer review, member checking, and audit trail). The procedures chosen reflect the researcher’s desire to ensure trustworthiness to the extent possible.

**Process Notes**

The use of process notes helped to bracket the assumptions of the researcher (Rennie, 1994). Grounded theorists often bracket their beliefs and assumptions by noticing them and setting them aside to the extent possible (Gearing, 2004). Bracketing allows the focus to be on the phenomenon. This use of bracketing also fits with the researcher’s constructivist framework. While suspending assumptions and beliefs to the extent possible, the researcher provides an interpretation of the participants’ worlds (Charmaz, 2006). This interpretation results from the interactions between researcher and participant. By noticing, through process notes, how the participants affect the researchers’ thoughts, feelings, and observations, the researcher remains transparent in the analysis process.

The researcher wrote process notes during and immediately following the interviews (within 2 hours), helping to clarify her thoughts (e.g., “I agreed with some of her interpretations”), feelings (e.g., “I felt uncomfortable asking that question”),
observations (e.g., “The participant discussed that topic a lot”), and questions to clarify in future interviews (e.g., “I wonder if she was this aware of her reactions at the time”). Process notes helped the researcher identify future questions to ask participants that could build saturation. They also helped to explore how the researcher viewed the participants and their story (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Process notes became a part of the data collection process and aided in researcher self-reflexivity.

**Peer Reviewer**

A peer reviewer checks and interrogates the coding and analysis of the researcher (Fassinger, 2005). The task of the peer reviewer, or debriefer, is “to be sure that the investigator is as fully aware of his or her posture and process as possible” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). The peer reviewer helps the researcher remain honest by asking the researcher questions about methods, analysis, and assumptions, in addition to providing support by listening to the researcher process his or her feelings regarding the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer reviewer helps the researcher think about the study in different ways, encouraging reflexivity.

The peer reviewer in the current study has an earned doctorate in Counselor Education from a CACREP-accredited doctoral program, an interest in women’s issues, and experience with grounded theory methodology. The peer reviewer is an independently licensed professional clinical counselor, with endorsement as a supervisor. At the time of this study, the peer reviewer was employed as a mental health clinician and supervisor in a community mental health agency and was an adjunct instructor at a CACREP-accredited community counseling program. The peer reviewer was not given
any identifying information about the participants (see Appendix H for peer review instructions). In the current study, the peer reviewer was consulted with at least three times throughout data collection and analysis.

After completion of Round I interviews with all participants, the researcher consulted with the peer reviewer. During this conversation, the researcher shared with the peer reviewer her impressions and assumptions following the interviews, along with the tentative emerging analysis. The researcher considered the peer reviewer’s feedback from Round I when constructing interview questions for Round II. The researcher consulted with the peer reviewer following Round II interviews. The peer reviewer was able to help the researcher elaborate and clarify existing categories and the emerging theory. The researcher was prepared to consult with the peer reviewer in case more interview rounds were required to reach saturation. Finally, the peer reviewer was consulted following the member check interview to share the participants’ feedback and how that may be incorporated into the final analysis. The researcher incorporated the peer reviewer’s feedback into the final data analysis.

**Member Check**

The use of member checking is “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This technique involves returning to the participants with preliminary findings and analyses to judge for credibility and accuracy (Creswell, 2007). The researcher utilized member checking in this study by sharing her emerging theories with the participants and co-constructing a theoretical model based upon Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist lens. Constructivists emphasize the nature of data
collection and interpretation as a shared experience between researcher and participant, evolving from their interactions and relationship (Charmaz, 2006). As a result, member checking in this study not only corrected or evaluated data analysis, but also helped elaborate on categories and inform and create theory (Charmaz, 2006). Member checking gives participants the opportunity to offer additional information, to correct errors and challenge interpretations, and to judge the overall adequacy of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Appendix I provides the member check instructions.

Participants were asked to participate in a member check interview when agreeing to take part in the study. Member checking took place after the final semi-structured interview. Participants were sent a summary of the preliminary categories, including their properties. The summary reflects the analysis of the data and subcategories from all interviews with all participants. The participants also were sent the concept map that illustrated a visual representation of each of the preliminary categories and their properties. These materials were sent to participants approximately one month after the final interview took place. Participants were asked to provide feedback or questions relating to the data and the emerging analysis. In addition, the emerging theory was shared with participants for feedback purposes. A member check telephone interview was scheduled two weeks after participants received the summary of preliminary categories, concept maps, and emerging theory. The member check interviews were approximately 30-60 minutes in length, digitally recorded, and transcribed. This feedback was considered by the researcher and incorporated into the analysis. Questions asked during this telephone interview included:
1. What was the experience of talking about your doctoral education like for you?

2. How was the information in the analysis consistent or inconsistent with your experience of completing your doctoral program?

3. What additional information might be helpful to incorporate into the emerging theory?

**Audit Trail**

A final verification procedure involved the use of an audit trail, which is careful documentation of the procedures used in the event others might wish to recreate the process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). An audit trail consists of “a residue of records stemming from the inquiry,” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319). These records encompass all documentation relating to the study. In the current study, raw data included digital audio-recordings, transcribed interviews and process notes; data reduction and analysis products (e.g., computer analysis; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); data reconstruction and synthesis products (e.g., structure of coding, categories, theory development, and concept maps; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); and instrument development information (e.g., demographic questionnaire and interview questions; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In the current study, the accumulation of all products and interactions relating to the study are a part of the audit trail. For example, the use of memos helped establish an audit trail by documenting how the researcher organized her thoughts, reactions, and decisions related to the data (Charmaz, 2006). The following pieces of evidence were also a part of the audit trail, including: recorded interviews, list of interview questions,
demographic questionnaire, transcribed interviews, process notes, memos, NVIVO (8) data organization tool, concept maps, peer reviewer notes, and member checking notes.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 provided the reader with an overview of methodological procedures and how qualitative inquiry, specifically constructivist grounded theory, assisted with developing a theory grounded in the participants’ experiences. The use of grounded theory helped provide an emerging theory of how female counselor education doctorates experienced their doctoral education. Participants were a diverse group of six female counselor educators who had completed their doctoral studies within the past 2 years and were currently employed as clinicians and/or counselor educators. All participants engaged in semi-structured interviews. NVIVO (8) assisted the researcher in data analysis and organization. Several procedures helped establish trustworthiness, including process notes, member checking, peer review, and an audit trail.
Chapter 3 presents the results of the analysis of interview data that addressed the primary research question: What doctoral education experiences facilitate degree completion for CES women doctoral degree recipients? Constructivist grounded theory was the method of inquiry used for the current study. Utilizing constructivist grounded theory encouraged participant-researcher dialogue and helped shape the inquiry under study.

Participants were a diverse group of six female counselor education doctoral degree recipients who completed their doctoral studies within the past two years and were currently employed as clinicians and/or counselor educators. All participants engaged in semi-structured interviews that were transcribed and analyzed for pertinent themes. Several procedures helped establish trustworthiness, including: process notes, member checking, peer review, and an audit trail. This chapter contains a description of the theory and its properties that emerged from the analysis of the interview data from six participants through two rounds of individual interviews and a member check interview. Contributions of the peer reviewer are also presented. A summary of participant demographics follows; however, more specific demographic information was not provided to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Participants

The six CES women doctoral recipients in the current study demonstrate variety in geographic ACES (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision) region of
doctoral program, and varying dimensions of diversity (e.g., race and age). More specific demographics were not provided to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Information related to employment status, educational funding sources, and time to degree (TTD), all important elements in the retention literature (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nettles & Millett, 2006), are included. Three of the five ACES regions where the women completed their doctoral degree were represented (two participants from North Central ACES, one participant from Rocky Mountain ACES, and three participants from Southern ACES). Five of the participants were Caucasian, and one identified as an international student of a minority race. The age range for this group of participants at the beginning of their doctoral education was 26-53 years old. The range of years it took for TTD was 3-10 years. One of the participants worked full-time and attended the program on a part-time basis, while another participant worked full-time while attending her doctoral program on a full-time basis. The other four participants held graduate assistantships to fund their education and attended their doctoral programs on a full-time basis. Participants also acquired federal loans to supplement their income. In addition, three of the six participants were part of a cohort model of education and spoke about their experiences within a cohort. In this particular study, four of the participants entered their doctoral program with the explicit goal of becoming a full-time counselor educator. One of the participants entered her program with the goal of writing an article, but changed her goal to becoming a counselor educator after her first semester of classes. One other participant entered her doctoral program with the intent of being a full-time school counselor who engaged in other scholarly activities. She, too, changed
her focus to becoming a full-time counselor educator once she received mentorship and feedback related to her career goals. In summary, all six of the participants had the career goal of being a full-time counselor educator upon entering or after entering their doctoral program. Further demographics were not provided to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

**Emergent Theory and Key Themes**

The emergent theory (i.e., the theory grounded in the data as interpreted by the researcher) was titled: *The process of completion as an inter-connected system of experiences with self and others*. This overall theory portrays the participants’ experiences of degree completion as consisting of complex interactions with others that influenced the direction and perspective of participants while navigating their doctoral education. The emergent theory was informed by two overlapping key themes: *Relationships as sources of support and catalysts for growth*, and *Navigating obstacles*. Participants’ relationships (both positive and negative) created opportunities for growth both personally and professionally, contributing to their motivation to complete their degree and surmount obstacles related to degree attainment. Obstacles experienced within the academic system and on an individual level emerged as they related to the process of completion. Personal characteristics and influences from others helped participants persevere to completion when such obstacles presented themselves.

The key themes are inter-connected, demonstrating that the experience of doctoral degree completion is evolving and dependent on many interrelated influences. Figure 1 presents a visual depiction of the emergent theory, *The process of completion as an*
inter-connected system of experiences with self and others, including the two key themes, categories and subcategories that facilitated the women’s doctoral degree completion. The emergent theory will be evident in the key themes, categories, and subcategories discussed throughout this chapter, revealing the overlapping nature of participants’ degree completion.

**Relationships as Sources of Support and Catalysts for Growth**

This theme reflects the dynamic and multi-purpose role relationships provided the women. It encompasses the categories and subcategories that reflect specific relationships and how they helped the women with degree completion. Relationships helped support the women emotionally and created opportunities that encouraged personal and professional growth. Participants placed great emphasis on the nature of these relationships and conveyed the belief that without them, they may not have completed their degree. Relationships provided the foundation for participants’ doctoral education experiences and shaped their journey towards degree completion. As a result, the strength and quality of participants’ relationships were crucial factors when considering how these particular women completed their degrees.

In this study, analysis of the data revealed how relationships influenced two pivotal areas of growth in an overlapping fashion, where personal and professional growth developed via positive and negative interactions with peers and faculty. Although each participant’s development was an individual experience, all were able to identify how relationships altered them both professionally and personally. Relationships acted as a catalyst for new behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions, prompting participants to reflect
and discover aspects of themselves that were previously unknown to them. The women benefitted from these changes through increased self-awareness and understanding as it related to their doctoral degree process.

The following sections describe how personal and professional development evolved from relationships with others, facilitating motivation for degree completion. Participants developed dynamic views of themselves because of these relationships, often appreciating a new perspective of their abilities and talents, improving their self-confidence as it related to their doctoral education. Personal support promoted connectivity with others and with the academic departments, encouraging participants when obstacles presented themselves. Scholarly collaborations with peers and faculty influenced professional development, deepening participants’ emerging CES professional identity, assisting with program acclimation and retention and ultimately, degree completion. The following discussion describes the categories Personal growth, development, and support occurs through relationships with others, and Professional growth and development occurs through relationships with others that comprise the key theme of Relationships as sources of support and catalysts for growth.

Personal Growth, Development, and Support Occurs Through Relationships With Others

Participants described how counselor education programs facilitated participant personal growth and development leading to degree completion by (a) providing emotionally supportive and mentoring relationships with faculty, and (b) offering formal or informal peer relationships that were supportive and mentoring in nature. Participants
agreed that such relationships with faculty and peers were a central aspect of their doctoral completion experience, and often continued past graduation. Partly because of these relationships, the women developed as individuals and acquired personal resiliency skills that assisted them with degree completion. These relationships served multiple purposes for the participants, including providing a source of motivation when obstacles presented themselves.

The following section describes how participants experienced personal support from faculty and peer relationships and how that influenced their journey towards degree completion. Descriptions of these relationships illustrate the care, concern, and compassion the women felt from others during their doctoral degree, illustrating the importance of having affirming relationships en route to doctoral degree completion. In response, participants acquired skills and attitudes necessary for degree completion.

**Relationships with faculty.** Relationships with faculty were some of the most important aspects to participants’ degree completion experiences. Participants discussed faculty support in two ways: Faculty expressed emotional support to participants and faculty provided feedback on their progress during their doctoral program. A description of how the women experienced emotional support from their faculty follows.

Jamie’s sociable relationship with faculty members exemplified the way she experienced their support and care. Jamie felt comfortable sharing personal details of her life with faculty members with whom she worked. As a result, she experienced mentorship and support, deepening the relationship into one that was more personally fulfilling. Feeling free to be herself, Jamie was able to gain useful information pertaining
to degree completion or personal concerns. She also felt comfortable initiating dialogue and talking to her advisors. These conversations initiated reflection and self-awareness. Conversations with her advisors left Jamie with additional insights into how she could handle the unique experiences she was having within her doctoral program.

Whenever we had a meeting and even though I am working for them, I can talk about my personal life and what I am doing. They would listen to me and they could give me advice, and so on. They were not only professors that I was working for, but at the same time, they were also like a mentor of life.

Jamie discussed how much of an impact her relationships with faculty had on her, from the beginning of doctoral studies, to the end. It is clear that during her doctoral program, Jamie was able to go to her faculty to discuss fears, and seek advice and guidance with the implicit knowledge that they would be able to help her. As a result, she knew there were several people she could turn to when she was struggling.

In my program, one faculty member was assigned to me in the beginning, and then while I am working on my dissertation, I had other advisors as well on my committee, and all of them were very how can I say, good at guiding me. Especially when we were talking about dissertation and the future or just chit chat, like whenever I had something come up, I would go to their office and talk with them. So through that advising I [felt] like I was growing up, whenever there was something I didn’t understand like even from the class, and then I tried to have a conversation with a professor and then through that conversation I learned a lot.
Jamie experienced mentoring relationships with the faculty with whom she worked. Having mentors was important to her because they provided support in the form of encouragement and direction, which offered Jamie additional insights about her doctoral education experiences. Here, she described how helpful it was for her to hear the multiple perspectives from mentors that normalized the difficulties she was experiencing as a doctoral student.

There was a time that they would share their experiences of going through the doctoral program and it was helpful as well because then I feel like I’m not the only one. And now they are professors there and they went through the same stuff.

Molly experienced faculty support and caring when she became sick during her doctoral program. This support came at a crucial time for Molly, who, in addition to being ill, was feeling unchallenged by her doctoral program. The dissatisfaction she felt with her program contributed to thoughts of leaving or transferring to another program. Partly because of the care and compassion she experienced regarding her illness, Molly reconsidered her decision to leave and was able to persevere to completion. Molly’s experiences with supportive individuals helped her feel re-connected to her program, instilling a desire to stay. She recounted how faculty accommodated her personal circumstances by making themselves available to be of help, if needed. Molly noticed that her reliance on others in her program changed how she viewed her program and the individuals within it. Ultimately, this was critical to her ability to continue in her doctoral program. She acknowledged,
The health issue piece was a part of it that kept me there [in the program]. It’s been so long I sometimes forget about that aspect of the first three months [in the program], but that was certainly a piece of it.

Similar to Molly’s experience, faculty assistance came at a crucial time that Debbie described as a “make or break” moment. Debbie, who at the beginning of her doctoral studies felt like “it was everything I wanted it to be, where you want a collegial level with your professors, you know, the questions [in class] were encouraged and I loved it,” later experienced distress over receiving mixed messages on whether or not she passed her comprehensive exams. Feeling uncertain of her future within the program, Debbie sought the guidance of a female professor with whom she shared research interests. In this relationship, Debbie found an ally and mentor: “She was so helpful when I really needed somebody to be supportive and so she mentored me through the rest of the program.” This mentor eventually became her dissertation advisor. Debbie, whose struggles during her academic program prompted thoughts of leaving, credits her dissertation advisor as the main source of support during that difficult time. “I didn’t want to go on, I was done, and she was wonderful, she never pushed, she just very gently listened, she empathized, she sympathized.” This personal support and encouragement provided Debbie the wherewithal to continue in her program and helped her see she was capable of completing her doctoral degree.

Kathy identified her primary advisor as her mentor during her doctoral program, a male faculty member she described as a “straightforward workaholic,” and someone to whom she felt connected. This challenging, yet supportive relationship led Kathy to
being the only student to attend her advisor’s wedding, something she found personally meaningful. Their relationship continued to strengthen during her doctoral program and Kathy shared how her relationship with him evolved after graduation into a strong collegial friendship. “I have a good relationship with him to the point where you know, we’ll go out for sushi once a month and I will still get e-mails. Hey, I need your opinion on this or that, very collegial.”

For Kathy, being a gay female was a positive aspect of her doctoral program. This, in combination with having a supportive advisor that she felt close to, led Kathy to enjoy a sense of comfort in their relationship. This relationship contributed to her feeling productive and engaged during her doctoral program. Without this connection, Kathy revealed that their relationship might have suffered and her doctoral education experience would have been drastically different.

We taught classes together at night, and I think that’s part of the reason why it [the relationship] worked because if I were any other student, I think on both of our parts. You know, I think it worked because it [sexual attraction] was never an issue. I think that’s part of why being female was never an issue, because being a gay female was positive.

The choice to attend a certain doctoral program is partially determined by the student’s experiences and perceptions of faculty. Elizabeth chose to attend her doctoral program after meeting with the faculty at a national conference. During this chance encounter, she shared personally relevant fears and hopes with the faculty and experienced feeling heard and respected, contributing to her decision to apply. Feeling
accepted led Elizabeth to conclude that this program would be a good personal fit for her. Intuitively, she knew that feeling connected to the faculty and the program would make for a rewarding experience.

I remember being able to talk to them about my fears about becoming a counselor and what it meant to be a new professional and just thinking “these people respect me as a colleague,” which isn’t something I thought I would find in a group of tenured faculty.

She gained comfort in knowing that she could ask for help when needed, and enjoyed several positive relationships where she felt affirmed and supported. As a result, her self-confidence as it related to her doctoral coursework strengthened during the course of her education.

Elizabeth summarized the importance of her relationships during her doctoral program, signifying the role they played in her doctoral education experience. “I think relationships were the most important thing I had during my program. They were the grounding factor during such a hard time.” She credits her department with assisting in the formation of healthy student-advisor relationships where she felt support and care. “I had a very close relationship with my advisor and that’s something I credit the university for. They have a really strong advising program.” During her doctoral program, Elizabeth also “connected with a couple of faculty who took mentoring roles with me and that was really important” to degree completion. Similar to other participants, Elizabeth shared how the essence of her relationship with advisors has not changed, despite no
longer being a student. Post graduation, Elizabeth still experiences mentorship from her primary advisor, while also enjoying the benefits of being his colleague.

I think he’s going to retire in a few years but, he calls all the time. That relationship hasn’t changed much. We can’t go to lunch anymore, but he still takes a mentoring role, and now we are colleagues and that is kind of cool.

In addition to receiving emotional support, the women discussed how receiving feedback on their progress and development during their doctoral program affected them. Faculty feedback was important to participants and was an indication to them of their capabilities, promoting motivation for degree completion. The examples of Kathy and Elizabeth demonstrate this point. Kathy mentioned that receiving positive feedback affected her.

I got a lot of positive feedback. I don’t know if I would’ve gotten negative feedback how that would’ve played out. You are getting feedback not just from your faculty but also from your cohort members. [And] that sort of informal feedback that you’re continuously getting along the way.

Elizabeth described how feedback from others can serve to reinforce hard work and instill the desire to work harder.

At first when you are being evaluated by someone, there is always a measure of wanting to do it right. I think a loop occurs at some point where I did hard work and then I got good feedback for it, and that makes me want to work harder.

Samantha also benefitted from faculty feedback that highlighted her strengths and capabilities. During her program, Samantha experienced multiple instances when faculty
encouraged her to demonstrate advanced clinical skills to other students. Also, the attention and appreciation she felt from her advisor helped Samantha develop personal comfort in her program and an enhanced sense of belonging, something she struggled with initially. Feelings of inadequacy sometimes left her questioning whether she belonged in the doctoral program, but the faculty support and encouragement was a critical part in making that transition towards a sense of belonging and completing her doctoral degree. Samantha shared how having a “great professor who sort of pulled me in” led to her joining a research group and co-presenting with him. By being “pulled in,” “other students would come in and it was a neat way for me to have a foot in the door and to share what I knew but also learn from other people.” These were powerful moments for Samantha, and helped her feel supported and connected to the individuals within her program.

**Relationships with peers.** Peers also served as a vehicle for personal support and catalysts for personal growth for participants. By investing in peer relationships, participants experienced mentorship throughout their doctoral studies, contributing to increased personal growth. The participants in this study were available to provide mentorship to other students and displayed a willingness to accept personal mentoring from other students. Similar to faculty relationships, peer relationships provided participants with a sense of support that helped them feel more connected with the academic program. These relationships also helped participants entertain multiple perspectives about their own strengths and abilities, through formal (e.g., academic departments that organized cohort models, promoting peer mentoring) or informal ways
(e.g., social interactions outside of the department), thus offering participants additional ways to successfully navigate their doctoral program to completion.

The nature of peer relationships varied to some extent based upon the program. In some doctoral programs, a cohort model, in which a group of students moves through all the phases and courses together, provided unique opportunities for mentorship, along with personal support and growth. Participants who came from a cohort model benefitted from an instant source of support provided by a group of people sharing the same experience. For participants who came from cohort models, this was a powerful aspect of their doctoral experience, and often eased the difficulties inherent in completing a doctoral program. It also provided participants with ample opportunities to develop skills in navigating relationships, something that was a benefit to participants. Experiences such as these helped participants develop confidence in themselves and their abilities to handle various obstacles, certainly needed when completing a daunting endeavor such as the doctoral degree.

Participants were keenly aware that developing and being part of a community of peers was an important aspect of their doctoral education and its relationship to retention. Kathy, who came from a cohort model, shared her perspective on how the cohort model is “definitely, in a sense like a fraternity, or sorority in that those [students] before us would mentor us.” She explained that the cohort model can help doctoral students complete their doctoral degree because “statistically, people don’t finish, and so that [cohort model] was kind of their [doctoral program] way of setting it up to have a sense of community.” For Kathy, the cohort model “made adjusting extremely easy because
there was a lot of processing [discussion] in classes. You know, we have to work together on certain projects, so it was extremely easy in adjusting [to the doctoral program].” For Kathy, being part of a cohort helped her to gain useful information as it related to her doctoral program and aided with acclimation.

I think it [being part of a cohort] extremely helped in the sense that you always have someone to ask a question to and so you don’t necessarily have to go to faculty because everyone else in the larger cohorts have connections to some other faculty member in the college of education, so it was kind of like a wealth of information shared.

Jamie, who also came from a cohort model, shared how “I had my cohort and there was one person who I was very close to and she and I were really supportive of each other and everything.”

Participants discussed mentorship amongst cohorts as an important element to their peer relationships. Elizabeth discussed how “there is a lot of mentoring between cohorts,” helping to create a sense of community. This was invaluable to her as a student, and contributed to her ability to acclimate to and continue in her program. Developing those relationships helped decrease the feelings of homesickness that challenged her decision to move across the country for her doctoral program: “When I went [out] there [to doctoral program] I was kind of on the fence, like, I’ll give it a year and if it’s terrible, I’ll just come back.” Fortunately, Elizabeth was able to acclimate and continue in her program, partly because of peer relationships and the support she experienced from them, which included introducing her to others in the community.
One of my cohort members introduced me to some friends in the community. She was really invested in me getting out, so she introduced me to a couple of people and one friend outside of school that I really connected with. I guess she was pretty instrumental in that shift [feelings of belonging] as well.

Cohorts helped support the women when challenges presented themselves. Elizabeth experienced support from the cohort ahead of her while struggling to navigate the relationships within her own cohort. Peers ahead in the program could also serve as a role model of expectations and helped Elizabeth understand what she would be required to do in order to be successful.

There is a lot of mentoring between the cohorts. The two [cohorts] above me were really strong mentors, and they took me under their wings and they made sure I was comfortable. You know my cohort was a train wreck and they would say “come on, let’s go drink wine and eat chocolate,” you know, I still keep up with them. They are just really good friends. And seeing a model of what they were going through prepared me for what was next in ways, I watched them go through comps, and do their prospectus meetings and defend their dissertations and graduate and get jobs and so it was nice to have that mentoring.

Being part of a cohort was not the only avenue to experiencing peer support. Participants who attended cohort-based programs, and those who did not, specified further ways that peers helped them to acclimate to their program and facilitate degree completion. These experiences, unique to the individual, often reflected specific struggles with personal issues, feeling unmotivated or unchallenged, and other areas that
left participants struggling. Peers helped to normalize and validate those challenging experiences.

Molly, who did not come from a cohort-based program, experienced a great deal of personal support from peers when dealing with her illness, and found their support and caring critical aspects of her doctoral experience. Her dependence on others created a stronger connection to her program and the individuals within it. She found this to be an important piece to her ability to continue in her program.

I became very dependent on people right off. If there was a meeting somewhere off the bus route I didn’t always have a ride. I could take the bus from home to campus but, as far as anywhere else. Sometimes, they would take me to the grocery store because lugging the groceries from the bus stop to the house would become difficult. And so yeah, there was this piece of just being very dependent on people personally.

Molly articulated awareness of how essential peer support was to her degree completion, acknowledging that without the support of these peers, “I don’t know that I would’ve finished.” Molly described how group cohesiveness and a sense of unified purpose surfaced when faced with departmental pressures and politics that threatened the doctoral students’ camaraderie. This experience highlighted how imperative it was to have peer support. “I think there were those of us who knew that we needed that support from colleagues to kind of band together and say ‘screw this,’ so to speak.” During this experience, Molly learned important lessons about advocating for her rights as a student, while forging strong friendships united by a shared cause. The sharing of negative
experiences and accompanying support with peers helped Molly as she navigated her doctoral program towards completion.

Participants described how peers provided support to one another by processing and normalizing the unique experiences of going through a doctoral program. This served various purposes for participants as they completed their doctoral degree. For instance, feeling heard by others within the academic culture was important to the participants who needed validation for their efforts to embark on and complete a doctoral degree. As Elizabeth described, peer relationships were a powerful aspect of the doctoral experience.

Being in a doctoral program is such a different experience from anything else you can’t really share it with people outside. I mean, I can explain it to my family and friends, but living it is different and I think that made the relationships inside really extreme.

For Elizabeth, these intense academic relationships were unlike any other because of “the distance of being in an experience that no one else is going through is hard.” She further explained how “I could talk to the people inside the program because they could understand my experience.” This was helpful to her as she completed her degree.

Elizabeth also spoke about how accepting (and providing) personal support from peers helped ease the difficult transitions associated with moving and beginning a doctoral program. She recognized how helpful it was for her to have the support of others during this very stressful time and wanted to provide that to others. By doing so, she enjoyed a sense of community, helping her feel more connected to others and
invested in her program. Elizabeth was keenly aware how important supportive relationships were to having an enjoyable doctoral experience and to degree completion. In turn, she offered to do the same for others acclimating to their doctoral program.

It was more like we are all away from our family and friends, we are in this experience together and to be able to reach out to someone and give back like it was given to me was really important. You know, you just moved and left behind family and friends and I have just gone through that and if there’s something I can do to help, then I want to. You know, helping somebody go through that would help me go through it. It’s like we’re all away from our families but this is kind of a new type of family and we want to bring you into this family. The more people we have in it, the stronger it is, the easier it is to all get through it together, so more than needing to mentor them, I think that I needed them in my life.

Kathy benefitted from processing with peers and also found that having conversations with her peers helped her in acclimating to her program: “I think that I’m a process observer and so I was able to process stuff with a couple other people in my cohort.” Additionally, Kathy found that providing assistance to other students was something that helped with her motivation to complete her degree: “I got to teach undergrad and masters’ students, which is another good aspect that I enjoyed and that was very helpful in the motivation aspect, too, because you knew you were helping and mentoring others through the process.”

Participants found it helpful to discuss their experiences with peers, especially as they related to feelings of dissatisfaction or differentness. Molly’s peer support helped
normalize her feelings of dissatisfaction with her program while assisting with program acclimation: “I had another classmate who also had a pretty rigorous master’s program and so we kind of sat down and had a discussion about being in the same place.” Being “in the same place” helped Molly realize that she was not alone in her experience and could reach out to others who might be able to help her through her struggles.

Samantha’s status as an older student helped her to bond with a fellow non-traditional student, normalizing her feeling of differentness. This supportive relationship helped her understand how her previous life experiences could help her acclimate to her doctoral program, which was something she found important to her process of degree attainment.

I had one of my really good friends come to school and she drove three hours and so she was a part-time student like me, and older, and also had a private practice so we would talk a lot about trying to blend those worlds with this new world we were involved in.

When meeting other doctoral students at professional conferences, Kathy and her cohort members had the opportunity to compare their doctoral program with others, leaving Kathy with a clearer understanding of how her program differed from others. This was often a validating experience for her and her cohort members.

We were able to process that together, as a cohort, you kind of never took for granted what you had. And sad as it [doctoral program experience] was at times for people it was also our motivation, too, like it [doctoral program experience] could be a lot worse, that perspective taking.
Participants also described some of the obstacles they experienced with their peers, and how that affected their route to completion. Negative interactions created space for growth and reflection. Competition and conflict with peers helped participants identify their motivation towards degree completion, while coming to understand themselves better.

Elizabeth discussed how the experience of being part of a cohort influenced her ability to navigate conflict, furthering her growth as an individual. Conflict came about because of various group dynamics and the challenges associated with sharing an office space with others. Although her cohort members were sources of support and encouragement, they also served as sources of stress. Nonetheless, Elizabeth experienced growth because of the conflict she experienced with her cohort members. She described how navigating conflict during her doctoral program prepared her to handle conflict in a confident manner.

I think I learned how to navigate difficulties in a working relationship and a friendship in ways that I probably wouldn’t have learned otherwise. I mean because I don’t see pushing myself to go there [areas of conflict] with people that I don’t have to, it’s really uncomfortable, but I feel pretty confident that I could do it again if I have to.

Elizabeth experienced a close relationship with some of her cohort members, but also found that healthy competition amongst her peers provided good amounts of motivation, something that encouraged her timely completion of her degree:
I became competitive with the others without them knowing it. Like, [I] have to get [a] job before them, have to have defense before them. And I think maybe that was a way of motivating myself. At some point it became a game. I would say that there were hugely varying levels of motivation just in my cohort and I don’t want to say it was a competition because it wasn’t. It wasn’t like I want to win or you need to lose so that I can win it was more like I just wanted to do my personal best, and I’m going to use you as my motivators.

Kathy experienced conflict with a fellow cohort member and found the outcome of that to be of benefit to her growth and development. During a confrontational conversation with a cohort member, Kathy became aware of how her motivation to complete her degree could be threatening to others. She did not identify the conversation as a negative experience, but one that helped remind her of the counseling skill of meeting the client “where they are at.” Kathy developed a new perspective on herself and her ability to understand others, “it was actually a positive reminder developmentally, where everyone is. We talk about meeting people where they are at and I had to live it as opposed to just talking about it.” This conversation reminded Kathy of her own abilities and talents as it related to degree completion.

[I told her] I am not in a competition with you, I am kind of on a treadmill and if you want to hop on with me, you are more than welcome. A lot of it has to do with [her] doing things well, but doing them very slow and [she] couldn’t understand why I could do them extremely fast. Mine was more motivation than aptitude.
A unique aspect of peer relationships for these participants was experiencing support that took place outside of the academic setting, which usually involved activities that were social in nature. Social activities helped participants find humor in the difficulties they experienced and served to connect students. This kind of support was important to participants while they completed their degree. It provided them with alternative perspectives and encouragement when struggles inevitably occurred. Samantha shared how she and her peers would

Laugh, gripe, discuss what to do about the papers, how to get through so-and-so’s class, where are you at in the process, hang in there, what do you need? Let’s go out and grab dinner, you know that kind of stuff.

Kathy shared, “I gotta tell you, happy hour was very helpful. It was not about the alcohol, it was just a way to be able to have those discussions and laughter.” Similarly, Debbie’s experience involved going to one peer’s home, where they would “be a support to one another, talk, whatever.”

Most of the participants discussed having peers offer mentorship, advice, and support as it related to completing the doctoral degree. Not having this poses unique obstacles to doctoral students who cannot benefit from peers who have completed coursework, comprehensive exams, and other doctoral education experiences that can be shared and processed. Debbie, who was part of the first entering class in her doctoral program and took the longest to complete her doctoral degree, could not benefit from the experiences of more advanced students. During her exit interview with the department, Debbie expressed disappointment in not experiencing cohesion with other students in her
class, many of whom did not complete their doctoral degrees. Her thoughts on how doctoral students could support and mentor one another demonstrate what a peer system could have provided her: “Just to be able to rely on them, to be able to call them, or get some direction when you weren’t sure how to do something, or who to call, that would’ve been wonderful.”

The previous subcategory illustrates the powerful impact peer relationships have on doctoral student’s path to degree completion. Peers provide support, mentorship, and guidance as it relates to the culture of academia. The cohort model provides unique opportunities for mentorship, but all participants (including those who did not come from cohort-based program) benefitted from peer support as it related to degree completion. Peer relationships can also serve as a catalyst and motivation for change when conflict or disagreements arise and helped participants see themselves in dynamic ways that affected motivation to complete.

The following category relates to how faculty and peer relationships served as a catalyst for new behaviors and perspectives regarding participants’ professional growth and development. Making an informed decision whether to continue in the doctoral program included observation and participation in CES related activities with others (e.g., teaching, service) which helped reinforce participants’ desires to continue in their program.

**Professional Growth and Development Occurs Through Relationships With Others**

This category demonstrates how faculty and counselor education programs facilitated participant professional growth and development leading to degree completion
by (a) assisting with CES career preparation (e.g., faculty provision of job search
guidance) and by (b) modeling and encouraging development of CES professional
identity (e.g., faculty demonstrating typical counselor educator activities). In this study,
the women identified how CES career preparation, which included career advice, helped
participants understand the evolution of a counselor educator career and determine how
their career goals aligned with the profession. The women also shared how faculty and
peers exemplified CES professional identity through role modeling of scholarly activities.
Proper guidance in scholarly activities helped participants understand how their skills,
abilities, and knowledge fit within the world of counselor education, facilitating degree
completion. Additionally, a discussion on how the lack of professional identity in peers
and faculty influenced participants’ professional growth during their doctoral education is
included.

**CES career preparation.** The subcategory of CES career preparation reflects the
ways in which individuals influenced participants’ career path toward the decision to
become a counselor educator. Faculty and peers provided guidance and mentorship
about the realities of the profession. Participants received career guidance and support
beginning with the early encouragements to pursue a doctoral degree in CES, to the final
steps of locating a CES academic position. These were critical aspects of their doctoral
experience, often serving to remind participants of their reasons for pursuing, and
completing, a CES doctoral degree. Participants discussed how faculty, peers, and
counselor education programs helped doctoral students navigate their career
development.
Faculty assisted participants with the development of their career path, often initiating the first steps towards a counselor educator position by encouraging participants to obtain their doctoral degree in counselor education. These sources of encouragement suggested to the participants that they had traits or qualities conducive to becoming a counselor educator. As a result, participants became aware that others thought they were capable of doctoral level work, something they might not have considered otherwise. Participants described the significant role faculty played in their decision to pursue their doctoral degree, illustrating the influence faculty have in shaping and developing an individual’s career trajectory.

For many of the participants, faculty encouragement to consider the CES profession began with those who knew the participants as master’s level students. Faculty encouragement served as the primary catalyst for Samantha to consider entering a doctoral program. She described running into a former professor after graduating with her master’s degree, who convinced her to pursue her doctoral degree when she learned that Samantha was interested in writing an article on her clinical area of interest. “Okay, so it was her, it was her influence, it was her mentoring me and the fact that somebody believed I could do it despite the fact that I was in my 50’s.”

Molly began thinking about pursuing her doctoral degree during her master’s program, encouraged by her mentor who was her first professor in her master’s program and who later taught in the doctoral program from which she graduated. Similarly, Elizabeth was also encouraged by a professor from her master’s program, who orchestrated a meeting between Elizabeth and faculty from a particular doctoral program.
while she was a master’s student: “I didn’t know it at the time but this mentor of mine was really invested in me going out there to [a doctoral program]. She said it was going to be a great fit.”

For Jamie, faculty advice about attending doctoral programs focused on specifics that would later influence her job prospects: “After I graduated from the [master’s] program, when I was applying to PhD programs, my professor from my master’s program recommended that I apply to a CACREP-accredited program because [he said] it will help you to get a job.” These early encouragers set the stage for participants to consider themselves future counselor educators, necessary when considering the daunting decision to enroll and complete a counselor education doctoral program.

For Kathy, the understanding of what being a counselor educator meant changed during her doctoral program, once she decided to switch her career focus from a blend of clinical work and service to primarily education. By the end of her first semester, Kathy realized the employment opportunities she, as a school counselor, could enjoy in the academic job market and her career goal shifted to one of becoming a counselor educator instead of primarily a school counselor. She described how classes and conversations with faculty began the shift in her professional goal:

I will attribute that to one of my first classes which was [introductory course in program]. It was kind of an orientation to being a counselor educator and you were paired with one of our faculty members to write your first manuscript so they mentor you through that and then [you] also submit it for presentation. This
is what changed my mind: they said there’s lots of jobs but the jobs are mostly for school counselors, so that began my shifting.

Professional development also related to faculty’s career guidance and pragmatic advice about seeking and finding a counselor education position. Participants acknowledged that faculty relationships were instrumental in providing information related to the job search and locating a position that would be a good personal and professional fit following graduation. Soliciting career advice from faculty was typical for participants, who knew that their advisors and mentors had perhaps more information regarding the program and school to which they were considering applying. Molly revealed that her doctoral experience would have been radically different were it not for the mentorship of her advisor. His sage advice related to the job search encouraged her to remain goal oriented and focused on degree completion: “Particularly when I got to the time for the job search, he literally had multiple lunches with me and peers about navigating the politics of finding an academic position.” Elizabeth also benefitted from her faculty mentor, who she described as “being [with me] all the way through dissertation and the job search.” Samantha also felt encouragement from her faculty throughout her program that she would find a faculty position. Unfortunately, due to limited mobility, Samantha and Debbie were not yet able to secure a counselor educator position at the time of these interviews, but felt hopeful that they would find one in the future.

For these participants, CES career preparation included encouragement to pursue the doctoral degree, advice on the job search process, and further clarification on how the
counselor education profession fit with their personal and professional needs and interests. The following section describes how peers and faculty helped instill CES professional identity in participants through collaborative scholarly activities and role modeling. The women also described how the lack of professional identity in faculty and peers had an impact on them while en route to degree completion.

**CES professional identity.** The subcategory of CES professional identity reflects how doctoral program experiences and relationships helped participants acquire the skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary of a counselor educator. The women described this in various ways: (a) academic departments helped create opportunities to develop professional identity through curriculum structure; (b) faculty and peer relationships influenced the development of participants’ professional identity through role modeling and joint ventures in scholarly activities, which continued to strengthen participants’ professional identity development; and, finally, (c) as the women participated in various CES activities, motivation to clarify career goals as related to the doctoral degree increased.

Participants described how departments helped create opportunities to develop professional identity through curriculum structure. As they participated in coursework, participants noticed changes in their conceptualization of what being a counselor educator meant, developing an increased awareness of how they fit within the counselor education profession. Perhaps Jamie best described how her conceptualization of what it meant to be a counselor educator became clearer with discourse and experience. Through conversation with others, she began to understand how the accumulation of courses and
knowledge applied to her career as a counselor educator. Jamie learned how her time spent in classes was not just for the purposes of learning, but it also prepared her for a career. She now saw another purpose to class time, and this impacted how she felt about her doctoral education. During one particular seminar class, Jamie’s professor helped her understand what it meant to be a counselor educator, shaping her understanding of why she was studying the material and how it applied to her professional identity. She said,

I took classes because I had to. They were in my program and I was just happy to be learning new things, but I was not aware at the time, [of] why am I doing this? But in this seminar, the professor helped us realize those kinds of things [how content learned in class applied to a counselor educator career] and then opened the discussion on being a good counselor educator.

Kathy’s program provided students with professional activities that mimicked what a counselor educator would do on a routine basis. Although challenging, her program provided a service to students by engaging them in experiential activities that accurately portrayed the counselor educator’s career. This gave students the opportunity to decide if what they observed and took part in aligned with their professional goals and interests. Kathy described the second year in her doctoral program, which she called “the life of a counselor educator.”

Second year for us is my life now, where we ran group supervision for practicum, we were responsible not only for our coursework, we were responsible for the dyadic supervision for practicum, we were each teaching our own class, and we were all conducting research projects as well. Pretty big research projects. So
literally the second year they call it “the life of the counselor educator” and they always say it doesn’t get worse than this. Because not only did we have to do all that we were also teaching classes, and research and publishing as well.

Kathy also recognized, through meeting other doctoral students, how her program was preparing her for a position as a counselor educator:

Throughout the three years professional development is really big and going to conferences is the norm. We kind of learned very quickly along the way what it was like in other places and we would talk to other doc students and so we also got that feedback from other doc students along the way, knowing how fortunate we were as students and then at the end realizing “I want to have a job, I want to be a teacher, I want to be happy” and then realizing how much of where I am is as a result of the program I went to. It’s overwhelming and exciting all at the same time. And grateful and humbling.

Participants described how faculty and peers who modeled professional identity influenced participant skill sets and helped them feel connected to the CES profession. Modeling professional identity involved joint collaborations between faculty and students in the form of co-teaching, presenting at conferences, or writing manuscripts. As participants engaged in these activities, they came to understand how their skills fit within the CES profession. Joint ventures helped create a sense of mastery in teaching, writing, and service and promoted a sense of accomplishment and further development of professional identity in the participants, who were aware of the professional expectations, but needed mentorship to help execute the tasks.
Kathy knew that publishing was an important CES task and benefitted from being the graduate assistant for an advisor “who literally writes all year-round nonstop. And so, I was privy to that process and had published a lot by the time I graduated.” Similarly, Molly benefitted from her work with one particular faculty member in regards to publishing and “did everything from writing up some lit reviews and [getting] two publications out of that study.” Samantha also wrote an article with one of her mentors, who modeled and mentored her through the writing experience:

He and I wrote an article together because he believed in me and he helped me do it and he worked diligently with me every week. We would sit down for a year and he just helped me because he wanted me to be able to do it.

Molly’s professional identity as a counselor educator developed from her observations of her master’s level professors. Here, she witnessed how these educators facilitated growth and learning for their students. She described how her interest in student growth and development was influenced by observing previous role models.

The things that appealed to me [in a counselor educator role] that I saw in faculty were the faculty that taught at the master’s level. Just being in the classroom with students [and] watching them [faculty] interact with students; supervision and watching that student develop from that entering first year master’s student to watching them graduate and watching the growth and development [of the student].

Debbie benefitted from co-teaching experiences with her mentor during the last 5 years of her program; these experiences strengthened her resolve to find an academic
position as her passion for teaching grew. Samantha’s participation in co-teaching opportunities with faculty were a favorable aspect to her doctoral education and one that likely helped her to feel more confident in her abilities as a counselor educator.

[The faculty were] extremely supportive, immediately brought me in to start co-teaching, not just the females, I must say, the older men, too. And a lot of it had to do with the fact that we had similar experiences, in terms of training. The profs were very, very inviting. They say do this workshop with me, you have to participate.

For some participants, a lack of professional identity in faculty affected the quality of relationships faculty had with students, posing retention implications. Because of restructuring within academic departments that resulted in faculty teaching courses outside their discipline, Molly’s doctoral program lacked a strong counselor education identity (e.g., faculty held doctorates in disciplines outside of CES), resulting in poor faculty-student relationships, student dissatisfaction with the program, and mistrust of students towards faculty. Because of this, Molly described how faculty behaviors affected students emerging professional identity.

What I had come to understand about being a professional counselor and being a counselor educator I did not see being modeled in the PhD faculty and I think an example of that is that I recently learned they didn’t go to [ACES regional conference] this year. They all went to a different professional conference.

In addition to faculty relationships, peer relationships also helped the women develop their professional identity development. Participants developed some friendships
more readily based upon shared mutual professional interests and professional goals. They identified with peers whose work ethic or professional interests they shared, fostering professional growth and development by engaging in joint activities they might not have had the opportunity to do alone. Usually, the women sought out peers with whom they could relate. For example, Samantha’s passion for teaching found a home with some of her peers. Samantha was influenced by, and drawn to, peers whom she could relate to professionally.

If your passion is there, your passion is there. There were people in our program who I could not connect with very well because they were opposite of that. And so the people that I was really close to had the same passion and had the same drive and the same perseverance.

Kathy’s decision to shift her career focus, and professional identity, was influenced by her peers. At various times throughout her doctoral program, Kathy struggled with being a teacher educator or counselor educator. She was able to make her decision based upon experiences when she collaborated on projects with peers, finding that her knowledge as a developing counselor educator helped her to clarify her professional identity and goals.

My best friend in the program and one of my roommates when I was up there was in [area of concentration] as well. I think through a lot of collaborative projects we did kind of got me to that point, where my counseling specialty actually enhanced [the project].
Most of the participants were motivated to pursue a doctoral degree with the career goal of teaching, mentoring, and advising counselors in training. Integration into their doctoral programs provided them with opportunities to strengthen their CES professional identity and identify their strengths, limitations, and preferences in relation to their career. Not surprisingly, most of the participants mentioned how much they enjoyed their teaching experiences and other activities that were student-focused. Although participants acknowledged that research and service were important elements in the life of the counselor educator, having an active role in teaching, mentoring, and supervision were the counselor educator roles that appealed to them the most.

Debbie, who had a long career in teaching various age groups, knew that her primary motivation for completing the doctoral degree was to continue to teach adults. “I love teaching. I’ve been a kindergarten teacher, I taught adults in community college. I love teaching and so this is the ultimate goal of teaching, to teach adults. The next generation coming into the profession that you love.” In fact, Debbie admitted that her strengths lie with teaching, not research. “For me it’s not the research and writing because I hate that, I’m a very practical person. I never went into the doctorate to do research.” Debbie articulated her goals for entering the doctoral program and progressed through it with the self-knowledge of what her strengths and limitations were, creating realistic expectations for herself and her program. Debbie’s professional identity as an educator in a counselor education program likely helped her persevere to degree completion.
Elizabeth’s motivation relates to the appeal she finds in the role of an educator and being an instrumental figure in another person’s growth and development. In addition, she finds the topic of counseling, and teaching counseling to others, exciting.

I think that mentoring role is appealing to me. To be able to, I was going to say to be able to influence learning, but that’s not exactly what I mean because it sounds like I have a lot of power in the situation and that’s not really what I’m interested in. It’s more like I like to be able to facilitate learning for someone. I think that’s a really exciting process. I had some really good facilitators that were instrumental in my learning and so I think getting to be a part of the growth and change and learning that students go through is really exciting to me. I’m excited about the topic of counseling in counselor education so interacting with people who are also excited about that is exciting.

Samantha clearly articulated her strong love of education. Additionally, she desired increased self-awareness, growth, and development as a doctoral student. Learning about new ideas was thrilling for Samantha, who enjoyed seeking new experiences that would assist with that:

My motivation was I absolutely love to learn and the more I learned the more I wanted to learn. The more I wanted to read and relearn what I learned in the past. My motivation was to keep filling my cup up. And I just get really excited about stuff. I was thrilled to be able to learn new things and be able to figure out, even becoming an APA guru. I loved that it was fun for me. And I didn’t look at
things as stressful, I looked at things as more “isn’t this a cool opportunity?” You know it was more of an open door for me.

Samantha’s preference for a career in counselor education is reflected in her desire to learn from, and teach others. The emphasis on relationship building also demonstrates a desire to interact with others in a collaborative and meaningful way. She discussed how the counselor education field promotes learning through discourse and engagement that can occur in classrooms and at conferences. For her, the most important tasks of a counselor educator were “giving back what you know, and to co-construct relationships with students, and continue to grow and learn and be able to go to conferences and pick people’s brains, and just keep moving forward. For me, it is an ongoing evolution of learning.” Samantha’s engagement in such activities during her doctoral program strengthened her CES professional identity and provided her with the energy to continue moving forward towards degree completion.

Kathy discovered strengths about herself she was unaware of and which helped clarify her career interests, goals, and professional identity as a counselor educator. She noted that her favorite counselor educator activities were Teaching and research. Definitely research. I never thought I would like research as much. And I guess, I never really put it together that you can be out doing presentations to schools and professional outreach. I ended up loving stats, too.

Participants acknowledged that their doctoral programs helped them understand the multifaceted role of a counselor educator and determine which roles (e.g., teacher, supervisor) they most preferred. By observing others in these roles and engaging in
experiential activities themselves, participants discovered which activities they enjoyed the most and the least. This was important information for participants to consider as they continued to invest time and energy in the pursuit of obtaining the doctoral degree in counselor education.

The following key theme, *Navigating obstacles*, demonstrated how the participants experienced and surmounted obstacles throughout their doctoral program. Participants experienced obstacles stemming from the system of higher education, and obstacles related to issues of a personal nature. Participants shared how these experiences created feelings of dissatisfaction and even thoughts of leaving their doctoral program. Nevertheless, participants found ways to navigate such obstacles, facilitating degree completion. Acknowledging the challenges participants faced, and just as importantly, how they overcame them, illustrates the personal resources and relationships needed to complete a doctoral degree. Understanding the obstacles participants experienced, and how they navigated them, explains the resources they used to facilitate their degree completion. The following theme, *Navigating Obstacles*, explores this.

**Navigating Obstacles**

All of the participants spoke about various obstacles they experienced during their doctoral program. They described obstacles that were systemic or more individual in nature. Systemic obstacles related to the academic system, whereas individual obstacles related to dimensions of diversity, such as gender, or age. These obstacles provided opportunity for the participants to pause and reflect on their reasons for attending a doctoral program, and to re-evaluate their desires and motivations for seeking a doctoral
degree. Although experiencing these obstacles was often difficult, it revealed strong resolve in these women, and an ability to tolerate ambiguity and high levels of frustration. Despite these obstacles, the participants found ways to surmount these obstacles and complete their degree, which often required drawing upon internal sources of persistence to make helpful connections in navigating problematic situations. Participants also acknowledged the personal characteristics they believed helped them to persevere (e.g., desire for follow through, “gutsiness”). The following discussion describes the categories Navigating systemic obstacles and Navigating individual obstacles that comprise the key theme of Navigating Obstacles.

Navigating Systemic Obstacles

This category reflects how the system of academia can impact individuals in negative ways. Systemic obstacles were a combination of complex interactions that permeated the experiences of the participants. Participants sometimes called these systemic obstacles “politics.” Participants identified three main systemic obstacles that permeated their experiences related to the: (a) environment of academia, (b) academics, and (c) financial aid.

The academic environment reflected an ambiguous experience for participants who struggled understanding the processes of navigating a doctoral program. Academic obstacles frequently referred to experiences with coursework, comprehensive exams, and dissertation, while financial aid focused on obstacles surrounding ways of financing their education. Obstacles involved novel experiences related to the system of academia and
doctoral education, consisting of policies and procedures that participants struggled to understand.

**Environment of academia.** For many of the participants, vague or unclear expectations created a sense of confusion about the doctoral education environment, leading participants to feeling anxious and frustrated about their roles and responsibilities. When discussing acclimation to their doctoral programs, participants often used the term “ambiguity” to describe how they perceived the expectations, requirements, and the process of obtaining a doctoral degree. Participants provided examples of ambiguity within academia and the persistence necessary to tolerate uncertainty.

For Samantha, this “new culture” was academia, and fitting in was important to her. She devoted a great amount of energy figuring out the new culture and how to become a part of it. She was able to navigate this challenge by observing others, paying attention to both verbal and nonverbal communication, and figuring out how to make herself part of this new environment, normalizing the experience for herself and others who also returned to school later in life.

You know I have talked to other people that started the same venture and I think it’s pretty similar for people who have been out of school for a while to go back and to try to do that. I think that you have to reset yourself to a new culture, and learn all the unwritten rules, you know. I think it’s pretty common for new adventures.
Samantha, who, as an older student, struggled with fitting in to her new environment and figuring out the “unwritten rules” of academia, discussed what rules she tried to understand and why it was important to do so. The “unwritten rules” were often ambiguous, but important for academic success.

Like trying to figure out your brand-new peers, who’s with whom, how do you fit in, what the patterns are, and with the profs it was the very same way. You know, some unwritten rules for the professors was that some preferred that you only speak after raising your hand, some were like go-ahead and speak out, subtle things, but they were important, important when you step into a new culture.

Some participants benefitted from being part of academic programs that prepared them for the ambiguous nature of academia. Kathy’s doctoral program used intentional means to help doctoral students learn to tolerate ambiguity. Kathy experienced a program that encouraged mentorship amongst cohorts and a department that helped students develop a system of networking and resources to help navigate the system.

We were being told constantly, “This is very ambiguous, be comfortable with ambiguity, be comfortable with not knowing”. You know that kind of stuff that had been ingrained since day one, and so, okay, well that’s how we had to navigate it, but we were set up to help us navigate it.

Molly’s mentor and advisor prepared her for tolerating ambiguity by educating her on the nebulous nature of doctoral education. Molly shared her interpretation of what he told her.
I think it was just that you don’t always get a black and white answer, sometimes the answer is wait, it’s not time for that yet. You know, I hear you but we’re going to get there. Sometimes the answer isn’t clear. I think that’s what I meant when I said learning to tolerate ambiguity, it’s not always about getting the information you think you need up front, there’s a piece about trusting the process which we hear[d] about all the time.

**Academics.** Academic obstacles created feelings of anger and dissatisfaction for the participants. Academic requirements that did not meet participant expectations (e.g., academics were too challenging, or not challenging enough) left participants with thoughts of discontinuing their program and quitting doctoral studies, or transferring to a different program. Despite these feelings, participants were able to surmount these obstacles and complete their degree. In most cases, participants drew upon their support network, including faculty mentors and peers, to help them gain motivation and the wherewithal to continue. In addition, the participants harnessed an internal source of strength that carried them through to completion.

Molly shared how unmet expectations, related to structure and organization, led to feelings of dissatisfaction with her doctoral program: “They lacked the consistency and structure that I was used to. Things seemed to be very haphazard, like ‘take this then take this now.’” Her unmet expectations for an academically challenging program contributed to feeling underwhelmed and poorly acclimated, affecting Molly a great deal. She struggled with thoughts of leaving. She said,
I found the writing to be very easy and no big deal. It was what I had done in my master’s program. As far as the workload, I found it easy. Now for me personally, though, it was frustrating because here I am, I thought [I was] getting a PhD and the work is so easy, it was not challenging. So acclimating myself to that and overcoming that was a bit of a challenge at times.

Molly’s resourcefulness at finding ways to navigate this challenge came from her other coursework, which was outside of her program. Taking courses outside of her department represented a kind of challenge that was missing from her program and one that she clearly desired. For Molly, these courses helped renew her sense of purpose and motivation to complete her degree:

I did consider leaving. I will say that once I got out and got into my cognate we had a specialization that had to be in the college of education and then our cognate was technically outside of the college of education, so once I got into my specialization and cognate course work that was very helpful.

Debbie, who was part of the first cohort in her doctoral program, described how her unmet expectations led to a very negative experience with comprehensive exams. Misinformation altered Debbie’s expectations of the exams. Feeling unprepared for the format and expectations of content led to a poor performance that precipitated thoughts of leaving her program. “It was very bad and I remember coming out of it just sobbing. It was a horrible, horrible experience. I was ready to say ‘you know what folks, I don’t need this.’” Being in the first doctoral cohort presented unique obstacles related to academic requirements.
I have to reiterate we were the guinea pigs. We were the first ones doing all of this, the first ones in the classes, first ones going through comprehensive exams, and so I don’t think we were prepared very well, not for the material, but for the formula of the exams. We were told, “oh, there will be just one statistics question on the exam,” and actually every question had a piece of statistics in it and so I wasn’t prepared for that.

After this disappointing experience, Debbie intuitively knew that other faculty whom she was close to could be a source of support in her time of need. Sharing similarities with her main advisor was a source of comfort and consolation for Debbie, who lacked role models. “She [faculty member] is an excellent counselor and she did her doctorate later [in life], so she understood everything that I was going through.” Partially because of this support, Debbie reconsidered and persisted with her degree.

Samantha, who felt strong resolve throughout her program, also struggled with her comprehensive exams. Feeling unprepared to write the amount expected, Samantha noticed her motivation falter. Confusion about whether or not she met the academic expectations for comprehensive exams left her with self-doubt. She utilized positive self-talk reminders then and throughout the challenging experience of her doctoral program to keep herself uplifted.

And at one point I thought, “what is this?” You know all those crazy hoops we have to jump through? I would have to constantly say to myself “this is just another hoop, it’s okay, this will pass,” because that is the hardest part is not giving up when those hoops are big.
Jamie also struggled with the academic requirements of her doctoral program, mainly because of her status as an international student who spoke English as a second language. The intense writing required in her doctoral program left her feeling overwhelmed and inadequate, and she considered returning to her native country instead of finishing. Her self-confidence faltering, she wondered whether she was capable of completing a doctoral degree in the US.

Writing is tough, not just writing my ideas, but creating good ideas and putting them onto paper in a kind of refined way was very challenging, so whenever I saw obstacles that way, I felt like I just want to stop. I just want to go back to [country of origin]. I can be an English teacher. So every time I feel kind of struggling on many levels in different ways, I felt that I want to stop here and go back to [country of origin].

Jamie was able to surmount this obstacle by realizing her limited career options if she did not finish her degree. Facing unique obstacles as an international student revealed Jamie’s strength of character as she navigated her way towards completion.

I think that in the beginning it was the ultimate goal, I have to finish this, otherwise, if I just go back to [country of origin] or stay here without completing the degree I would not get any job and I knew that. It was, I think, a driving motivator for me, other than that, I may not have completed.

Once coursework was complete, participants entered the challenging dissertation phase. Dissertation was an obstacle that participants struggled with in various ways on their journey towards completion. Participants described the isolative and rigorous nature
of writing the dissertation, demonstrating the persistence needed to finish this writing endeavor. Kathy described how she managed to cope with the sense of isolation she experienced while writing her dissertation by staying physically connected to campus.

That time was hard because you’re at a pivotal point when you no longer have classes and you no longer have faculty or other students to check in with at the end of that process. You’re kind of on your own because that’s when you start gearing towards comps and then you start gearing towards your dissertation and you’re pretty much on your own. You go from this extremely supportive environment to almost isolation and you’re only interacting with your dissertation chair. So I guess for me if I didn’t find myself on campus four days a week [working on dissertation] then I don’t know how I would’ve handled it.

Molly struggled with finding participants for her dissertation and took an extra year to complete it. She had a great deal of difficulty obtaining enough participants for her study. This led to her still needing to finish her dissertation while already in her first academic job.

Debbie’s struggles with the dissertation experience began with obtaining IRB approval for her dissertation study. Gaining information about what she needed in her IRB created a process she compares to a “puzzle.” Her tenacity in receiving an answer helped her navigate this particular obstacle. She explained how she finally got the answers required to obtain IRB approval for her dissertation.

I couldn’t figure out what was the problem because every time I would submit the answers to their questions, I would get more questions back, I’m like, “what is
this?” So finally, I just e-mailed them and said, “I really do not know how to fix this. Can you please help me?” I should’ve thought of that question months before that because then they e-mailed me back and told me what they wanted me to do and I thought why couldn’t they have told me this in the first place? It’s like this puzzle and you have to figure out the exact right words to say and if you don’t use the right words you don’t get the answer.

Debbie also had difficulty with her dissertation committee and described their requests for changes to be overwhelming and contributing to the amount of time it took to finish her dissertation. “You know my dissertation was a qualitative study and was an uphill grind because my committee, not my chair, my committee kept adding pieces to it that they wanted me to do. It was grueling, it was quite grueling.”

**Financial aid.** Decisions such as attending school full time and relying on financial aid (e.g., graduate assistantships and federal loans) versus employment income certainly affected the doctoral experience of these participants and their route to completion. Four out of the six participants in this study had graduate assistantships, working either in the department, or outside of the department in another program or school. One of the participants who did not have a graduate assistantship worked full time outside of the university and attended school on a part time basis, while another participant worked part time in a clinical capacity outside of the university, taught classes during her program, and attended classes on a full time basis.

Navigating this challenge was important because feeling financially secure was vital for participants to complete their degrees. The importance of having sufficient
income was evident in participants’ decisions to enter a particular program because of financial aid availability, or work outside of the academic department full time in order to remain financially independent. Having stable financial income was important to participants’ completion experiences and the need to generate income affected their doctoral experience, sometimes in adverse ways. It is important to understand that despite financial aid difficulties, participants found ways to overcome this obstacle en route to degree completion.

Elizabeth discussed how “there were some factors that contributed to me making the choice to go [to doctoral program], mostly financial factors. They give good scholarships and stipends out there.” Others relied on financial support from employment and had to juggle the duties of being an employee, with being a doctoral student. Debbie, an older student and a single mother, worked full time throughout her doctoral degree, limiting her energy to devote to other more academic activities, like writing.

For Jamie, the experience of being an international student posed unique systemic obstacles related to financial aid. In her particular program, needing to find a new graduate assistantship every semester to stay in the US created a great deal of stress for her, affecting her ability to focus on her studies. Without a graduate assistantship, she would not have had the means to pay for her doctoral program and would not have been able to continue in her program. She had also wisely used her time in the graduate student office to ask questions. In this office, conversations with peers enabled her to learn about graduate assistant opportunities that helped finance her education. In order to
support herself financially, Jamie held assistantships outside of her program, some not always related to her interests or professional goals.

I had to worry about “what about next semester?” Sometimes I had to work around that. For example, I don’t want to work on a project that is not of great interest, but that is what they have for the graduate assistantship and so I had to work on it.

Similar to Jamie, Kathy also experienced systemic obstacles related to financial aid. Not having accurate information about receiving financial aid resulted in her taking out loans and accruing education debt. In Kathy’s situation, she described how not having accurate information related to the funding process contributed to her feeling a sense of disappointment with her program.

I was the only one in my cohort that first year who was not receiving funding and when I inquired about it, they told me my GRE scores were low, and I was like okay, whatever, I will retake them. Well, I retook them, a few times, and come to find out it would not have mattered the second year because you don’t need the GRE scores and I ultimately, got the funding, but I’m like, somebody could’ve told me that earlier.

This disappointment led Kathy to ultimately get the funding by advocating for herself and talking to people who could help her.

It was just about being in the right place at the right time. The first person I was mentored with for writing that first semester, we had that conversation, and he was the one that got me the Fellowship the following year.
By initiating a conversation with someone in a position of power who could possibly help her, Kathy demonstrated resiliency and good problem solving abilities that likely served her well as she managed a doctoral program.

As a part-time student, Samantha juggled multiple sources of employment while completing her dissertation. Perhaps she provided the best reason that financial support is so imperative to the doctoral completion experience:

Being part-time was hard for me because I wanted to be there and it’s who I became. It was my identity, so I always tell people (a) don’t wait until your 50s to go back and (b) if you can financially afford it go full time.

Persisting through financial aid obstacles highlights the resourceful nature of these women. Struggles with acquiring financial aid were met with problem solving abilities and demonstrated a strong desire to complete a graduate degree. The women were able to finance their education through a variety of creative means that involved a combination of relationship skills and self-reliance.

Navigating Individual Obstacles

In this category, participants discussed how various demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender) contributed to their experiences of doctoral completion. Many of these experiences conveyed frustration and disempowerment. In other cases, however, the participants used these perceived limitations to foster internal strength and resolve to overcome perceived obstacles. Feelings of differentness resonated with all of the participants. The experience of completing the CES doctoral degree is unique to the individual, and participants spoke about cultural dimensions in addition to gender. In
most cases, gender and other dimensions of diversity were inter-connected. Participants shared how they experienced obstacles related to gender and other dimensions of diversity, and what personal resources they used to help navigate them towards degree completion.

The women in this study were diverse based on their: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) sexual orientation; (d) ethnic heritage; (e) religion, and (f) first language. The most salient dimension of diversity for these particular participants related to their status as women in a doctoral program; however, the participants also shared how they experienced obstacles related to other personal characteristics, specifically, age, ethnic heritage, sexual orientation, and first language.

Some participants described how they experienced gender inequality in their doctoral programs from both male and female faculty, obstacles that were unsettling and difficult to navigate. Varying degrees of unfair treatment occurred during the participants’ doctoral programs, conveying an environment that was, at times, hostile and unsupportive. Elizabeth discussed her interactions with a female faculty member whose poor boundaries contributed to Elizabeth feeling unsafe and manipulated in their relationship. Because of this experience, Elizabeth is a “lot more careful about how I relate to students because I don’t want to put anybody in the position that she put me in.” She left her doctoral program feeling resentful about this experience.

She flirted with the male students, which was uncomfortable and I always felt like she was competing with me as a woman. I always felt like I was threatening to her somehow. Things that would have been were very much like, “I have the
power here. Don’t you forget it. And I’ll put you back in your place.” She talked a lot about being a feminist, women power, it seemed like it was all talk. Like she talked about it a lot but I never really felt like I was treated all that equally to her. I guess in my experience the person who was talking about equality was not the one who demonstrated equality.

Because of negative interactions she experienced with this female faculty member, Elizabeth chose different people for her dissertation committee, when she originally was going to include her. This wise decision-making ultimately helped Elizabeth complete her dissertation in a manner that was professional and supportive.

In the end, I felt like if I had men on my committee that I would have less drama and I did. The three of them worked well together, they were all very respectful to me and my process and I felt more of an equal with them than this woman.

Elizabeth also experienced gender discrimination from male faculty when excluded from social events at professional conferences. She noticed how male faculty asked male students to do more physically intensive tasks. These experiences bothered her and left her feeling like an outsider. Fortunately, these experiences did not permeate her entire doctoral education.

Debbie’s experiences with her male advisor left her feeling disregarded and powerless. She experienced comments he made as unfair and discriminatory towards women. She also believed that a male student received preferential treatment from her advisor simply because of his gender. “He was very pro-male. If you are a male, you’re fine if you’re not, then you’re not very important. Women were not very intelligent, I
think, in his eyes.” For Debbie, growing up with a father who held discriminatory views of women provided her with the emotional hardiness to deal with her advisor. She was familiar with men who had limited expectations for women, but did not allow those expectations to define her or limit her capabilities. Debbie was unwilling to adhere to the rigid gender beliefs and roles that her father’s generation condoned, and developed strong resolve to combat others who may have held similar beliefs, such as her advisor. Not getting discouraged in the face of this ultimately assisted her with degree completion.

My father was also a chauvinist and a sexist, and my father constantly brought up my brother and his accomplishments, and I would say “but I am going to be the first one that’s going to get the doctorate,” but that was never important because it’s not a medical degree, or a lawyer or something like that. I’m not going to be making a lot of money. So I kind of grew up with that and was grounded by it. It was like, this is what men of this generation think like.

Female doctoral students with children experience unique obstacles en route to completion. In this study, the only woman who had children was Debbie. She shared how being an overwhelmed single mother with family obligations contributed to her feelings of powerlessness. Not having social supports affected how she experienced her doctoral program, posing unique obstacles for single women with children.

I would have been one of those ABD’s because, it was too much, it was too much to ask. You know. There are some candidates who are married or have significant others you know, have family that support them and back them, but I was really doing this by myself as a single mother with two daughters and a high
schooler who was constantly at battle with me. There were other traumatic things going on in my life that I looked at this and said, you know is this really worth it? Other participants noticed that those who did have children might have had additional challenges than those who did not. Jamie, who did not have children, made this observation:

I am thinking that maybe the doctoral program affects females more than it does the male doctoral students regarding how it is affecting their relationships, or how it is affecting their families because many times I see female doctoral students struggling a little bit regarding time management with their families, and stressors pile up.

Kathy, also childless, remarked, “I will say we also had a lot of moms [in the program] and I was thoroughly impressed with the moms in my program. I don’t know how they did all of it.”

For Elizabeth, the community in which her doctoral program was located practiced rigid gender roles to which she was unaccustomed. Feeling unwelcome by members of the community and limited in the ways they viewed her as a woman led Elizabeth to experience anger and determination to “prove them wrong” about who she was. Instead of isolating herself from the community, Elizabeth intentionally set out to meet others who shared her values, creating friendships that helped sustain her throughout her doctoral program.

In addition to gender, participants shared experiences that related to other dimensions of diversity, such as cultural heritage. As an international student and a
minority, Jamie worried about getting undeserved preferential treatment because of her status as an international student and someone who spoke English as a second language. The desire for equal treatment motivated Jamie to work harder and push herself beyond her comfort zone.

I think I was afraid that they would evaluate me or assess me differently. I don’t want them to sympathize with me, I don’t want them to give me extra credit because of that, I want to be evaluated in a fair judgment.

As a result, Jamie set out to learn about her new culture in a very intentional way. She navigated this particular challenge by making the effort to understand her surroundings.

I think I learnt from here and there, by listening to other people and just getting to know the culture of the school and going through the Master’s program and through the movies, I would educate myself. At the same time, my aunt went through the school system here and she knows, she kind of gave me tips. [She said] if you want to learn, you have to be close with your professors and you have to get to know them and something like that. I [could] not imagine that you would have a relationship with a Professor, but during my Master’s program experience, and at the same time my aunt, and educating myself through movies and listening to other people and observing other people [gave] me an idea that I’d rather build a relationship with the professors [where] we can work together, not work for them.

Jamie became aware that having strong, supportive relationships with faculty was helpful to having a positive doctoral experience. As an international student, she
observed unique differences in relationships between students and faculty in the United States from her culture. Surprised by the informality between students and faculty, Jamie began to understand how important it was to develop those kinds of relationships with faculty and tried to mimic what she saw in her peers. Jamie saw how her friend, who completed her master’s in the same program, benefitted from having stronger relationships with faculty members. She described the steps she took to make herself visible to others, even at the cost of feeling uncomfortable.

I had to put forth extra effort to make myself present in the department, part of the reason is that I felt that other people had [relationships with professors], it was easier for them to get [what they needed]. I felt it was a little bit hard for me to have a relationship with the Prof., kind of a working relationship, a mutual relationship, because as a [cultural identification] I cannot imagine to have a relationship with your professor. Because professors have kind of authoritarian authorship for me, a different status. I put them in a different status, a higher rank than me.

Debbie, who spent several years outside of the United States, also spoke a language in addition to English. Debbie’s ability to speak another language was a strength dismissed by her male faculty advisor, who focused more on her English language abilities, which had suffered because she lived in a non-English speaking country for many years. This criticism was difficult to hear, but she recognized why her English language skills were limited and knew that she could overcome them.
I know myself well enough, and I knew that I had a certain deficit and I shared that with him, yes, I have a deficit, I know I have a deficit, but I also have command of another language that has needed my attention and focus and I just said, but I am capable of compensating for that.

Not feeling supported, she decided to find a more validating advisor, a means to navigating this particular challenge. Debbie’s confidence in her skills, along with the decision to choose an advisor who would support her, contributed to her ability to withstand the criticism and follow through with her dissertation, and her degree.

Another dimension of diversity, age, resonated with some of the women. Participants who returned for their doctoral program later in life had unique experiences related to family obligations and feelings of differentness because of their age. Samantha and Debbie both worked professionally for many years prior to entering their doctoral program and experienced thoughts of self-doubt while acclimating to their new environment. Samantha shared,

> It wasn’t so much being female that resonated with me, but of being an older female. That was different, more so of an internal realm for me then in actuality. Often times I felt like what am I doing here with all these kids? I am in this different part of my life and I have like 20 years experience, how do I fit in? That was a struggle for me, somewhat, internally not externally.

Samantha described part of the reason why she thinks she overcame obstacles and completed her degree: “I’m just gutsy. Just gutsy. And I think for me it was if I’m going to do this then I want to do all of it. I want to make it the best I can.”
Debbie discussed how pursuing and finishing the doctoral degree was a personal endeavor that required sacrifice.

It’s very difficult you know, you give up on lots. And there were comps and I remember all summer long I didn’t go anywhere on the weekends because I was studying every single weekend. There are a lot of things you give up in order to do this.

Debbie struggled with sacrificing personal time with her aging father. She shared how the decision to pursue a doctoral degree is a very personal one that requires great commitment.

There are influences but the ultimate decision to do this is a completely personal decision. You have to be invested in it because there is just too much, too many components in it that make it too difficult. For me I think this is one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life.

Debbie revealed her personality trait of endurance that helped her to complete her degree, in addition to wanting to be a positive role model for her children: “I’m not a quitter. When I start something I finish it.”

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 provided a description of how these six women navigated their doctoral degree to completion. Relationships with others, both positive and negative, influenced virtually every aspect of the doctoral degree process, fostering a commitment to develop professionally and personally. Participants experienced obstacles with people and with the academic system, which challenged them to harness internal sources of strength and
resolve as they continued to strive toward their goal of completion. Chapter 3 illustrated the complicated endeavor of completing the doctoral degree, one that relies on external sources of support and internal personal resources.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to generate an emergent theory of the process of doctoral degree completion for female CES doctoral degree recipients. The question that guided the current study was: What doctoral education experiences facilitated degree completion for CES women doctoral degree recipients? The data suggested an emerging theory related to program retention specific to women and the CES doctoral degree. In this chapter, results are discussed, contributions of the findings to current CES doctoral education literature and limitations of the study are reviewed, and implications for counselor education programs and future research are provided. Finally, the researcher shares observations and experiences of the research process.

The Emergent Theory

Analysis of the data revealed that participants conceptualized their doctoral education journey and completion as being dependent upon relationships with others. Participants’ positive and negative interactions with others modified their self-concept and as a byproduct, helped provide motivation for degree completion. Without these particular relationships, participants’ experiences with their program and their ability to complete the degree might have been quite different. The emergent theory developed on the basis of these findings thus conveys the relational nature of doctoral education, and is defined as: “the process of completion as an inter-connected system of experiences with self and others.”
Central to these program experiences were relationships. Participants discussed how vital aspects of their journey to degree completion related to relationships with others, which often influenced their behaviors and attitudes. For example, the care and support they experienced helped them to feel competent and empowered, contributing to their ability to complete a doctoral degree despite many inherent challenges.

Participants experienced obstacles, specific to the completion of doctoral programs, which required resourcefulness and the ability to remain goal-oriented. The ability to deal with challenges demonstrated the personal qualities of the participants, such as perseverance and focus. The women in this study shared how their journey to completion was filled with both positive and negative experiences that required reaching out to others and self-reliance. Clearly, the experience of doctoral degree completion is influenced by several inter-related factors. To support these findings, the emergent theory is supported by two overlapping key themes: (a) Relationships as sources of support and catalysts for growth, and (b) Navigating obstacles.

**Contributions of the Current Study to CES Doctoral Education Literature**

The purpose of the current study was to generate a theory that describes what facilitated doctoral degree completion for female counselor educators. The CES doctoral education literature has yet to provide a description, specific to women, of students’ experiences during a doctoral program that either facilitate or encourage them to complete the program. In fact, very little exploration has been conducted regarding completion of a CES doctoral degree. The women in this study, therefore, contributed to
this area by describing experiences they believe facilitated their completion of the CES doctoral degree.

Existing CES literature describes how CES doctoral students manage returning to their doctoral program after departure from it (Burkholder, 2009), as well as the program experiences of CES doctoral students, in general (Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). One study (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005) addressed retention and persistence in counselor education, acknowledging that a good program fit directly affects students’ ability to persist in their program of study. The results of the present study were consistent with several of Hoskins and Goldberg’s findings relating to CES students’ experiences of their doctoral program and factors facilitating retention. Like the doctoral students in Hoskins and Goldberg’s study, participants in the current study discussed the importance of having strong faculty support and a clear understanding of how their career goals matched program activities.

**Relationships as Sources of Support and Catalysts for Growth**

All of the participants discussed several aspects of their doctoral education completion that were contingent upon relationships with others. Participants perceived personal growth and development as partly due to their mentoring and affirming relationships with faculty and peers. These relationships validated participants’ experiences and provided encouragement when most needed, usually when participants had thoughts of leaving their program. As a result of these relationships, participants learned about new opportunities, considered alternative perceptions of self, or initiated
change in some other way, and therefore, these relationships were a catalyst for personal growth.

Relationships also enhanced the professional growth and development of the women in this study. By observing role models among peers and faculty, and engaging in scholarly activities with others, participants found ways to engage in the role of a burgeoning counselor educator. These experiences helped shape their CES professional identity and assisted with solidifying career aspirations.

Participants in this study frequently used the term “mentorship” when describing the relationships that were sources of support and catalysts for growth. Mentorship is distinctly different from advising, although an advisor may become a mentor. An advisor is a person (not always a faculty member) who instructs the student on program requirements, course scheduling, and answers other academic related concerns (Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2010). A mentor, however, is someone whom the student works with, learns from, and seeks to emulate professionally (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Most of the participants in this study indicated that one or more mentors had assisted them during their doctoral program; often the participants’ faculty advisors had become their mentors, but they also experienced mentorship from non-advisor faculty and peers. The participants described two different aspects to their mentorship experiences, one of a personal nature, and another relating to professional development, reflecting the distinction often made in the literature on mentorship (Gilbert & Rossman, 1992; Kram, 1985).
Personal Growth, Development, and Support Occurs Through Relationships With Others

Doctoral education retention literature emphatically states that students need to have personally fulfilling relationships with others during their doctoral education (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001) and development in the student occurs through supportive relationships (Gardner, 2009). When students have meaningful and helpful relationships that support their efforts, they can be inspired and motivated to consider alternative perspectives of themselves and their situations. In the present study, participants acknowledged that the foundation of their education consisted of relationships that fostered a desire to change and grow. When faced with stressful situations during their doctoral program that often prompted thoughts of leaving, the women experienced encouragement to overcome these obstacles and persevere to completion. As a result, they began to see themselves as more capable and resilient.

Personal growth manifested in ways unique to each participant, facilitating motivation to complete their degree. All of the participants experienced emotionally supportive relationships with faculty, peers and others, which helped them to feel validated, cared for, and empowered. This in turn helped the participants feel important to others and fueled a desire to continue in their program. It also encouraged them to see themselves as capable of finishing a doctoral degree, something most had struggled with at some point during their program.

Relationships with faculty. Previous research has demonstrated that substantive relationships with faculty contribute to degree completion (Bair & Haworth, 2004;
Cronan-Hillix, Gensheimer, Cronan-Hillix, & Davidson, 1986; Lovitts; 2001; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). In fact, favorable relationships with faculty are the most likely predictor of degree completion (Ferrer de Valero, 2001). A key aspect of positive student-faculty relationships includes when the advisor demonstrates concern for students educational development and personhood (Bair & Haworth, 2004). The majority of the participants in the present study had close relationships with one or more faculty members where they felt support and concern to develop personally. Often, the participants called these mentoring relationships.

Gilbert and Rossman (1992) identified the personal realm of mentorship, which is “relational in nature and centers around the notions of mutuality and enhancement” (p. 234) and which assists the mentee in developing self-esteem and self-confidence. This is similar to Kram’s “psychosocial help” component of mentorship (1985), which consists of providing emotional support, offering empathizing, and demonstrating role modeling. In the present study, the women benefitted from this type of mentorship when they struggled with confidence issues related to degree completion, and benefitted from faculty who listened to and empathized with their struggles, and empowered them to persevere. Researchers have also explored how mentors can normalize the graduate school experience and provide support to students who lack self-esteem (Kram, 1985; Tenenbaum et al., 2001). This was evident in the accounts given by Jamie and Debbie, who often felt like outsiders and benefitted greatly from faculty who shared about their own struggles with their doctoral programs, normalizing the difficulties of completing a doctoral degree.
Mentors offer, among other things, emotional support and understanding (Casto, Caldwell, & Salazer, 2005). In the present study, all of the participants acknowledged feeling cared for, emotionally supported, and validated by one or more faculty members. This had often occurred when participants were undergoing particularly stressful or even traumatic experiences. Both Molly and Debbie faced personal and academic challenges during their program and considered leaving. Faculty demonstrated concern and interest in their well-being, ultimately helping with degree completion.

Positive faculty-student relationships that are not considered mentoring relationships also provide students with support and guidance. For example, faculty members who encourage participation in programming activities are promoting program integration, an important element in retention (Lovitts, 2001). Samantha’s struggles to fit in with her program were ameliorated by one faculty member, who noticed her floundering and encouraged her to participate in experiential activities as a role model for other students. Samantha was grateful to this professor whom she did not identify as a mentor, but who had taken notice of her and helped create opportunities for her that required participation and investment of time and energy. As a result, Samantha learned she had much value to offer her program, improving her self-worth. Such examples demonstrate the importance of faculty support and validation in the process of doctoral degree completion.

**Relationships with peers.** Doctoral education researchers have identified peers as important in the process of degree completion (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright Parker, 2011; West, Gokalp, Vallejo, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011). Bruce (1995)
reported students in a counselor education doctoral program found peer relationships to be helpful, positive, and a crucial aspect of graduate school, consistent with what the women in the present study reported. Doctoral students often learn the specific values, skills, and norms of their field in the process of receiving emotional support, specific content knowledge, and general advice from peers (Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2008). Peer mentoring can be arranged formally by the department or university, or informally by students themselves. In this study, both formal and informal methods of peer support were found to be important facilitators of the participants’ degree completion.

Universities that encourage formal peer support can provide a mechanism for this by formation of a cohort model. Cohort based programs are organized around a group of students who enter their doctoral program at the same time, take courses together, and move through the graduate program on a similar path and timeline (Lewis, Ascher, Hayes, & Ieva, 2010). Elizabeth and Kathy spoke about their experiences in a cohort-based program. The goals of cohort models of education are to promote retention, graduation, and graduation rates of students (Lei et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2010), which is something Kathy was aware of: “statistically, people don’t finish, and so that [cohort model] was kind of their [doctoral program’s] way of setting it up to have a sense of community.” The doctoral student’s cohort “influences the learning process, opens support mechanisms, and enriches the experience socially and emotionally” (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 62). Weidman et al. suggested that cohorts can offer “social outlets, psychological release, and much needed emotional support” (p. 82).
Elizabeth and Kathy also used the term “peer mentoring” in relation to their cohort experiences. Elizabeth received peer mentoring from cohort members, which she perceived to have contributed beneficially to her growth, development, and degree completion. Kathy’s recollections revealed a highly structured program that emphasized peer learning and mentoring amongst cohort members. She also shared how having a community of peers to receive information from helped with acclimating to her doctoral program.

Similar findings in the literature reveal that those who attended a cohort based program experienced more cohesiveness and support than those who did not attend a cohort based program (Unzwueta, Moores-Abdool, & Donet, 2008). Jamie also reported feeling that her cohort had been a great support to her, but she noted that it had been difficult to avoid peers whom she did not get along with because they took most classes together. Although this negative aspect of the cohort model did not deter Jamie from degree completion, her experiences reflect the common criticism of the cohort model, that personality conflicts are not contained to single class encounters (Lewis et al., 2010).

The remaining participants had not come from a formally organized cohort program, but also shared how peer mentorship influenced their personal growth and development. A peer mentor arrangement offers a safe environment for both giving and receiving feedback, which allows for freedom of expression and the ability to consider multiple perspectives (Bonilla, Pickron, & Tatum, 1994). Peer mentoring has also been found to help individuals feel less isolated and more involved with their program, issues that are known to influence retention (Unzwueta et al., 2008). Peer mentoring is
instrumental in helping students complete their doctoral degrees (Dorn et al., 1995).

Molly had been part of a core group of students who supported one another, and reported that she did not believe she would have finished her degree without the support of this group. Similarly, Samantha had not been part of an organized cohort, but had experienced “tightness” with a group of about seven other students who helped her stay connected to her program.

Participants spoke at length about the nature of their experiences with peer relationships and how they facilitated personal growth en route to degree completion. Many of the participants shared stories about activities that had taken place at one another’s homes, at social events, or related to other recreational type activities. Commiserating with, and confiding in, peers helped participants feel heard, validated, and emotionally supported. Kathy discussed how her ability to process the experience of her doctoral program with peers also served a vital purpose to her personal development because it kept her from internalizing her experiences. Without these relationships, she believed she may have struggled more emotionally and mentally.

One study investigating graduate students sources of stress and social support found that social support provided by peers buffers graduate student stress (Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001). Molly and Samantha both turned to their peer group when feeling frustrated and unhappy with their program. Debbie, Samantha, and Kathy all shared experiences where involvement in group activities (e.g., going out to a local pub) with peers helped them feel more connected to and supported by them. Peer encouragement to engage socially also helped participants feel more integrated into their community and
Elizabeth described how encouragement from peers to meet others and forge new friendships outside of the academic department helped her to feel more invested in her community and instilled a sense of belonging within her department, which was a part of the larger community.

**Professional Growth and Development Occurs Through Relationships With Others**

Similar to the previous section, which described how the women’s mentors helped them develop personally, the participants had at least one mentor with whom they worked closely and who helped them develop their professional skills, contributing to their scholarly productivity and professional development. As with personal growth and development, graduate students who experience professional growth and development typically have one or more mentors (Cronan-Hillix et al., 1986; Tenenbaum et al., 2001). In one study, both faculty and doctoral students identified mentoring to include “skill building” and “direction” which involved the faculty mentor helping to hone the students’ research, writing, or teaching skills (Webb, Wangmo, Ewen, Teaster, & Hatch, 2009).

The professional domain of mentorship relates to mentor functions that focus on coaching, teaching, protecting, and networking (Gilbert & Rossman, 1992). Noe (1988) found that mentors provide mentees with feedback and opportunities to practice new behaviors. Mentors also serve as role models. The women in the present study described various ways faculty and peers encouraged participation in various CES professional activities, such as co-teaching, presenting, and engaging in other scholarly activities. For example, Kathy had many opportunities to write with her advisor, who served as a role model and provided her with feedback on her writing.
The results of one study showed that doctoral students want professional socialization opportunities from their mentors (Noonan, Ballinger, & Black, 2007), which included receiving information about, and participating in activities, that related to their future as a professional. The participants in the present study expressed similar desires from their mentors. Additionally, they discussed various ways faculty provided modeling and help with professional growth, often in the forms of coaching and exposure to academic activities and assignments. These experiences helped participants gain an increased awareness of the attitudes, roles, and behaviors of counselor educators and encouraged participants’ development of their CES professional identity. As stated previously, persistence towards degree completion is impacted by professional identity development.

Professional development also occurs through peer interactions. Sharing of office space has been discussed in the literature as a way in which peers can interact informally to exchange ideas about teaching, program and course requirements, and research (Gardner, 2009). Both Jamie and Elizabeth spoke about their experiences in a shared office space with peers and the knowledge they gained while there. Jamie, an international student who felt uncertain of her surroundings, had wisely used her time in the graduate student office to ask questions. In this office, conversations with peers helped her understand how she fit within her new academic culture and contributed to her professional growth and development. Elizabeth discussed the ways in which sharing an office with her cohort members resulted in conflict and negotiations, which she described
in positive terms as a growth enhancing opportunity and aided in her ability to manage professional relationships.

**CES career preparation.** Kram (1985) denoted a category of mentoring tasks called *career functions*, which include mentor behaviors such as sponsoring, protecting, coaching, and making the mentee known to others. These functions can provide networking opportunities and can link mentees with those in positions of authority and decision-making. In the case of the participants in this study, CES career preparation involved coaching participants in their decisions about whether or where to attend doctoral programs, facilitating meetings with prospective doctoral programs, and providing guidance on the academic job search process.

Even before entering doctoral programs, the participants’ mentors in their master’s programs helped to sponsor, protect, and coach them in various ways, by encouraging them to pursue doctoral degrees and coaching them on which programs to pursue. Elizabeth described how her mentor orchestrated a chance encounter with faculty at one particular doctoral program, helping her connect with a group of faculty she might not have had the opportunity to meet with otherwise. Another mentor from a master’s program served a coaching function by encouraging Jamie’s application to a CACREP-accredited doctoral program and explaining how the CES job market favors those who graduate from CACREP-accredited doctoral programs. Such examples demonstrate how, with faculty guidance, professional development can occur.

Consistent with Kram’s (1985) career function category of mentoring, faculty provided participants with coaching related to their career objectives. Once on the job
market, participants were happy to receive information about the job search process. These mostly informal activities, held during lunches or classroom conversations, helped the participants tremendously as they considered how their current activities and goals fit with the realities of an academic job. Often, their mentors and advisors were in a much better position to assess that fit. It seems that having a faculty member provide academic career advice, or provide a reference, can instill a sense of hopefulness in students since others (faculty) see them as capable of holding a faculty position. This hopefulness was especially encouraging in the midst of obstacles that might stall their progress. It offered participants a perspective that they themselves might not have always held: that they would finish their degrees and would get CES positions (which all desired).

**CES professional identity.** The development of a professional scholar identity is an essential task for doctoral students (Austin & McDaniels, 2006) and development of such an identity requires socialization into the academic profession (Weidman & Stein, 2003). Socialization into the profession is the process through which an individual learns to adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge needed for membership (Weidman et al., 2001). Without socialization into the profession, degree progress of the doctoral student is compromised (Turner & Thompson, 1993). The women in the present study, who found themselves learning how to acclimate to a doctoral program and simultaneously preparing for a future career as a counselor educator, were socialized into the CES field through relationships with others and engagement in professional activities. These experiences helped them understand the values, skills, and norms of the profession.
Some criticize doctoral programs for not providing enough attention to doctoral students’ professional identity development (Austin, 2002), an assertion made by Molly. Molly’s experiences with a doctoral program that lacked CES professional identity permeated her entire doctoral education. Her doctoral program lacked a strong CES identity and struggled with developing students’ professional identities. She was disappointed in the lack of CES identity she observed in the faculty, who served as role models for students. This led to her feeling disconnected from her program and experiencing thoughts of leaving. Ultimately, Molly was able to develop her professional identity through experiences she had as a master’s level student and with the assistance of faculty who recognized her needs and involved her in scholarly activities.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) considers professional identity to be comprised of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions, and offers guidelines for how doctoral programs can meet the professional identity development needs of doctoral students. CACREP outlines certain expectations that require commitment from doctoral programs and students to implement in advancing their professional identity. Because all of the participants attended CACREP-accredited doctoral programs, it is worthwhile to compare how the women in this study experienced their doctoral program in light of the CACREP standards.

The women in this study benefitted from the CACREP standards relating to the development of collaborative relationships with faculty in teaching, research, and professional writing (CACREP, 2009). All of the women engaged in collaborative endeavors with faculty involving teaching, writing, and/or research. They were often
invited by faculty to take part in co-teaching opportunities. In addition, faculty encouraged the women to take part in the CACREP standard relating to contribution to, and promotion of, scholarly counseling research. Molly and Kathy specifically spoke about faculty encouraging them to contribute to scholarly counseling research. As a result, they were able to publish while still in their doctoral programs, making them attractive potential employees on the academic job market.

One CACREP standard that pertains to participation in appropriate professional counseling organizations was not widely discussed by the participants, possibly because it was not considered a major facilitative aspect of degree completion. Only Elizabeth and Samantha mentioned active service to professional counseling organizations; Elizabeth was President of Chi Sigma Iota (counseling honorary association) at her university, and Samantha shared that she was one of the few doctoral students active with her state counseling association. Although service was acknowledged to be an integral aspect of the CES career, the participants’ energies during their doctoral programs appeared directed more towards other activities, such as teaching or writing. Nonetheless, all of the participants were active in departmental and university activities (e.g., orientations, new doctoral student interviews), which were not specific to professional counseling organizations, but offer legitimacy to Bair and Haworth’s (2004) findings that student participation in various professional and institutional activities contributes positively to retention.

Participants’ investment of time and energy in a doctoral program resulted in relationships that enhanced their experiences. As a result, both personal and professional
growth occurred, helping participants see themselves as capable of completing a doctoral degree. The following theme, *navigating obstacles*, continues to reveal what facilitated doctoral degree completion for these particular women, even in light of the obstacles they encountered.

**Navigating Obstacles**

A discussion of obstacles may seem unrelated to how individuals finish their doctoral degree, but in order to understand what facilitates completion, knowing *how* participants navigated obstacles is important. Participants discussed at length their experiences navigating obstacles, both systemic and individual in nature. Participants often provided specific examples of various challenges they encountered and how they dealt with them. Their ability to overcome obstacles demonstrated the personal resources necessary to complete a doctoral degree. The ability to tolerate high levels of frustration, and demonstrate strong persistence and internal motivation, were critical to navigating both systemic and individual obstacles.

**Navigating Systemic Obstacles**

This category focused on obstacles of a systemic nature (e.g., financial aid availability or curriculum-based concerns, or a combination of complex interactions that permeated the academic environment). Participants identified three main systemic obstacles, and demonstrated how they overcame them and persevered to degree completion. These obstacles related to: (a) environment of academia, (b) academics, and (c) financial aid.
Environment of academia. Participants in the present study struggled with some inconsistent and, at times, inadequate guidance surrounding student roles and responsibilities that helped to create an ambiguous academic environment. The women in the present study struggled with overcoming vague or unclear expectations and requirements, concluding that lower levels of satisfaction might have existed, important to consider because student satisfaction of their doctoral program is related to retention (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Nonetheless, the women persevered to completion.

In this study, an ambiguous academic environment created confusion and uncertainty for some of the participants. Fortunately, departments monitored student needs and provided resources to help students navigate their programs. Kathy spoke a great deal about her program’s emphasis on helping students navigate the ambiguity of their programs by creating peer mentoring programs and providing orientations to help demystify the doctoral process. Molly commented on the ambiguous nature of academia, but also remarked that she had faculty who explained to her and her peers that tolerance of ambiguity was necessary. In addition to having assistance from their academic department, the participants used internal resources (e.g., problem solving skills) to reach out for help, and observed their environment for clues on how to fit in and acclimate. Samantha and Jamie spoke about the culture of academia and of how their efforts to assimilate involved observing the environment for clues about appropriate behavior, all in an effort to integrate into the academic community and counteract feelings of uncertainty.

Academics. Participants mentioned dissertation as the most challenging academic requirement during their doctoral program, but obviously were able to complete
their dissertations and lend support to Bair and Haworth’s (2004) assertion that experiencing less difficulty with the dissertation promotes program retention and degree completion. Bair and Haworth (2004) also found that difficulties with the dissertation experience, including the time devoted to it and the selection of a topic, related to attrition. Several factors aid in successful completion of the dissertation, including: (a) good advising; (b) a manageable topic choice; (c) internal strength, characterized by independence, high motivation, and the ability to endure frustration; (d) limited or no employment; (e) imposition of deadlines on oneself; (f) delay of internship; and (g) existence of externally imposed incentives, such as future employment (Muszynski, 1988). The participants in this study all completed their dissertations and exemplified many of the characteristics of those who successfully complete dissertations; however, they still encountered obstacles that required management.

Researchers have discovered that certain characteristics, similar to ones the women in this study possessed (including persistence, internal locus of control, intrinsic motivation, and self efficacy), are associated with a greater likelihood of dissertation completion (Flynn, Chasek, Harper, Murphy, & Jorgensen, 2012). This was evident when the women in this study explained their struggles with their dissertations and revealed personal characteristics that assisted with dissertation obstacles. Kathy struggled with the ambiguity and isolative experience of writing a dissertation. She found the lack of peer and faculty contact to be especially difficult for her. She managed to circumvent this obstacle by going to campus on a daily basis to stay accountable to the process, a wise decision supported by Kluever (1997) who found that close proximity to
university resources, such as the library, and contact with advisors facilitates dissertation completion. Kathy’s decision to avoid full-time employment also assisted with her ability to complete her dissertation, which is consistent with the recommendations of researchers who advise doctoral students to delay employment and maintain completion of the dissertation as their main priority (Germeroth, 1990).

Personal characteristics related to persistence assisted with dissertation completion. Molly reported having to take an extra year to complete because of inadequate sampling. She expected to have an easier time soliciting participants, but struggled to do so. Nevertheless, she displayed tolerance for frustration by continuing to solicit participants. Debbie used terms such as “puzzle” to describe her experience with getting IRB approval for her dissertation. Debbie also experienced a great deal of frustration with her dissertation experience and found some of her committee members to be demanding and unsupportive, citing “politics” as the main deterrent to completing her dissertation in a more timely manner. Certainly, her ability to tolerate frustration served her well.

Additionally, participants struggled in academic areas not related specifically to dissertation. Participants discussed struggles with academic requirements that were too challenging or not challenging enough. Bair and Haworth’s (2004) meta-synthesis found that items mentioned most often by doctoral students as contributing to student satisfaction included fairness in requirements, adequate guidance, and consistency in evaluation measures of students. Molly found the academic requirements haphazard and lacking in rigor. She felt the guidance received from faculty was poor, and believed her
master’s level training was more rigorous than that of her doctoral program. Her expectations for faculty to provide guidance and modeling regarding scholarly activities were unmet. Jamie struggled, in general, with her writing skills, but persevered and found ways to improve her writing. Samantha and Debbie struggled with the comprehensive exams and were not prepared for the realities of that endeavor, a common criticism of comprehensive exams (Loughead, 1997). The exam did not meet their expectations regarding content. Debbie, a member of the first cohort in her program, described her cohort as “guinea pigs” who were ill informed about the exams. Despite challenges, these women maintained focus and exhibited a great deal of problem solving capabilities, such as identifying ways in which they can overcome these obstacles.

**Financial aid.** An important aspect of the doctoral experience is the availability of financial aid and navigating this obstacle was a necessary activity contributing to degree completion. Doctoral students consider the lack of financial resources a reason for departure (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Ehrenberg et al., 2007; Gardner, 2009), while students who hold fellowships, or research or teaching assistantships are more likely to complete their degrees than those who rely on other types of funding (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Protivnak and Foss (2009) found that financial security was an important compromise CES students made in order to pursue their doctoral degree.

Participants discussed finances as a reason to attend a certain program or to continue in a program. All but two of the participants had graduate assistantships during their doctoral program. Elizabeth’s primary motivation for attending her doctoral program was the substantial amount of financial support offered her, which helped her
focus all her efforts on her studies. This certainly helped her persevere by letting her focus be on academics. Jamie, as an international student, struggled with needing to find a new assistantship every semester. Sometimes these positions did not pertain to her interests as a novice counselor educator, but without financial support from the university, she would not have been able to complete her studies.

The women in Moyer et al.’s (1999) study voiced their difficulty in balancing their financial needs while maintaining their scholarship and academic requirements. As a result, these women worked several part-time jobs to help support their family while completing doctoral studies. Debbie, the only participant with children in this study, discussed the difficulties she had balancing single parent status with full-time employment in addition to being a doctoral student. This is an area of concern since researchers have identified employment as a hindrance to doctoral degree progress (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Samantha, who juggled multiple sources of employment while completing her degree, provided the best reason that financial support is so imperative to the doctoral completion experience:

Being part-time was hard for me because I wanted to be there and it’s [being a doctoral student] who I became. It [being a doctoral student] was my identity, so I always tell people (a) don’t wait until your 50s to go back and (b) if you can financially afford it go full time.

The systemic obstacles the women in this study experienced related to those areas of their doctoral program that all doctoral programs share, including the environment, financial aid, and academic requirements. The following subcategory, navigating obstacles
related to individual characteristics, reveals the unique obstacles of each woman, taking into consideration demographic variables, which contribute to the variation in doctoral program experiences.

Navigating Obstacles Related to Individual Characteristics

The women in this study described how their individual characteristics (e.g., gender, race, age) related to obstacles they encountered while finishing their doctoral degree. These descriptions are consistent with the higher education literature, for instance, the literature on gender. The experiences of women completing their doctoral degree are qualitatively different from the experiences of men, and in many cases, illustrate the embedded assumptions of societal practices and beliefs reflecting gender roles (Hall & Sandler, 1984; Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Wall, 2008). Historically, higher education has been a field dominated by, and created for, men. As a result, some of the beliefs, processes, and practices within higher education continue to reflect traditionally gendered assumptions about men and women (Wall, 2008). Elizabeth encountered the “boys’ club” at professional conferences where the men and women socialized separately instead of together. She also experienced the “boys’ club” within her department, when male doctoral students were asked to do tasks that required more physical demands. Innocuous though these seemed, for Elizabeth, the message was “go hang out with the women now,” and she worried that separation from male faculty would negatively impact her doctoral education and the relationships she wanted to foster with faculty. It also added an element of separateness
that could lead to female doctoral students feeling unwanted or disregarded, in general, leaving some to question whether or not they belong in that doctoral program.

In addition to gender, participants identified other personal attributes (e.g., age, partnership/dependency status, ethnic identification) that compounded the stressors they experienced. The consequence of multiple stressors and feelings of “differentness” led to feelings of alienation and disempowerment that had a marked effect on their graduate school experience. Some of the participants in this study did experience overt forms of discrimination, and some did not. Those who did not experience discrimination still felt isolated and different, at times, from their peers and faculty, owing to personal attributes that did not fit the academic norms of their program. For example, Samantha felt out of place in her program as an older student in her 50s with extensive professional experiences, but who was surrounded by graduate school students in their 20s and 30s. Feeling out of place is common to those in her situation, as described by Offerman (2011). Samantha’s tenacity in acclimating to a new environment through engagement in her state counseling organization, for example, demonstrated her abilities to solve problems, an important quality of one who strives to obtain the doctorate.

Women with dependents often experience unique obstacles to doctoral degree completion, such as the need to balance the demands of motherhood with the rigors of academia (Wall, 2008). In the present study, the only participant with children was Debbie. Debbie, a single mother, took the longest to complete her degree (10 years), and she did not discuss in detail how having children affected her time to degree completion, nor can conclusions be drawn about the impact children have on degree completion.
Participants noticed that those who did have children might have had different challenges than those who did not. Jamie, who did not have children, made this observation:

I am thinking that maybe the doctoral program affects females more than it does the male doctoral students regarding how it is affecting their relationships, or how it is affecting their families because many times I see female doctoral students struggling a little bit regarding time management with their families, and stressors pile up.

Kathy, childless, remarked, “I will say we also had a lot of moms [in the program] and I was thoroughly impressed with the moms in my program. I don’t know how they did all of it.” In one study, women psychology doctoral students struggled to balance the demands of home and work, limiting the time they could devote to their studies (Barata, Hunjan, & Leggatt, 2005). In addition, the age of women’s children can affect their abilities to balance home and work (Acker & Armenti, 2004).

Women of minority backgrounds may experience discrimination due to racial stereotypes (Kenway & Bullen, 2003; Margolis & Romero, 1998). Therefore, many racially diverse women in academia feel disregarded, compelling them to demonstrate competence and intelligence by working harder (Kenway & Bullen, 2003). In the present study, the only woman of a minority race was Jamie. She spoke English as a second language and worked hard to compensate for language skills she believed were weak. In addition to language skills, adaptation to academia requires assertiveness skills and independent work habits, qualities that are culturally constructed. Minority women, expected to conform to these expectations, may deny their culture to fit into the dominant
model (Margolis & Romero, 1998). Jamie discussed how her internal motivation to succeed and graduate compelled her to understand the individualistic culture surrounding her. Acclimating to her academic department and forging necessary relationships with faculty and peers forced Jamie to deny her collectivist cultural heritage. In doing so, she began calling faculty by their first name, and engaging in social conversation that initially felt uncomfortable to her. Jamie was a keen observer of her surroundings, and made concerted efforts to notice how other students behaved around faculty. From these observations and conclusions, she began to understand the norms of her academic department and ways of navigating the environment. All of her efforts at understanding her new culture and acclimating to it helped her to finish her degree.

Clearly, both systemic and individual obstacles in this study were mitigated by personal characteristics of the participants, such as the commitment to degree completion, which is critical to degree progress and often depends on personal qualities (Maher et al., 2004). The women in Maher’s study who finished early often described themselves as “goal oriented” and “disciplined.” Challenges are an inherent part of completing a doctoral program, and the challenges also created the opportunities for the qualities of resiliency, determination, and problem-solving to surface, facilitating degree completion for the women in this study.

**Implications for Counselor Education**

The present study offers counselor education programs and prospective doctoral students ideas about how to facilitate degree completion by exploring the ways degree completion occurred for six women. The implications of the findings for the CES
community pertain largely to the relationships between faculty, students, and peers; the women in this particular study could not discuss their experiences of degree completion without also discussing the nature of their relationships with their faculty, peers, and academic departments. Therefore, the implications of this study pertain to understanding the nature of relationships with faculty and peers that fostered completion, which often demonstrated a connection between personal connections and program completion. The following describes how relationships may foster degree retention by promoting students' connectivity with their doctoral programs via humanistic principles.

The humanistic principles that the counseling profession was founded on, which emphasize subjectivity and the potential for actualization (Hansen, 2003), are also evident in the relationships these women had with others. Rogers’ hypothesis (1961) about human relationships suggests that by providing a certain type of relationship, either as a clinician or a teacher, change and growth will occur in the client or student. As a result of the teacher fostering an environment and relationship that is respectful and accepting, “the student will become a self-initiated learner, more original, more self-disciplined, less anxious and other-directed” (p. 37). These attributes certainly apply to the participants in this study, who benefitted from having such relationships; participants found it meaningful that faculty and peers provided them with mentorship and engaged with them in respectful, responsive, and affirming ways. It is beneficial, then, to encourage CES faculty and academic departments to use such an approach with their students inside and outside of the classroom in order to facilitate degree completion. Similar to Rogers’ emphasis on relationship building, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005)
encouraged counselor education faculty to engage in relationship building with doctoral students in order to increase student persistence.

One way to do this is for CES faculty to recognize students’ individualities as strengths and assets, and to find ways to convey this to them because doctoral students often feel uncertain of themselves as they navigate a doctoral program. Such was the case for Samantha, who initially struggled with feeling disconnected from her program. Faculty invited her to share with others her unique diverse professional experiences, which helped instill a sense of belonging in Samantha and furthered her acclimation to the program. These experiences also helped Samantha see herself as valuable to others. Additionally, faculty acknowledging gender, cultural, and racial differences during classroom discussions not only convey acceptance of and respect for individuality, but can also help students feel their perspectives are of value.

Many of the participants mentioned having one or more mentors, and it behooves the CES community to consider ways that mentoring can assist student development and degree completion. Within the counselor education literature on mentoring, guidelines for developing female-to-female mentoring relationships are provided by Casto et al. (2005). These authors distinguished between formal mentoring (relationships organized by the academic department) and informal mentoring (relationships that occur organically between participants) mentoring relationships. They suggested that informal relationships may be more beneficial in meeting female graduate students’ emotional needs, and more role modeling, friendship, and counseling than those in formal mentoring relationships.
Mentoring international students poses certain challenges, especially if the doctoral student is from a culture where teachers have the final authority and students are expected to show high respect for them (Wang, 2008), as in the case of Jamie. As an international student, Jamie came to learn that having strong, supportive relationships with faculty was important for her degree completion, but she struggled with developing informal and nonhierarchical relationships that were typical in the United States graduate education system (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). Once established, her experiences with less hierarchical relationships promoted friendly and collegial relationships en route to completion. CES faculty might consider the ways in which worldviews differ for students of color and international students, and offer mentoring that validates the perspective and background of the student. Additionally, CES programs can establish relationships with student service organizations on campus that promote cross cultural communication and understanding.

Participants reported that mentorship related to professional development was a necessary component of successful degree acquisition. Faculty can offer structured activities that reflect the typical tasks of a counselor educator and help students become involved in professional organizations that deepen their CES professional identity (Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Counseling faculty members are role models of the profession and help doctoral students envision their career by involving them in scholarly activities, teaching, and service. For example, Kathy’s doctoral program provided a structured experience that included all of these activities and mirrored the life of a counselor educator.
Another recommendation is for counseling faculty to discuss, throughout the curriculum, career options for doctoral students. Having clear, realistic expectations of the job market, and where and how the CES degree can be used, is important information for doctoral students to know. A lack of information may create confusion about what the CES degree can provide, causing enough concern to abandon doctoral studies. All of the participants in this study had the career goal of achieving a CES academic position and most of them were able to obtain one. However, it is important for programs to remain realistic and transparent about the realities of the academic job market when talking with students, and to help students cultivate unique professional identities and areas of research focus that can help them be more competitive in the academic job market.

The women in the present study persevered in their doctoral programs partially because they perceived a compatible match between their career goals and the goals of the doctoral program. Specifically, all of the women’s career goals related to becoming counselor educators, and their programs prepared them to operate in that capacity. Similarly, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) concluded that CES doctoral students who persisted to degree completion experienced a match between student career goals and program focus (i.e., preparation to be clinician, academic, or a combination). Academic departments and faculty could discuss the mission statement and program intentions, and how these apply to students. Curriculum should reflect the goals of the program (e.g., focus is on clinical work and/or academia), and be communicated to current and future
students. Relatedly, individual needs of the person and how these needs relate to their career goals ought to be explored.

Orientations to an academic program, such as the ones some participants experienced, can provide necessary information related to program goals and expectations, helping students understand how they fit within the department and the profession, what they are required to do to complete their degree, and how and where they can use their doctoral degrees. This can alleviate the disparity between doctoral student training, doctoral student career desires, and the realities of the job market, which surfaced in Golde and Dore’s (2001) study of over 4,000 doctoral students from 11 different disciplines. This is consistent with the experiences of Kathy and other participants as they worked with faculty who engaged students in on-going conversations related to adjusting and transitioning to a doctoral program, while validating student difficulties with their doctoral education.

Strong peer relationships, which also facilitated participants’ degree completion, can be actively encouraged by academic departments and are particularly significant, since degree completers are more likely to interact with their academic peers than non-completers (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Several of the participants found the cohort model to be very beneficial for building relationships. Also, a system of peer mentoring, such as the one discussed by Kathy, can help alleviate overly taxed faculty from being the sole source of information and support to doctoral students. To facilitate this, academic departments can help organize activities in which students can participate together. Peers can provide workshops on topics of interest to the student body (e.g., APA style
workshop) and hold each other accountable when necessary (e.g., dissertation support groups). Peers can help one another develop leadership skills by co-presenting with each other, or offering their assistance to service projects. Finally, peers can provide important support and guidance related to coursework and program expectations, a common experience for the participants in this study. Helping doctoral students connect with one another should be a priority of doctoral programs, especially because peers’ shared experiences related to obtaining the doctoral degree encourages persistence towards the degree (Dorn et al., 1995).

Women doctoral students have needs and preferences that may not always be acknowledged by entities in positions of authority (e.g., academic institutions) but can have a large impact on the doctoral experience, and therefore, doctoral completion. The women in this study indicated a strong desire to feel connected to faculty, peers, and the academic department. Fortunately, these needs were largely met, but an important implication for the CES community is to consider the relational needs of female doctoral students, as well as taking into consideration unique needs of individuals that reflect differences in age, race, and other dimensions of diversity. For example, an inclusive classroom environment was an important factor for the women doctoral students in Ellis’ (2001) study, in which both Black and White women had more concerns about classroom environment than Black or White men. In particular, women had less positive classroom experiences than men and felt uncomfortable voicing their opinions or disagreeing with faculty members. Women students, more so than men, complained about the lack of attention paid to group work, racial differences, and cultural differences within the
classroom. In addition, women doctoral students experienced “the absence of a sense of community” (p. 38) within their program, citing a sense of isolation from others. Ellis did not study retention, but if doctoral programs help socialize students to the academic profession and women have experiences such as these in the classroom, then what conclusions might they draw about being a part of academia? Unfortunately, some women may consider academia to be a poor career fit and consider alternative career paths, posing significant implications for the CES profession when considering the CES degree prepares many students to be faculty members.

Women doctoral students can be supported by providing opportunities for mentorship and offering practical knowledge about how to finish the doctoral degree. Participants discussed the ambiguous and isolative aspects of successfully completing comprehensive exams and the dissertation. Therefore, pro-active guidance and support related to coursework, comprehensive exams, and the dissertation, through regularly scheduled meetings and writing support groups, is also recommended. Efforts made to promote a collaborative and collegial environment where individual differences are celebrated and appreciated can be of help. Finally, fostering supportive relationships that take into consideration the individual’s career, and personal needs and preferences, may be necessary for degree completion.

**Future Research**

Reasons for doctoral degree completion are complex and multi-layered. This particular study addressed the question of what helps facilitate degree completion for female counselor education doctoral students, but this is just one way of understanding
the experience of completion. Perhaps future research can explore this topic in other meaningful ways. For example, the women in this study who offered their unique perspectives were mostly of the “traditional” graduate student demographic: single, Caucasian, and young. However, future research could also focus on how nontraditional women complete their doctoral degree and how family responsibilities, partnerships, and other life events can affect degree completion.

In this particular study, the participants had already completed their degrees. Much of the attrition literature focuses on students who had dropped out of their doctoral studies. The CES field has explored, to some extent, the experiences of doctoral students who departed from their doctoral studies but successfully returned (Burkholder, 2009). Future research could also focus on CES students who did not complete their degrees by exploring reasons for non-completion.

This study demonstrated the immense amount of influence faculty relationships have on student persistence. Exploring the perspectives of faculty and administrators, and what they believe helps facilitate completion, can also be an area of future research. For example, CES faculty could share their opinions about what skills and habits of mind CES doctoral students need for degree completion, similar to the study conducted by Gardner et al. (2007), which was not specific to CES. A quantitative study exploring what faculty believe are predictors of degree attainment can also help further the conversation in this area, particularly in a field such as CES.

Finally, another area of further research could be to look at the comparison between doctoral students who attend CACREP-accredited programs and those who do
It might be unfair to draw retention and attrition conclusions from this distinction, but the advice Jamie received from her faculty advisor during her master’s program, to attend a CACREP-accredited doctoral program to increase her marketability as a counselor educator, implied that graduates of CACREP-accredited programs were more marketable. Also, it is clear from the employment postings on sites such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that most CES programs desire a doctoral degree from a CACREP-accredited program. Therefore, another area of future research relates to the career implications for those pursuing a CES doctoral degree from a non-accredited program.

**Limitations**

This research study has several limitations. Although the participants were a somewhat diverse group of women, only one woman was a person of color. This particular woman did not speak English as her first language. Having only one participant of color limits the findings of what women of color perceive to be experiences that facilitate degree completion.

Doctoral students with dependents, particularly women, have struggled with time to degree, which can affect degree completion (Schmidt, 2008). Only one participant in this study had children, and she did take the longest time to complete her doctoral degree. The facilitative factors of degree completion for doctoral students with dependents may be different from those of students who are single and childless. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore the relationship between dependents and how having them helps or hinders degree completion, but it is an area needing further exploration. Samantha, who
was married during her doctoral program but did not have children, was surprised to see
the lack of discussion related to family responsibilities in the themes. During her member
check interview, she remarked, “I was surprised that there isn’t more about families being
challenging, which I think is great.” This indicates the somewhat homogenous graduate
student population represented in this study, the “typical” 20-something, single, Caucasian
female.

A further limitation was the voluntary nature of the sampling method used. Participants volunteered to speak about their doctoral experiences by answering a call for participants. Those who responded may be biased about their doctoral education, and overly positive or negative about their experiences, although this did not appear to be the case. The participants all spoke honestly about their experiences that led to degree completion and their challenges during their doctoral education. Nevertheless, those who responded clearly felt at ease with discussing their doctoral education and were able to articulate reasons why they believed they completed their degree.

A final limitation of this study is the topic under investigation and the researcher’s position within it. The researcher was a doctoral student at the time and collecting data for her dissertation, which explored the experiences of women who had completed their doctoral degree. Obviously, this was a meaningful and personally relevant topic to the researcher, who was currently experiencing the topic under investigation. Many of the areas under discussion also related to the researcher, posing some unique considerations. Process notes, member check interviews, peer reviewing, and an audit trail were used to ensure credibility and trustworthiness.
Researcher Experience

The decision to embark on this journey of exploration stems from my desire to be a counselor educator and to understand what helps students succeed. Stories of success are some of my favorites and they usually involve overcoming obstacles. As a clinician, I find myself seeing the good and positive things my clients do when presented with many of life’s challenges. I try to help them see that, too. As a co-constructor of knowledge with the participants, I was acutely aware of how my interpretation and re-framing of their experiences into ones that were often positive and affirming, shaped my research findings while affecting the participants in various ways. As we discovered new, undiscovered information together about their experiences, our relationships strengthened, becoming closer and more intimate. The participants felt freer to be themselves and more honest. Some of them cried during their interviews, remembering their sacrifices and obstacles. I began to see that all of it, the healthy and affirming relationships, as well as the sad and painful disappointments, were integral aspects of these women’s degree completion process. All of it needed to happen for them to be where they are now. My understanding of what facilitates degree completion increased and became more nuanced as data collection and analysis progressed. The complex and personal nature of doctoral education became clearer to me, as each woman openly shared about her trials and tribulations during her doctoral program.

As a doctoral student completing the dissertation requirements (this study), I found myself completely enthralled with the stories of courage and conviction I heard. They were the ultimate motivator for my own degree completion. Their voices and
stories stayed with me throughout the research process, willing me to succeed, even when I did not think I would. Living far away from my academic home, and the support that it offered, these women’s stories of completion stayed with me long after our conversations ended. I hope that I represented their voices truthfully and accurately, and perhaps, in ways they never considered before.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the current study was to create an emergent theory of what facilitated doctoral degree completion grounded in the views of six female counselor educators. Constructivist grounded theory explained how these particular women experienced degree completion. Data revealed a complex system of relationships with others that facilitated completion, and demonstrated the personal characteristics necessary for finishing a doctoral degree. This study adds to the limited information available on the doctoral education experiences of CES students. Further research in this area could help future doctoral students, faculty, and administrators understand what facilitates completion.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS ON CES LISTSERVS
Appendix A

Recruitment Email to Participants on CES Listservs

Dear ( ),

I am seeking a racially and regionally diverse group of participants for my dissertation study that seeks to understand how females experienced their doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision. I believe this qualitative study will add theory to the existing body of literature surrounding doctoral education completion. Please join me in exploring what experiences led to degree completion.

I am looking for participants who (a) are female; (b) graduated with a doctoral degree from a CACREP-accredited program in Counselor Education & Supervision; (c) obtained their doctoral degree within the past two years; and (d) are employed as a counselor educator and/or clinician.

If you are interested in participating in this study and if you meet the mentioned criteria, you will be asked to participate in at least two one-hour (approximately) individual telephone or in person (if geographically feasible) interviews, in addition to a member check interview that may last from 30-60 minutes. All interviews will be digitally-recorded. Participating in this project is voluntary and you may cease participating at any time without incurring any penalty.

This study has been approved by Kent State University’s Human Subjects Review Board. If you have any questions or want to know more about this study, please feel free to email me at: cperjess@kent.edu or contact my dissertation co-advisors, Dr. Jane Cox (jcox8@kent.edu) or Dr. Lynne Guillot Miller (lguillot@kent.edu).

Please reply to this email if you are interested in participating.

Sincerely,

Caroline Perjessy, MS.Ed., PC, Doctoral Candidate
Kent State University
APPENDIX B

INCLUSION CRITERIA PROCESS
Appendix B

Inclusion Criteria Process

1. For those who responded, ask participants the following questions.

   a. Are you female?
      i. if yes, move to question b.
      ii. If no, stop.
   b. Do you hold a doctoral degree in counselor education?
      i. if yes, move to question c.
      ii. If no, stop.
   c. Are you within two years departure from your doctoral education experience?
      i. If yes, move to question d.
      ii. If no, stop.
   d. Did you graduate from a CACREP-accredited doctoral program?
      i. If yes, move to question e.
      ii. If no, stop.
   e. Are you currently employed primarily as a counselor educator or a clinician?
      i. At least one participant must be employed primarily as a counselor educator and at least one participant must be employed primarily as a clinician.
   f. What is your race/ethnicity?
      i. At least one participant must be a woman of color.
   g. In what region of the United States are you currently located?
      i. A least 3 out of the 5 ACES regions must be represented among the participants (North Atlantic ACES, North Central ACES, Western ACES, Rocky Mountain ACES, Southern ACES).
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Appendix C

Kent State University

Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title: The Experience Of Completion: Female Counselor Education Graduates' Process Of Degree Attainment

Principal Investigator: Caroline Perjessy

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document.

Purpose:
I am conducting research on how female doctoral degree recipients from counselor education and supervision programs experienced their doctoral degree. I believe this qualitative study will add theory to the existing body of literature surrounding doctoral education completion. Because you have successfully completed a doctoral degree, I invite you to be a participant in this study.

Procedures
As part of this study, you will be asked to participate in at least two one-hour (approximately) individual telephone (or in person, if geographically feasible) interviews, in addition to a member check interview that may last from 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews will be digitally recorded. Please plan on being in a location that is private and free of distractions (e.g., private office) for all interviews. Once all interviews have taken place with all participants, you will be asked to review the preliminary organization of the data, the tentative emerging theory, and to

The Experience of Completion: Female Counselor Education Graduates' Process of Degree Attainment/CP

Counseling and Human Development Services Program
P.O. Box 5190 • Kent, Ohio 44242-0590
Program Area Website: http://chdsw.ohio.edu
330-672-2662 • Fax: 330-672-2472 • http://www.kent.edu

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participate in a 30 to 60 minute member check interview to clarify responses and provide feedback. I will email you these materials to review approximately one month after the final interview (materials also can be sent to you via postal mail, if you prefer). A date and time for the member check interview will be scheduled within two weeks of you receiving the materials for review. The entire process, beginning with the first individual interview and ending with the member check is anticipated to take three to six months. If you participate, I ask that you commit for the duration of the study, though you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Audio and Video Recording and Photography

All interviews will be digitally-recorded. Please plan on being in a location that is private and free of distractions (e.g., private office). Pseudonyms will be assigned for the discussion and dissemination of findings. Interview responses will be coded by number to avoid having the participant’s name associated with the responses. Transcripts and digital recordings will be kept in a secure location.

Benefits

This research will not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study will help us better understand what experiences contributed to the successful doctoral education completion for female counselor education doctoral degree recipients.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Your study related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results; only aggregate data will be used.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will be informed of any new, relevant information that may affect your health, welfare, or willingness to continue your study participation.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Caroline Perjessy at 404-783-6193 or Drs. Jane Cox and Lynne Guillot Miller at 330-672-3000. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions...
about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330-672-2704.

Consent Statement and Signature
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

Participant Signature

Date

The Experience of Completion: Female Counselor Education Graduates’ Process of Degree Attainment/CP
APPENDIX D

AUDIOTAPE CONSENT FORM
Appendix D

Audiotape Consent Form

THE EXPERIENCE OF COMPLETION: FEMALE COUNSELOR EDUCATION GRADUATES’ PROCESS OF DEGREE ATTAINMENT

Caroline Perjessy

I agree to participate in an audio-taped interview about my experiences during my doctoral education that facilitated degree completion as part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Caroline Perjessy may audio-tape this interview. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

______________________________________________________________
Signature Date

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I:

____ want to listen to the recording  ____ do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them.

Caroline Perjessy may / may not (circle one) use the audio-tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

____ this research project ______ publication ______ presentation at professional meetings

______________________________________________________________
Signature Date

Address:
APPENDIX E

RESEARCHER RESPONSE TO INELIGIBLE VOLUNTEERS
Appendix E

Researcher Response to Ineligible Volunteers

Dear Dr. __________:

Thank you for volunteering to be a part of my study exploring the experiences of doctoral degree completion. At this time, those most fitting the inclusion criteria were selected. I sincerely appreciate your willingness to be a part of this qualitative dissertation, but will not be requiring your assistance at this time. Feel free to contact me with any questions you may have. You may reach me at: cperjess@kent.edu or at 404-783-6193.

Sincerely,

Caroline Perjessy

Kent State University
APPENDIX F

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
Appendix F

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What was your age during your doctoral program?

2. What is your race?

3. Relationship status during doctoral program?

4. How long did it take you to complete your degree?

5. How much time passed between comprehensive exams and proposal defense?
   Between proposal defense and dissertation defense?

6. What kind of work experience did you have prior to entering your doctoral program?
   Did you have a graduate assistantship during your program? Did you work outside of the department? Did you work full time or part time? What other sources of financial aid did you receive?
APPENDIX G

PEER REVIEW INSTRUCTIONS
Appendix G

Peer Review Instructions

Hello ____________.

Thank you for agreeing to serve as the Peer Reviewer for my dissertation. Your commitment to provide feedback during data collection and analysis is much appreciated. We will communicate via email and telephone at least three times throughout data analysis and collection (one time after each Round of Interview and member check). As previously mentioned, your time commitment for the peer reviewer role will be approximately 10 hours over the next four months.

As I proceed with data collection and analysis, I will consult with you for feedback. Some examples of our consultation include: (a) you will provide me with feedback on the emerging analysis after the completion of each round of interviews; (b) you will be asked to comment on the accuracy of my representation of the participants’ responses, indicate areas that were unclear or misleading, and identify areas where my personal biases may have influenced data analysis. I will be in touch soon. Feel free to contact me with any questions at cperjess@kent.edu or 404-783-6193. Thank you for your commitment and time in assisting me with my dissertation.

Sincerely,

Caroline Perjessy, LPC, Doctoral Candidate, Kent State University
APPENDIX H

MEMBER CHECK INSTRUCTIONS
Appendix H

Member Check Instructions

Dear Dr. ___

Thank you for taking the time to assist me with my dissertation. As previously discussed, I am providing you with information to review prior to the member check interview. You are asked to participate in a 30-60 minute interview on DATE, which provides you the opportunity to clarify anything that was unclear or misleading in the attached documents. During this meeting, I will ask for your feedback on my analysis and interpretation of your process of doctoral degree completion. Prior to our conversation, please review the attached documents for accuracy and clarification.

Attached documents:

1. A summary of preliminary categories, including their properties. The summary reflects the analysis of the data and subcategories from all interviews with all participants.

2. Concept maps that illustrate a visual representation of each of the preliminary categories and their properties. This map also provides the overall emerging theory.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have. I can be reached at email: cperjess@kent.edu or 404-783-6193. Again, thank you for all your assistance during my dissertation process!

In appreciation,

Caroline
APPENDIX I

VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF CIRCLE CONCEPT MAP
Appendix I

Visual Representation of Circle Concept Map

The Process of Completion as an Inter-Connected System of Experiences with Self and Others

Relationships as Sources of Support and Catalysts for Growth

Professional growth and development occurs through relationships with others

Personal growth and development occurs through relationships with others

Navigating Individual Obstacles

Navigating Systemic Obstacles

CES career preparation

CES identity development

Relationships with peers

Relationships with faculty

Academics

Environment of Academia

Financial Aid

Navigating Obstacles

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REFERENCES
REFERENCES


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Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP].


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_Dissertation Abstracts International, 50_(03B)._ 


