

"I FELT LIKE I DID NOT BELONG": A CASE STUDY INVESTIGATION ON DOCTORAL  
STUDENTS' VALIDATION, ENGAGEMENT, AND SOCIALIZATION EXPERIENCES

by

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DEDICATION

To those who feel they do not belong – We all come from different backgrounds, and our unique perspectives and experiences are needed. You do belong.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A doctorate journey is one of tenacity, grit, passion, focus, and drive, analogous to my history in ultra marathons and ironman racing. It is a journey you first embark on, not knowing how to proceed but relying on those who have been there before to guide, mentor, support, and encourage, always knowing they are behind the scenes. Your goal is to finish, even with extreme upsets and minor failures; at least, it was for me. No matter what obstacle, not finishing was not in your mindset.

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## GLOSSARY

Advisor: A faculty academic guide for doctoral students (Lovitts, 2001).

Attrition: Student attrition is a departure from their degree program before completion (Crede & Borrego, 2014).

Cohort: A group of students who start a program simultaneously.

First-Generation (FG): First-generation students have little to no family influence on higher education, i.e., a family who may have had some college but no college degree (Davis, 2012).

Framework: A visual construct of an idea (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021).

Imposter Phenomenon (IP): Also, imposter syndrome; “The feelings students experience when they compare themselves to peers and believe they have significantly less preparation or intellectual ability” (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011, p. 430).

Mentor: A person who provides academic guidance, including but not limited to social, psychological, encouragement, and assistance with career guidance; can be seen as a role model or academic coach (Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Pfund, Byars-Winston, Branchaw, Hurtado, & Eagan, 2016; Smith, 2013).

Mentee: A student receiving mentoring from a faculty or another individual during their graduate studies (Kumar & Coe, 2017).

Program: Another term for a system of practice or a degree-seeking path in higher education.

Recruitment: The process of seeking our students for admission into higher education.

## GLOSSARY CONTINUED

Retention: When students continue their education rather than dropping out, it also can be considered degree completion (Crede & Borrego, 2014).

Scaffolded: A teaching method in which coursework is provided in a layered approach; each segment is added to the next to increase comprehension for the learner.

Theory: A construct to assist with explaining and comprehending a studied concept (Saldaña, 2021).

Traditional Student: Those from mid-to-upper income families, white, male, with parents who also attended college (Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Well-being: The overall quality of a person's life and happiness level, which includes physical and emotional aspects (Yusuf, Saitgalina, & Chapman, 2022).

Validation: The verbal and non-verbal communication or feedback a student receives that has a meaningful impact and decreases self-doubt (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rendón, 1994).

## ABSTRACT

This case study examines the role of an academic department in aiding doctoral students' success with a focus on socialization, engagement, and validating experiences. Research has shown that some attrition at the doctoral level can be mitigated by adopting systems similar to those already occurring in undergraduate populations, yet implementation continues to lag. Exploring the effects of programming and support in an academic unit may be the key to leading a campus integration strategy. To investigate this, the study utilized doctoral students within the Department of Education at Montana State University to consider their experiences with an implemented retention method, specifically unique courses geared towards student success. This research aimed to uncover the system's efficacy from the students' perspectives by understanding the students entering post-graduate work and exploring their experiences throughout their journey. The project involved interviews with 25 current and past doctoral students within the Department of Education. Students were selected from all doctoral students admitted by the department over seven years, covering Fall 2014 through Fall 2021. The students who responded self-selected to participate in a semi-structured interview or to complete an open-ended Qualtrics survey. A key finding was that the initiatives were mostly successful and provided validation, community, and social connections, which were aspects surrounding effective student retention. Conversely, the retention initiatives were somewhat problematic when the courses were not taken at the most opportunistic time or were found partially ineffective based on differing student needs. Ultimately, the study underscored the need for programming to support student success through programmatic changes to bridge social, cultural, and academic knowledge gaps, also known as insider knowledge, that some students may be lacking when entering doctoral programs and to address continued socialization, engagement, and experiential validation throughout a doctoral journey.

## CHAPTER ONE:

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the United States, more than two million people apply for a graduate degree every year with the hope that they will be among those who receive an offer of admission (Zhou & Gao, 2019). Unfortunately, of those individuals who apply, on average, only about 50% of doctoral applicants receive acceptance (NCES, n.d.). With that offer, the next step in the journey could be years of challenging and isolating work (Zhou & Gao, 2019). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that none of those accepted doctoral students envision dropping from their program and becoming an attrition statistic (Lovitts, 2001; Zhou & Gao, 2019).

Attrition in Higher Education

The concept of attrition in education is when a student does not complete their degree program, whereas those who finish are defined as graduates. Doctoral student attrition has many causes, including academic confusion, funding loss, career focus change, and family or health circumstances (Hanson, Loose, & Reveles, 2022; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). Thus, of the doctoral students who eventually begin their academic journey, the average completion rate is 50%, with some institutions citing completion rates as low as 11% (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Brill et al., 2014; Caruth, 2015; GSR & GR, n.a.; NSF, n.d.; Zhou & Gao, 2019). With institutions reporting 50-89% attrition, it is apparent that there has been a problem with doctoral degree screening and or completion for decades. Some universities may see this attrition as acceptable, considering it simply part of a weeding-out process to secure the strongest candidates (Garner, 2009). However, even considering this, this research will show that some of the best

and brightest students who are weeded out may have needed more guidance, support, and encouragement (Garner, 2009; Hanson et al., 2022; Lovitts, 2001, 2008; Merriweather & Morgan, 2013). As universities spend significant amounts of money to attract students into their programs, it is prudent to spend equal resources to retain those graduate students already in the system.

### History and Academic Culture of Higher Education

The history of higher education in the United States dates back centuries; however, the rise of graduate education has predominantly been in the last 150 years (Thelin, 2019). During this past century, situations surrounding attrition and methods to mitigate attrition to improve retention have increasingly become apparent. To understand the nature of this research and the focus on attrition and support measures at the doctoral level, the history of higher education will be briefly explored as this history plays a role in how we arrived at today's current retention challenges.

Higher Education in the Beginning My study is intended to explore how we arrived at the doctoral student experience today. In doing so, the constructs of understanding the more influential student group and how the roles of gender, class, culture, and race are necessary to mention, as they are entangled within this exploration.

At its inception, higher education was a place for a selective population, cultivated through familial generations, creating social groups of those who attended and those who did not and could not, the traditional group constituting the white, wealthy male population (Levin, 2022; Thelin, 2017; Spivak, 1992). As a result, the lines of those who attended higher education were typically drawn through race, gender, culture, and class or any combination of the



intersectionality of the diverse person, a group that monopolized the educational market, creating an exclusionary practice (Bañuelos & Flores, 2021; Gardner, 2013; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Leonardo, 2004; Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Levin, 2022; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Rendón, 1994, 2006, 2021; Spivak, 1992).

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, more non-traditional students entered the university due to increased degree options and the creation of Federal programs and policy changes such as the GI Bill and Title IX (Lazerson, 1998; Leonardo, 2004; Spivak, 1992; Thelin, 2019). Leonardo (2004) explains that being a non-traditional student is often experienced across gender, race, culture, age, sexuality, and religion (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Spivak, 1992). Non-traditional students may be inexperienced in academia, lack the knowledge to navigate the higher education system, and simultaneously can experience unwelcome behaviors, such as microaggressions, better known as “exclusionary behaviors” (Tulshyan, para. 6, 2022), and discrimination (Lovitts, 2001; Thelin, 2019).

Non-traditional students may have a different academic background and knowledge than the prevailing student group, as seen with many first-generation students (FGS) (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Leonardo, 2004; Levin, 2022; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Smith, 2023). For the context of this study, FGS are those students whose parents or guardians may have had some college but have not completed a higher education degree or have received the academic influences to help them succeed (Davis, 2012; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Hughes, Kimball & Koricich, 2019; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) explain that the FGS may not have their perspectives or views and then “turn over their loyalty to the conventions and practices of the academy” and align “with dominant group values and

behaviors” (p. 418). This means that the status quo for higher education resonates with and leans on past practices and acceptances of the traditionally dominant student group (Levin, 2022).

Bañuelos and Flores (2021) further drive this loyalty concept home when they indicated that some professors escalate student inequalities when they act as a type of gatekeeper and “maintain white hegemonic archetypes of academics” (p. 1) and do not support students due to “racialized, gendered, and classed biases” (Bañuelos & Flores, 2021, p. 4). Additionally, Bañuelos and Flores (2021) mentioned that the challenges with gatekeepers are that they preserve “culturally deficit perspectives, such as blaming educational disparities on students’ family or culture, while failing to acknowledge the role of inequitable institutions.” (p. 4).

By preserving traditional methods of considering students, “Gatekeeping agents play a role in preserving the status quo by denying marginalized students access to the social capital needed for educational success” (Bañuelos & Flores, 2021, p. 4). In 2012, Davis explained the FGS, or marginalized student experience, as a student needing guidance on their journey; this point is imperative. If the journey into higher education is not framed correctly, the culture and educational training does not exist for the student. It is this thought that some of the FGS students’ experiences could also affect them if they proceed to graduate work (Davis, 2012; Olson, 2014).

When the status quo is preserved, the students in this group may experience a general lack of understanding of higher education, sometimes referred to as the hidden curriculum or “insider knowledge” (Davis, 2012, p. 29), or lacking “cultural capital” (Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011 p. 30). This refers to the subtle cues or ways of communication methods that are part of the landscape of higher education (Smith, 2013). Davis further discusses this knowledge

gap by stating that “the absence of the non-first-generation student experience is what first-generation student status is all about” (p. 4). Soria and Stebleton (2012) identified that first-generation students arrive with less academic capital, which affects their class experiences, discussions, interactions with peers and faculty, and more.

Demographic Changes Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, demographic changes in higher education have seen an influx of non-traditional students; Levin (2022) mentioned this new mixture of students as those who can be considered “First-generation students, students of color, international students, non-binary identity students, students with disabilities, adult students (those 25 years of age and older), student parents, veterans, and others” (p. 15). The landscape of higher education has been changing for decades to a point where Levin (2022) indicates that “a significant, if not a majority, population of college and university students” are in this category. Levin’s research is on the undergraduate population; however, it is easy to correlate that this is also the direction and population for doctoral students. Levin (2022) further explains some of the challenges surrounding these demographic changes for students, mentioning that:

Students cannot be expected to integrate socially with their institutions, as one community; nor can these populations be expected to achieve academic integration, particularly with their personal backgrounds largely alien to academic life and with their academic participation as a less than full-time endeavor (in large part because of work and family responsibilities).

Levin (2022) states that higher education is bridging a time of change, a time of better understanding and accommodation for the upcoming population.

In higher education, the overshadowed student can also manifest through a lack of knowledge of communicating with faculty or department staff (Davis, 2012). In addition, it can

be experienced through misogyny and other exclusionary practices, especially within certain disciplines (Posselt, Porter & Kamimura, 2018; Tulshyan, 2022). For example, consider a female student's first encounter when entering a department composed of all male faculty and students. This student could immediately feel gender-based judgment and disconnection due to stereotyping roles and could amend how they typically communicate or interact to try to fit in (Posselt et al., 2018).

The experiences of non-traditional doctoral students can lead to increased departures at the doctoral level (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine & Hubbard, 2018). These students may encounter stress and confusion from the onset of their program and can persist throughout their doctoral journey, affecting their overall success (Cornwall, Mayland, van der Meer, Spronken-Smith, Tustin, & Blyth, 2019; Girard & Musielak, 2012; Golde, 1998). Craddock et al. (2011) noted that from the first term of a doctoral program, "graduate school may create an environment in which [Imposter Phenomenon] flourishes" (p. 431). Doctoral students may also leave due to a lack of engagement with the campus, faculty, and peers; upon leaving, students often cite a lack of social support as a contributing factor (Crede & Borrego, 2014; Danbert, Munir & Jackson, 1997; Ertem & Gokalap, 2019; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Munir & Jackson, 1997).

Emotional Toll of the Doctoral Student Research indicates that the longer a doctoral student is pursuing their education, anxiety, depression, feelings of isolation, and Imposter Phenomenon (IP) can increase (Craddock et al., 2011; Dolson, 2020; Gardner, 2009; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Girard & Musielak, 2012; Langford & Clance, 1993; Lovitts, 2001, 2008; Evans et al., 2018). When doctoral students experience imposter symptoms, they can manifest as feelings that they do not belong in their program, self-doubt, and that they are less prepared, are

intellectually lacking compared to their peers, or the fear that they will be exposed as a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978; Craddock et al., 2011; Gardner, 2013; Langford & Clance, 1993).

Gardner (2013) explained it as “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness” (p. 51). It seems contradictory to the common belief that in most life experiences, the longer a person does a particular activity or work, the more confident they become. However, this is not the case for doctoral students, who can become more clouded in doubt, stress, and other confidence-depleting emotions (Byrom et al., 2022; Lorenzetti, D.L., Shipton, Nowell, Jacobsen, Lorenzetti, L., Clancy, & Paolucci, 2019). The common theme of graduate student retention centers around the need for continual and consistent support throughout the doctoral journey to combat the persistent uncertainty and confusion they may experience (Craddock et al., 2011; Creely & Laletas, 2020; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Munir & Jackson, 1997; Sims & Cassidy, 2020). Craddock et al. (2011) suggested that while these issues may predate students’ entrance into the program, they “flourish” right at the beginning of a student’s program (p. 431).

In understanding the doctoral journey post-acceptance, we will examine a student through the lens of what they meant to the admitting department. Initially, the admitting department recognized the students’ qualifications and potential to contribute to the university, whether through teaching or a research assistantship, as well as scholarly contributions. Conversely, when a student struggles, it raises the question of why the same institution would not implement methods and expend resources to retain them. When a student departs a university after investing significant time, money, and resources, it represents a loss not only for that student but also for the university and broader society as well (Lovitts, 2001).

Addressing Attrition through Retention Initiatives There needs to be more clarity between acknowledging that attrition is happening and how to address student departures (Cole, Newman, and Hypolite, 2020). Most universities have a history and practice of replacing departing students rather than working with those who need help (Lovitts, 2001; Maher, Wofford, Roksa, & Feldon, 2020). The very issues that drive students to depart from their educational journey could often be mitigated by systemic changes in university support structures campus (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty & Turner, 2014; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001; Sandoval, 2018).

As student attrition has become a focus of research over the last several decades at the undergraduate level, similar attention to retention at the doctoral level has not been as robust and, in some cases, has lagged significantly (Sverdlik et al., 2018; Tinto, 1993). Retention initiatives started in the K-12 grades almost forty years ago and then moved into the undergraduate realm around the 1990s (Thelin, 2017; Tinto, 1993). Over the last 20 years, researchers such as Gardner (2009), Holley and Caldwell (2012), and countless others have realized that methods to improve retention can and probably should also be implemented at the doctoral level. Some universities, such as the University of Virginia, Grand Canyon University, and the University of Alabama, have attempted versions of supportive practices, typically utilizing methods to support Black Americans or First Peoples (Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Sandoval, 2018; Spivey-Mooring & Apprey, 2014). However, the challenge is that these supportive measures are not implemented on enough campuses. This lack of implementation may be due to insufficient research in the doctoral area, the perceived lack of need for it (e.g., not wanting to coddle the student), funding, or how to develop and build the best method for permanence.

Furthermore, it is essential to mention that the increasing disillusionment with the value of higher education, as indicated by many articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education and authors such as Paul Tough (2019), may contribute to a future decline in the undergraduate population. Regardless of the reasons associated with the decline, the issue raises a further question as to what this means about post-graduate education. With the changing climate of higher education, focusing on retaining those students who attend should be of utmost importance.

Universities that have implemented retention initiatives at the doctoral level have seen improved retention efforts, such as those researched by Spivey-Mooring and Apprey (2014) and the *Inter-Ethnic/Interdisciplinary Mentoring Institute for Graduate Education* at the University of Virginia and Holley and Caldwell (2012), and the *Tied Together* program at the University of Alabama. Successful programs have utilized methods of support involving 1) increasing programming to facilitate transparency, improve guidance, and diminish academic confusion, 2) creating doctoral communities to increase social engagements and mitigate feelings of isolation and self-doubt, 3) cultivating solid connections with meaningful mentors, and others within a department, and 4) nurturing a culture of acceptance (Caruth, 2015; Ewbank, 2016; Hanson et al., 2022; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Leonardo, 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Thelin, 2019). Inspired by this, the Department of Education at Montana State University (MSU) has established a Doctoral System of Support (DSS) to reduce departmental attrition.

#### The Department of Education DSS Program

During the years 2014 to 2017, Montana State University's Department of Education began to address its attrition concerns and, through research, considered methods to increase

retention through the addition of courses within their curriculum offering, and with a focus on student engagement, academic understanding and expectations, satisfaction, and mental wellness, an overarching of student support and success initiatives. Some universities report a 50% doctoral completion rate over ten years, while others are in the low teens, with many universities reporting the departures to occur on or before the completion of the dissertation, referred to as all but dissertation or ABD stage (Brill et al., 2014; Caruth, 2015; GSR & GR, n.a.; Zhou & Gao, 2019).

The department reviewed past and current research to understand better methods to improve retention and student satisfaction. For example, research over the past twenty years supports the effectiveness of mentoring-type programs (Gardner, 2009; Gardner, 2013; Golde, 1998; Holley & Caldwell, 2012). These initiatives have successfully reduced doctoral attrition by offering specialized courses that teach the essentials of being a doctoral candidate, such as conducting a literature review or dissertation writing, alongside seminars and workshops on organization or time management. Furthermore, the research indicated that supportive programs at the doctoral level could aid in retention if the program were developed specifically for the needs of each department and or campus (Gardner, 2010).

Using evidence-based and theoretically grounded research, the Department of Education gathered ideas from the research, looking into how the department could better serve its students. Despite already boasting a high completion rate, the department recognized that many students took longer to complete their degrees, sometimes up to 10 years. However, a review of the national trends of time-to-degree over the past five decades shows that the lengthy time-to-



degree seen at MSU is a typical trend, with time-to-degree getting even longer for some degrees in education (NCES-NSF, n.d.).

The department acknowledged that, traditionally, students took longer to complete their degrees due to the nature of the typical doctoral student in the department, students who predominantly work as full-time educators or administrators; data also reflected in national trends. However, even recognizing the longer time to obtain a degree, the department felt they could still serve their students better. Thus, the department developed the Doctoral System of Support (DSS).

With this knowledge, the Department of Education at MSU established the DSS in the Fall of 2017 to increase retention and student satisfaction. Attrition issues at the doctoral level surround many universities, including MSU (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Barry, Woods, Warnecke, Stirling, & Martin, 2018; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001, 2008). The DSS was unique for Montana State University, as no other graduate-focused and supportive system exists on the campus. Currently, the effectiveness of the department's implemented changes is unclear. This study will assess the effectiveness of the DSS and will allow the department to make necessary changes to current methods. It will inform future practices which could be implemented across other MSU departments or shared with other universities.

### Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study is to consider what role a university and its departments have in aiding doctoral students' success. This knowledge could serve the university by increasing the retention of doctoral students.

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this instrumental, qualitative case study is to provide a better understanding of the experience of the Doctoral System of Support (DSS) at Montana State University's Department of Education through the lens of two distinct student groups. While doctoral support systems are not uncommon in higher education, MSU's approach is notable for its distinctiveness and the scarcity with which such supportive measures are enacted, despite substantial research endorsing doctoral support programs. This case study offers a comprehensive understanding of the DSS's impact by employing a transformative interpretive framework and a phenomenological approach to examine student experiences and perceptions. This approach follows the precedent set by educational researchers like Cole et al. (2020) and Garcia and Yao (2019), who explored doctoral students' perceptions and socialization experiences. A support system such as the DSS is not a panacea for all issues affecting doctoral students, but it could assist with some causes of student departures.

### Research Questions

This research addressed the following questions pertaining to how students perceive their doctoral journey to understand better the efficacy of the Doctoral System of Support (DSS):

Research Question: 1) What experiences did students recognize as contributions to their academic, social, and personal well-being?

Research Question: 2) What aspects of the DSS did they identify as helping them complete their doctoral degree?

In addition, the research also answered the following sub-research questions:

Research Sub-question: A. How did the DSS prepare students for the academic expectations and rigor of the doctorate?

Research Sub-question: B. How did it provide socialization?

Research Sub-question: C. How did the DSS affect doctoral students' well-being?

### Significance of the Study

Doctoral student attrition is problematic at most universities, including Montana State University. The results of this study could inform the MSU campus of potential methods for improved retention to assist with attrition. MSU has a robust pipeline of doctoral students applying for and entering their degree programs; however, only about half have completed their degrees within ten years (GSR & GR, n.a.). Research indicates that retention and completion increase when students receive additional support throughout their degree (Brill et al., 2014; Golde, 1998; Hanson et al., 2022; Lovitts, 2008; Merriweather & Morgan, 2013; Spivey-Mooring & Apprey, 2014; Thelin, 2017). It would be unrealistic to claim that all attrition can be solved through a supportive initiative, as many reasons lead to doctoral departures. Still, as much as research shows programmatic changes such as these can be effective in overall outcomes, universities are slow to adopt them at the doctoral level (Hoffmann-Longtin et al., 2021; Lovitts, 2001).

The study is particularly significant as the Department has yet to conduct an analysis of the DSS and is situated at a time to learn the effects of the department's changes on the student experience. The findings will not only guide the department in refining its approach and can inform future practice but may also lay the groundwork for implementing analogous programs across campus and potentially benefit other institutions experiencing similar attrition issues.

### Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I hold a dual role as a doctoral student in the Department of Education and as the Director of Graduate Recruitment and Admissions at Montana State University. As such, I am positioned to see admissions, retention, and attrition from unique vantage points. My views on this research began as a non-traditional master's student a decade ago. In that, I did not receive the direct guidance I needed. Instead, the assistance was either delayed or experienced through infrequent responses or feedback that lacked helpful direction. As a result, I almost dropped out of the program if not for another faculty member stepping in and providing the unique guidance and support I needed. From this experience, I formed my belief that some students need more guidance and structured support.

My perspective has also been shaped by my years as an endurance coach, a career I had before joining MSU and Graduate School. Working with athletes, ranging from novices to experienced, helped me appreciate how needs differ between individuals and their associated situations or surroundings. Whether coaching a newcomer with a strong passion yet unfamiliar with training for an Ironman triathlon or Ultramarathon or fine-tuning the technique of a seasoned athlete, my coaching experience deeply informs my current commitment to student retention; as with my athletes, I aim to see each person succeed and reach the goals they set out to complete

As the Admissions and Recruitment Director in the Graduate School, I am also privy to seeing how many students depart the university without earning a degree. I feel the level of retention currently experienced at universities is unacceptable. Because of my unique stance of being both scholarly and professionally integrated into the research, my passion for the topic,

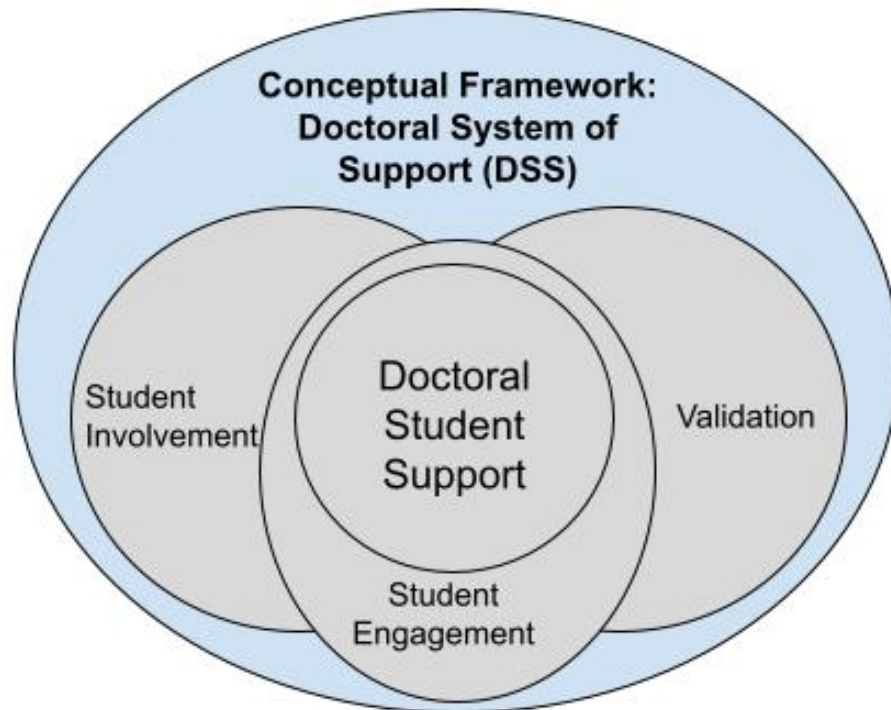
perspective, career, and views will be apparent throughout the study. I will present my experiences and perceptions while committing to an unbiased presentation of the study's findings, ensuring that all data is accurately represented.

### Introduction to the Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Framework

This research surrounding the DSS program within the Department of Education at MSU focused on two theories and a grounding framework, which framed and supported the Conceptual Framework. Unpackaging these theories and the framework provided a construct to explain how the DSS works while connecting the literature to the research.

The theories and grounding framework are an integral part of the conceptual framework focusing on doctoral student support and recognizing their involvement; the overarching concept in Figure 1 shows the relationship between the conceptual framework, the theories of Student Involvement and Validation, and the grounding framework of Student Engagement (Astin, 1984; Linares, & Muñoz; 2011; Rendón, 1994; Weidman et al., 2001; Stein & Weidman, 1989).

Figure 1: The Relationship between Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks (Figure, self-work).



The overarching ideas framing the DSS Conceptual Framework allow for a more in-depth look at the reasons for this research on doctoral support and how the DSS interplays with the process. The purpose of including the theory of involvement and validation is that being involved follows participation, whereas engagement is about the passion and enthusiasm a person has in that participation. Both play a role in the overarching theme of connecting students through involvement and support.

I also recognize that other theories could have been considered to underwrite the subject of dissertation support in the study; however, after reviewing the literature, it was clear that these choices were sound. In the literature review in Chapter Two, validating experiences and student involvement was vital when answering the research questions, as well as what may lead to

improved student satisfaction and retention and what could affect doctoral student completion.

To better understand the details of Figure 1, I also created Figure 2.

Figure 2: DSS Conceptual Framework (Figure, Self-work)

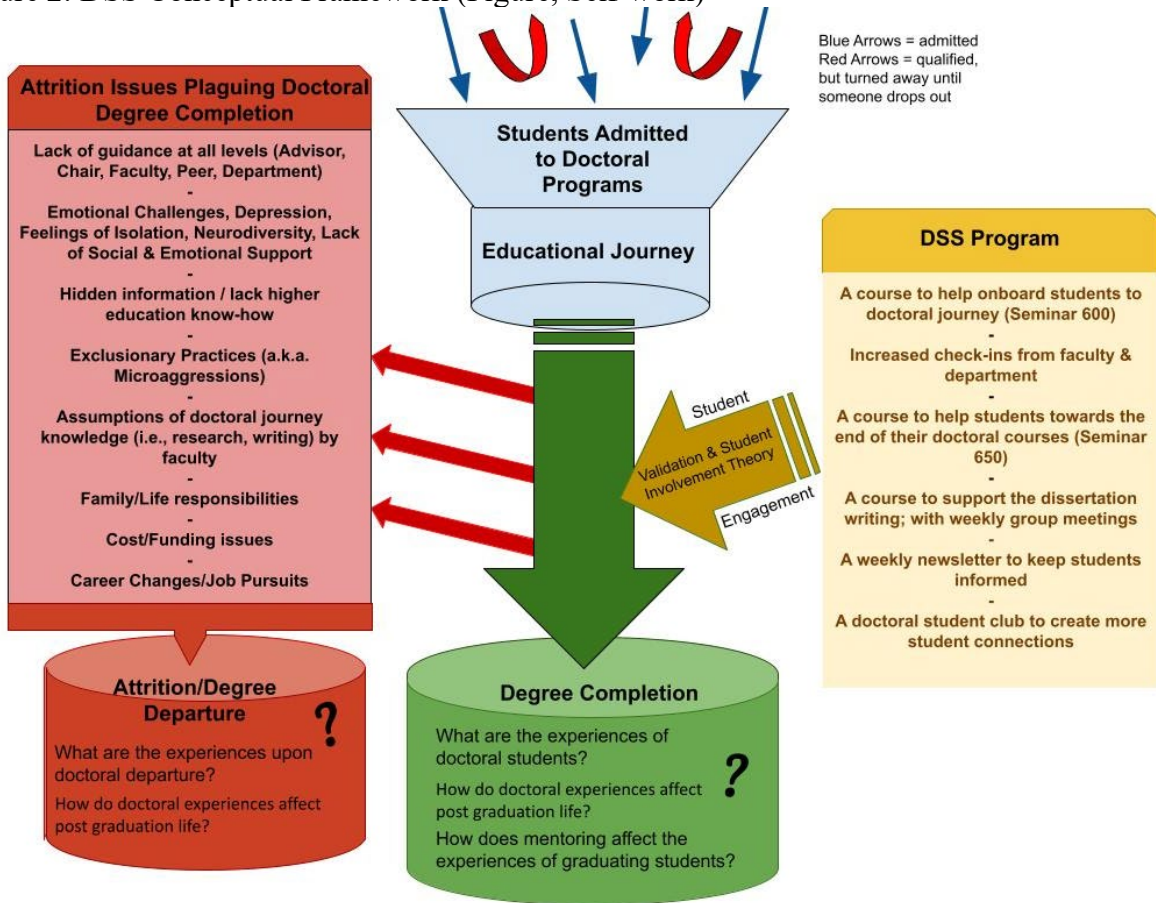
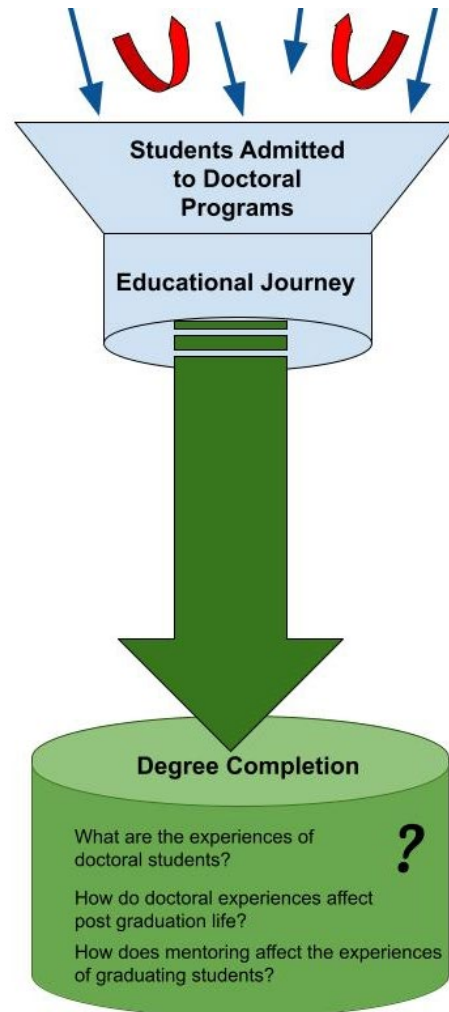


Figure 2 is best reviewed by unpackaging each layer into three parts: a center section representing the doctoral journey, a left section representing some reasons for student departures that could be alleviated through a DSS system, and a right section of what the DSS could do when implemented throughout a doctoral journey.

To understand this research framework, I will start with the center section, Figure 3, a detailed illustration of the doctoral pipeline and the path doctoral students take to enter a doctoral program.

Figure 3: Doctoral Journey (Figure, self-work)



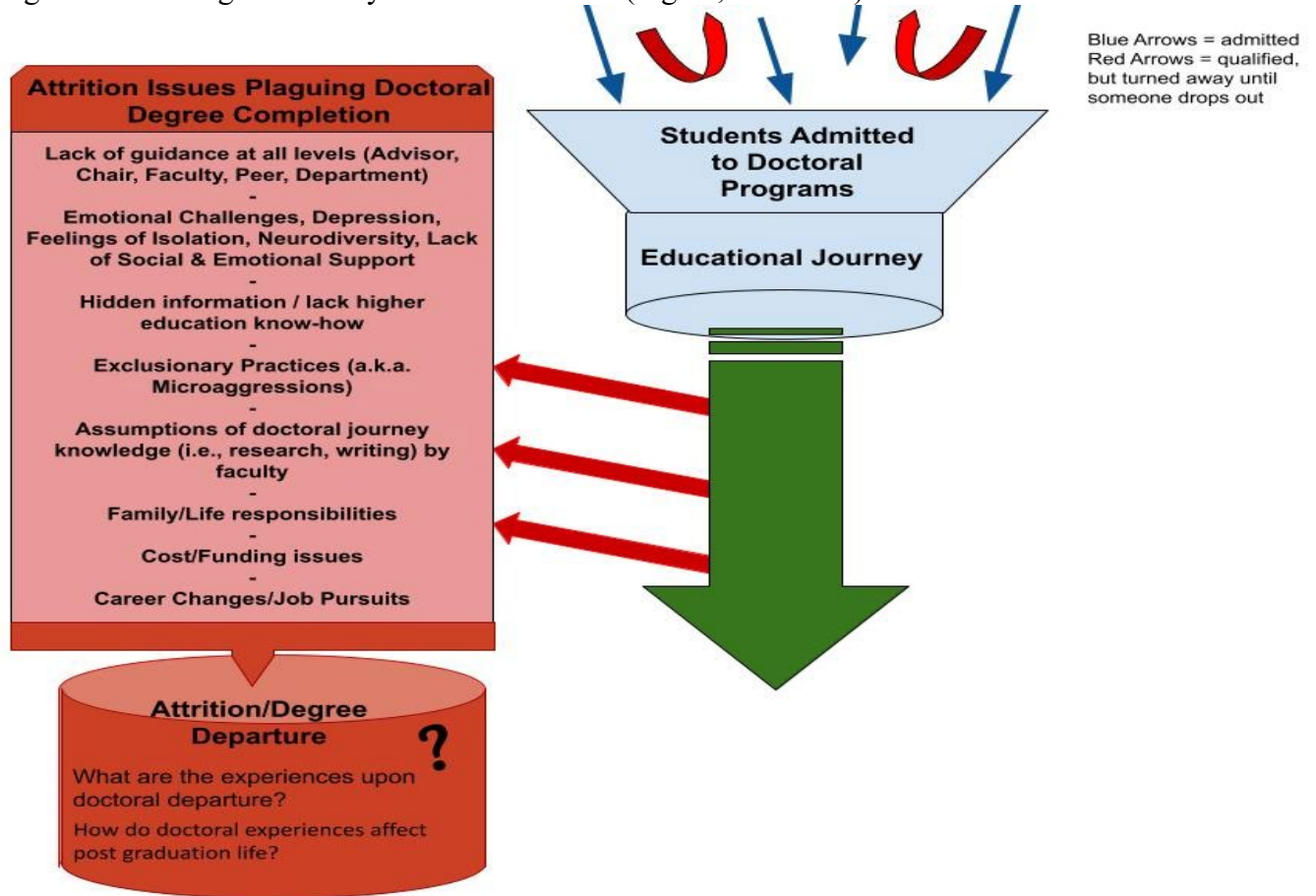
The top of the figure indicates the students applying to a program, illustrated by the arrows pointing into and out of the top funnel. For the Department of Education at MSU, the arrows represent those doctoral students admitted, 68%, with the exiting arrows indicating those



denied, 28% (graduate school internal application data, n.d.). When considering all doctoral students for the MSU campus, approximately half of the students who apply to MSU are admitted, or 46%, and 36% accept the offer of admission (graduate school internal application data, n.d.). Program acceptance stems from many areas, such as qualifications, funding, research objectives for a particular faculty, program capacity, and other metrics. The center arrow pointing down shows those doctoral students who enter and move through their educational journey, with the student's departure at the bottom with an earned doctoral degree in the bottom cylinder.

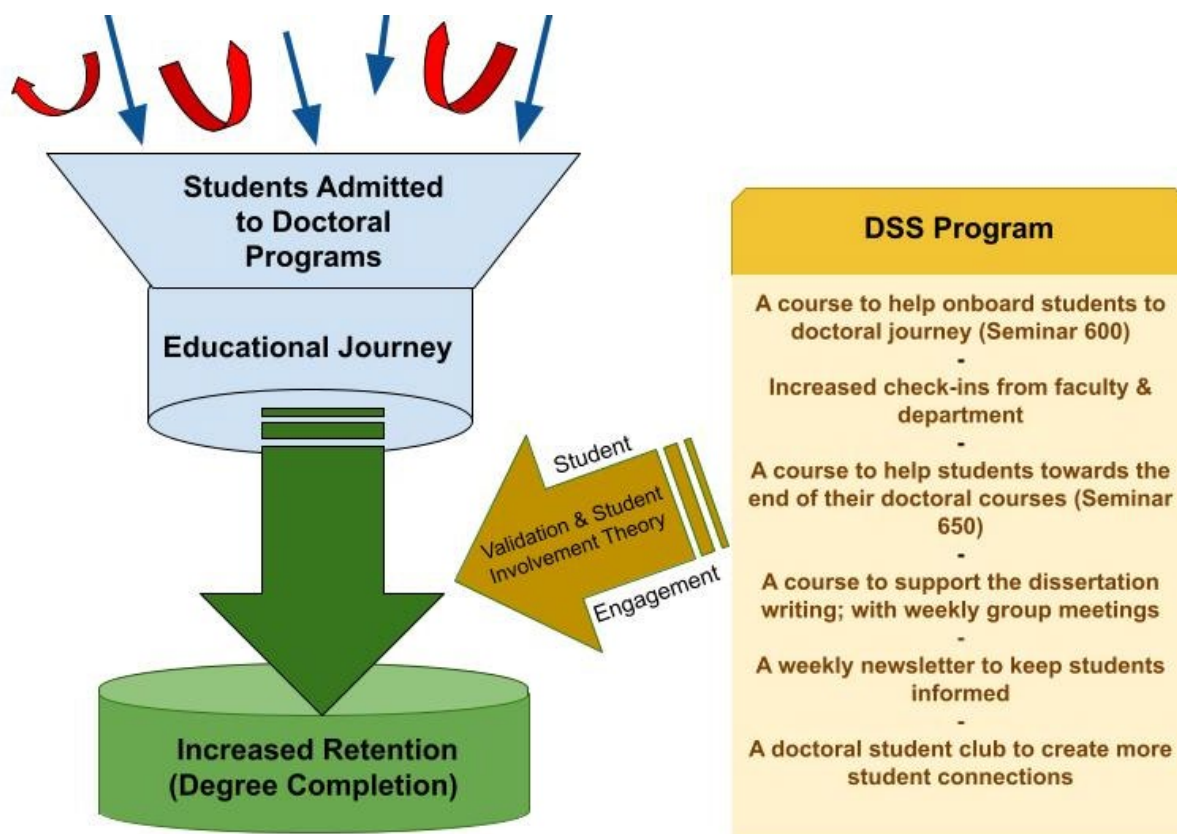
Figure 4 is one part of the framework that branches from the left of the center portion; Figure 3 provides a context for why a support system is essential at the doctoral level. This left side indicates the challenges faced by a doctoral student. The left-pointing arrows represent those students who depart at various times along the journey for various reasons, as indicated by researchers such as Lovitts (2001) and Gardner (2009). In addition, this left side provides some reasons for student attrition, such as lack of social support, depression, lack of mentoring, isolation, and exclusionary practices (a.k.a. microaggressions due to race, gender, neurodiversity, and more).

Figure 4: Challenges Faced by Doctoral Students (Figure, self-work)



Then, stemming from the right side of the Conceptual Framework are the elements of the DSS program, as seen in Figure 5. The gold box illustrates the department-implemented processes and programs. The gold arrow highlights the theories and framework supporting the research and what could impact students' experience and persistence at any point in their doctoral journey. This right side shows the role a DSS could have in aiding retention efforts, such as increased engagement, training, and better mentoring.

Figure 5: Doctoral Support System (Figure, self-work)



The DSS Conceptual Framework underscores the need to support a diverse student body and helps unpack the influences that impact doctoral students along their degree journey. The framework also organizes the eventual themes and coding necessary for qualitative analysis, all aiding in answering the research questions (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

To better understand how the identified theories and grounding framework serve as a basis for the conceptual framework, it is necessary to unpack and tie them to the ideas surrounding the DSS. The theorists are Astin (1984) and their Student Involvement Theory and Rendón's (1994) Validation theory; the 1989 grounding socialization framework came from Weidman, updated to include graduate students in 2001 (Weidman & DeAngelo, L. 2020;

Weidman et al., 2001; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Each supports the concepts of the DSS and is necessary to provide context and eventual interpretation of the study results.

### Astin's Student Involvement Theory

Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory asserts the creation of a better, more effective learning environment to encourage and motivate students to be more engaged with their academic pursuits. The Student Involvement Theory came about after Astin's research on higher education attrition, mainly how students are influenced by their surroundings, how these influences affect their behavior, and how much "physical and psychological energy" (p. 518) a student puts forth in their academic journey. Influences affecting students' experiences are those aspects within a university that could help a student's learning – from the facilities to academic engagement, from funding to how these resources are delivered to those in need. The Student Involvement Theory also recognizes students' different learning styles and approaches needed to connect with them. Astin's theory and research involved undergraduate experience, yet the usefulness can be considered universal (across educational levels). Accordingly, the Student Involvement Theory has been used outside of the undergraduate student realm and within the area of doctoral students, such as research Gardner and Barnes (2007) conducted looking into doctoral student involvement or with Anderson, Cutright, and Anderson's (2013) work focusing on mentoring and academic participation.

The purpose of Astin's theory is to create better-designed educational environments, an approach that could be utilized by both administrators as well as by researchers. In addressing the needs of students, some are very engaged and interact easily with their academic environment, while others are not. These others frequently do not connect socially with their

peers or have regular contact with the academic community. Astin posits that there is a direct correlation between levels of student engagement and involvement and how those students progress through a program. As supported by Tinto's (1993) research suggesting programs aligned with stronger engagement and social connections, this study will also underscore areas needed at the graduate level.

As the DSS Conceptual Framework indicates, socialization and engagement, or converse, isolation, are vital areas affecting doctoral student satisfaction and outcomes. It is through understanding and changing, if/as necessary, the educational environment that student engagement can be improved. Not to say that all students will become engaged through the DSS and the practices surrounding Student Involvement Theory; however, providing the opportunity could be the bridge that may impact and positively affect some. The Student Involvement Theory is one theory behind the DSS, particularly in better guidance, mentoring, and planning. However, as stated by Astin, for the theory to work, it "must elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development" (p. 522).

#### Rendón's Validation Theory

The second theory used is the Validation Theory, created in 1994 by Rendón (1994), which focuses on non-traditional undergraduate students. However, the approach was eventually deemed appropriate when viewing individuals from diverse backgrounds, as their later research indicated (2006, 2021). Rendón's theory could provide the context to understand the experience of those classified as 'other,' as mentioned by Leonardo (2004). Rendón's research focused on both in-class issues and out-of-classroom engagements and validation, noting that universities need to amend past practices to meet the diversity of the student population, which can affect

student success. This population is those who typically would not see themselves as college types, as Rendón explained:

In stark contrast with yesterday's uniform profile of college students as white males from privileged backgrounds, today's student body represents a tapestry of differentiation in social background, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, lifestyle, and sexual orientation. This has resulted not only in the colorization of the academy but in the proliferation of a constellation of students that challenge traditional values, assumptions, and conventions which have long been entrenched in the academy (Rendón, 1994, p. 33)

Rendón's research on culturally diverse students shows that the students expected to fail; they had doubts about their success and their capabilities and lacked the ability to self-validate or experience invalidating encounters both inside and outside the walls of higher education, which in turn made them doubtful of their role in higher education (Linares, & Muñoz; 2011; Rendón, 1994; 2021). These students sought more engagement, structure, and community, even a friendlier experience (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rendón, 1994; 2021).

Rather than looking at the "underserved students" ... "as a problem to be solved" (p. 20), Rendón (2006) suggests viewing these students in all they bring to higher education, both their "strengths as well as deficits, all of which affect student success. Students were not seeking to be coddled; instead, they thrived through compassionate, caring, and respectful encounters (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rendón, 1994; 2021). Rendón (2021) mentioned that "advisors need to understand the importance of assisting students in overturning the invalidation they may have received in the past and to believe that they matter, are valued and are important" (p. 9). As with Astin (1984), Rendón (1994) noted that not all could navigate the culture of higher education alone; they needed the institution to be more proactive in engaging with them to be more successful. When faculty stepped in to help engage students through caring and assisting with students' learning experiences, students developed academically; they thrived.

Through Rendón's research, when students received validation and personal concern, both with individuals inside and outside the college, their self-views improved (Linares, & Muñoz; 2011; Rendón, 1994; 2006, 2021). Validation provides a confirming experience through support, and it can foster an understanding of capability and increased self-worth, acceptance, and belonging, which will lead to further student development (Patel, 2017; Rendón, 1994; 2021). It can be argued that validation should come from one's own volition; however, when individuals encounter invalidating experiences, such as the first year of a doctoral program, even a confident person can be affected over time (Brill et al., 2014; Rendón, 1994; 2021).

Student Involvement and Validation theories support the DSS Conceptual Framework, providing the context to understand how students' environments and experiences can affect their perceptions. With these perceptions, we can acknowledge how different experiences could affect them. Along with the theories, the DSS Conceptual Framework emerged from the Graduate Socialization Framework developed by Weidman (Weidman & DeAngelo, L., 2020; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

#### Weidman's Socialization Framework

Weidman's framework explored the dynamic nature of first an undergraduate experience and then moved into the graduate community in 2001 with the Graduate Student Socialization Framework (Weidman & DeAngelo, L., 2020; Weidman et al., 2001; Weidman & Stein, 2003). The 2001 socialization framework identified how the elements of an educational community can influence the doctoral experience, affected by everything from the students' backgrounds to their academic community. Weidman's research noted that increases in knowledge would be impacted through faculty mentoring, supervision, and engagement focused on graduate students' work

(Weidman & DeAngelo, L., 2020; Weidman & Stein, 2003; Weidman et al.; 2001). Weidman's (2001) framework follows stages of engagement, indicating that this engagement is not linear, that "because universities are not encapsulated environments, graduate students experience communities with simultaneous, concomitant influences." (Weidman & Stein, 2003, p. 643). Think of it as interactive stages where some parts happen simultaneously for the student, with influences coming from multiple sources. Methods to support individuals and encourage and validate them are successful at every stage of a student's educational journey; the doctoral journey is no different. Weidman (2003) mentioned that academia can play an important role in creating a collegial environment that encourages socialization.

With the theories surrounding validation and student involvement and the socialization framework, the DSS Conceptual Framework has the grounding context necessary for the research focused on doctoral support at the Department of Education. In future chapters, the framework and theories will serve to understand how the literature has framed this study and within the results and discussion.

### Methodology

This qualitative case study was based on the epistemological assumption that the perspectives of the research participants were necessary to understand the doctoral student experience through these multiple sources of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, when considering retention and attrition, this understanding could lead to themes and interpretations necessary for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, semi-structured interviews or surveys were used to understand the doctoral student experience (See Appendix C for the list of questions). Additionally, the transformative framework provides a guiding backdrop in this



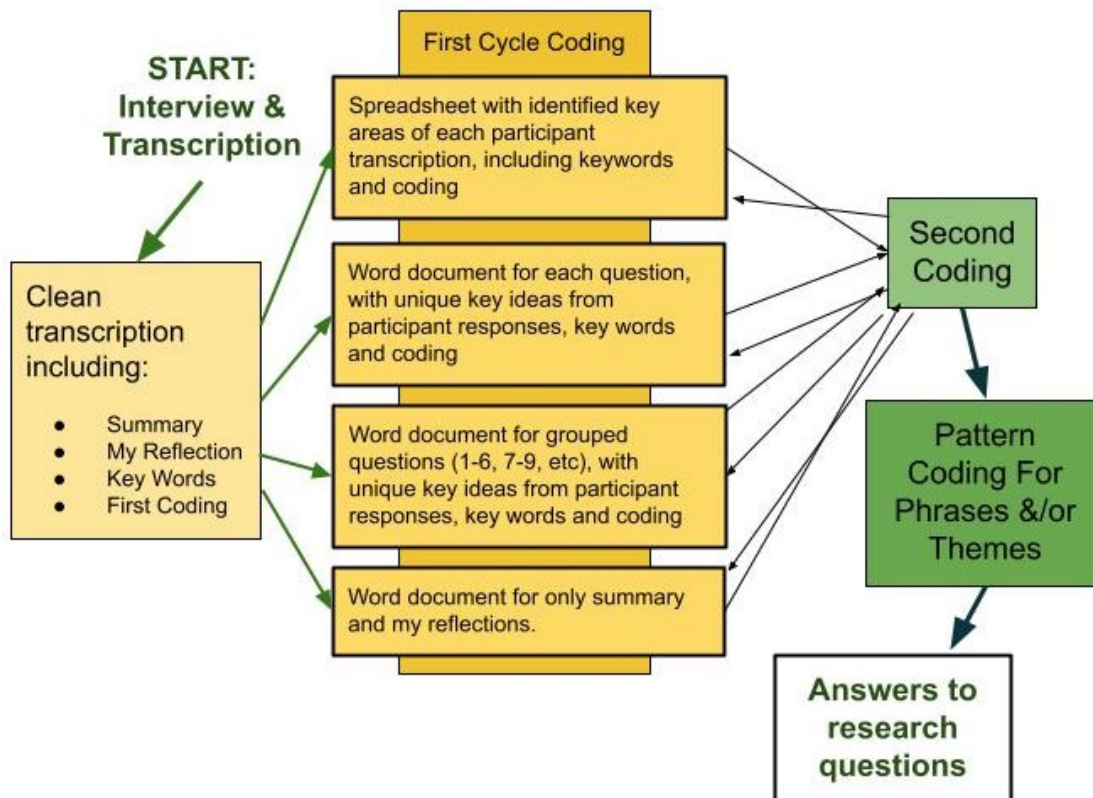
instrumental case study design, as the study was bounded within Montana State University in the Department of Education and their doctoral students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, I felt that this study could be more beneficial if I considered current and past doctoral students, even those who have already graduated or left the program. Using this selected population, I could provide a better grasp of the commonalities and differences between those students who arrived at the department before the implementation of the DSS (pre-Fall 2017) and those who came after. The interviews and surveys for this study allowed a context of the student experience; their lived experiences illuminated their voices and will add to this study by better understanding the perceived effects of the DSS in the MSU Department of Education (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Before this research, I conducted a pilot survey where I field-tested the interview instrument and then amended it for this current study. For this study, participants were asked to participate in either a Webex interview or to complete a survey. Both options allow for a secure transcription of the conversation(s) to be gathered, providing the necessary details of participants' stories to be recounted accurately (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 73). Through the initial pilot study, I felt that the detailed interviews created an opportunity for a richer overall context than a survey alone, as the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for further probing questions. Nevertheless, having both options could garner an increase in participation.

Cresswell and Poth (2018) refer to the analyzing and interpreting of qualitative data as a process that uncovers the "essence" of the story (p. 80), almost distilling the narrative and flushing out themes. The analysis considered all responses without embellishment or filtering (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 73). To interpret the interviews and surveys, summaries were

created and reviewed for initial coding ideas that could eventually lead to developing overall themes. Figure 6 shows how this process was conducted.

Figure 6: Analytical Process



The first round of qualitative review determined several types of coding; the initial coding method that was apparent was Value Coding (Saldaña, 2021, p. 167). Saldaña (2021) identified Value Coding as being a method that pulls in the participants’ beliefs, attitudes, and values, their “perspectives or worldview” (p. 167). Therefore, value coding was necessary for the analysis as it represented the participants’ impressions and feelings, an essential component of this research (Saldaña, 2021). Additionally, “Concept Coding” was used, as the review of the interviews and surveys presented some more significant concepts necessary in the overall theme

generation (Saldaña, 2021, p. 153). Moreover, In Vivo Coding (p. 137) was used as, in many cases, actual statements or individual words directly from participants were utilized, using the actual words from participants to express the voices of the participants (Saldaña, 2021).

The three coding methods allowed for a better interpretation of the data and provided the necessary themes to assist with a second coding process (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). The second process created patterns and grouped meanings from the narratives necessary for the student experience to surface (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). The “patterns” were then developed into themes that led to answering the research questions (Saldaña, 2021, p.322).

#### Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

The higher education system is at a precipice of change with student success, hopefully through program completion, as its focus. This research could have been conducted with a quantitative study; however, the DSS has not been running long enough to allow an analysis of pre-post completion, particularly for doctoral degrees in the Department of Education.

Additionally, due to the lengthy time it takes to earn a doctoral degree, the data would be imprecise and possibly misleading to conduct a quantitative study at this point. Using a qualitative design, the student experience could be probed for a deeper understanding of the current practices, possibly to amend future programming; however, certain limitations were apparent with this method.

### Limitations

The first limitation of this study concerns securing interviews and responses to the survey and the timeliness of participants' responses to requests. However, by seeking both, more responses could be secured to provide further viable and valuable data, as it is recognized that the surveys may not provide the same level of rich details as would come through interviews. As with any study, some individuals do not reply to the request to participate; this lack of response decreases the richness of the study. Those who do respond may not be honest in their interviews or surveys due to fear of some retribution (Mills & Gay, 2019). Also, some who respond may do so with confusing or uninformative responses, particularly within the survey where more probing inquiry could not be conducted (Mills & Gay, 2019). These responses could affect, both favorably and unfavorably, the overall results. There can also be selection diffusion or interactions, especially as the students are in many of the same courses together or have taken classes with the researcher. It is also important to mention that some students in the study have already completed their degrees. With this, their contributions may be diluted by time and wrestled with vague memories. Then, some have yet to complete their degrees; therefore, their responses may be lacking, simply due to needing more time in the doctoral experience.

### Delimitations

The delimitations surround the bounded population studied within the Department of Education at Montana State University (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). As the department had implemented specific programmatic changes for their doctoral students, these changes were not part of other campus units; therefore, including students across MSU would not provide meaningful insight to the DSS. It could be argued that including students from across campus

would allow for comparative analysis; however, for this initial study, containing the participant pool to those in the department would be an optimal first step in the analysis.

With this selection, it was apparent that an instrumental case study was necessary to examine the students' experiences with the DSS. The doctoral student sample should allow for some transferability of ideas and practices to other units on campus, even when considering differing department cultures and teaching methods (Mills & Gay, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). The overall goal is a transformative change through using individual experiences to promote and improve the retention of doctoral students.

### Assumptions

This research will follow the assumption that the responses from the study will be honest and illuminate critical gaps in understanding the effects of student support initiatives at the doctoral level. The premise of this research is that students would have a higher degree of satisfaction when they have received increased support, which leads to an increase in degree completion over those with less support. It is also important to point out that as this research is looking for doctoral experiences, it may not provide the full reasons why individuals leave a doctoral program, with departures due to issues outside the scope of this study, such as a family situation or career changes.

### Chapter Summary

Chapter One provides the necessary background to frame the purpose of this research. By understanding how higher education came to be and its effects on society, we can better understand the impetus of this research to doctoral student attrition. In addition, this chapter

presented the disconnection associated with attrition at this level and how supportive measures are perceived and could be effective at mitigating attrition and promoting retention. Finally, the chapter also included gaps in the research, an approach to solving those gaps, and the research rationale through a problem statement and a purpose for the study.

Additionally, Chapter One provided a theoretical framework and research methods to understand better the Doctoral System of Support (DSS) and how it was developed to solve some issues about attrition. The chapter furnished some foundational background for the study by answering the study's limitations, delimitations, and assumptions while also supplying operational definitions to aid in understanding the initial ideas surrounding the culture of higher education. Chapter One also presents the research questions for the basis and frames the comprehensive literature review in Chapter Two.

## CHAPTER TWO:

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The bottom line is that when we spend a lot of time worrying about how we fit and whether we belong—if we must continuously contort, adjust, hide, and guard ourselves at work—we risk losing opportunities to be seen as our best and truest selves, as expressive, fruitful, and full of ideas.

—Michelle Obama, *The Light We Carry*

This chapter will provide background literature to better understand the underpinnings of the Doctoral System of Support (DSS) program for doctoral students in the Department of Education at MSU. As the increase in more specialized learning, unique career objectives (outside of academia), and advanced degrees continue, universities should be prepared to implement changes to reduce the attrition of their doctoral students (Grawe, 2018; Patel, 2017; Thelin, 2019). However, it has been well noted by educational researchers such as Lovitts (2001) and Gardner (2009) that there should be more supportive measures at a doctoral level.

It is essential to mention that the breadth of doctoral students needs can challenge supportive measures, as doctoral experiences are unique for each student, department, field of study, and university. Each academic unit and university may encompass a unique and independent culture from one to the next. The uniqueness can affect how support could be delivered or even accepted. A perplexing question arises in understanding retention efforts and those doctoral students who would be supported. Does everyone need support, or simply a select few? Moreover, what does that support look like?

Educational researchers such as Barry et al. (2018), Bostwick and Weinberg (2022), and Caruth (2015) focus their research on uncovering supportive methods that could increase retention. Barnes and Randall (2012) identified that successful retention methods for one

program do not necessarily translate successfully to other programs. They posit that “.... overall satisfaction with doctoral experiences appears to be equivalent/similar across multiple disciplines, student satisfaction within disciplines varied significantly and consistently concerning specific academic experiences” (p. 47). In my experience as a distance coach, this would be akin to walking away from an athlete when they struggled with bridging a distance gap. Thus, how does a university attempt to create systems of support that could impact some of the students who might otherwise depart?

To provide a context for this study, this chapter focuses on the research surrounding how the university arrived at today’s retention issues and what is currently known about retention methods for doctoral students. The articles in this literature were retrieved by searching the Montana State University Library services and Google Scholar, accessing ProQuest, Sage Publications, Educational Research Information Center (Eric), Gale Academic, the digital research database EBSCO, and Journal Storage (JSTOR). The search criteria followed terms applicable to this research: attrition, doctoral education, doctoral satisfaction, doctoral support, mentoring relationships, mentoring issues, mentoring programs, retention, persistence, satisfaction, and doctoral degree completion.

After the initial criteria search, it was apparent that a secondary search was necessary to focus on specific areas and to learn more about a particular term or concept. For example, with mentoring issues or persistence, terms such as imposter phenomenon, power relationships, self-doubt, isolation, anxiety, well-being, and non-traditional student were investigated. This additional layer of investigation allowed the research to include areas relevant to the study. In



addition, searches surrounding the theories comprising the theoretical framework were also conducted.

Through this two-part process, the investigation typically focused on only current peer-reviewed research and undertaken primarily in the United States (U.S.), but, when necessary, studies such as Byrom, Dinu, Kirkman, and Hughes (2022) research predicting stress in doctoral researchers, articles outside the U.S., were used. Included in this review are some necessary articles and books dating before or just after 2000, such as the research by Rendón (1994), Key (1996), Langford and Clance (1993), Lovitts (2001), and Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001). These authors provide a greater understanding of student populations, history, demographics, and departures in higher education, which was necessary to comprehend the empirical influences of the research better.

The literature analysis also included the historical perspectives using researchers such as Lovitts' (2001) book *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study*, Tough's (2019) book *The Inequality Machine: How College Divides Us*, and books by Thelin covering American higher education issues (2017, 2019). These researchers provide the history and the future of higher education necessary to appreciate where higher education was a century ago and where we are today. When exploring attrition and retention, research by individuals such as Gardner (2009) and their study of the attributes that contribute to higher or low doctoral completion rates, or research by Maher, Wofford, Roksa, and Feldon (2020) and their investigation into early doctoral exits, were necessary for the study. The literature review also incorporated other elements that lead to doctoral departures, such as cultural and gender influences (Caruth, 2015; Cole et al., 2020) and programmatic influences

(Gardner & Holley, 2011; Golde, 1998). By being more inclusive of this history, we can better understand how we arrived at the current retention issues within higher education, specifically with doctoral students. A chronological timeline and a systematic view were used to align the research in the sections of this chapter.

This chapter will provide a brief historical look at higher education, an abbreviated view of what led to the pursuit and growth of higher education over the past century in both student enrollment and overall demographics. Much of this history is centered around undergraduate education; however, the undergraduate lens frames graduate education in importance, as this background directly impacts graduate education.

As we investigate history, we can begin to understand the current state of doctoral student attrition in our nation. The issues surrounding student departures are broad, yet universities still need to adopt those supportive measures that have been successful. It is apparent that many (if not most) universities are tethered to past practices and ideas regarding acceptable levels of student attrition. As a result, they may grapple with, be unaware of, or be not equipped to address student's needs for support or additional training throughout their doctoral journey. This chapter will explain supportive measures in general, those researched as part of this study, and the steps established by the Department of Education at Montana State University. Through this explanation, we can recognize how universities arrived at their current state to better understand the need for refocused retention efforts.

### Historical Overview of Higher Education

Higher education has spanned centuries; therefore, as much as history is essential in understanding how we arrived at today's circumstances and needs for supportive initiatives, this

research cannot be a complete and comprehensive dive into its history. Therefore, the historical perspective will briefly touch on a few key aspects of higher education history to understand the current attrition issues.

The history of graduate education support measures has not been one of particular focus until the last several decades (Crede & Borrego, 2014; Lovitts, 2001, 2008; Gardner, 2009). Today's education culture stems from the beginnings of higher education, formed from "a patterned and enduring treatment of social groups" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 129). Scholars such as Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) mention this enduring pattern when discussing critical social theory in their analysis of the persistence of the student; as much as their research is focused on undergraduates, it can also be overlaid into the doctoral experience. They mention that "substantial inequities exist in educational attainment by race, income, and gender, and such disparities contribute to the perpetuation of socioeconomic stratification in American Society" (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 409). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) mean that higher education caters to a privileged population.

Leonardo (2004) studied power structures in education and stated that social groups divide the higher education population and create an organizational grouping of otherness. This otherness is cited by authors such as Gardner (2013) and Tough (2019), who explain the disconnection of students' experiences from those considered the traditional group of students. As much as this research study is not focused on disparities such as race, cultural, age, or gender disparities, to understand how we arrived at the 21<sup>st</sup>-century doctoral student experiences in higher education, it is essential to dive into this otherness that a significant portion of the

population has, and continues to, experience (Davis, 2012; Leonardo, 2004; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nelson, & Williams, 2019; Tate et al., 2015; Thelin, 2019).

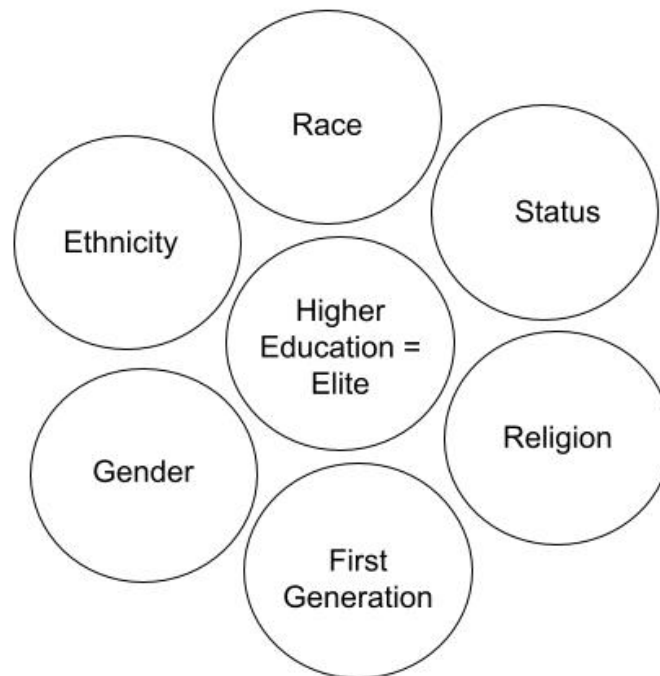
Higher education in the United States came about at a time when only those of privilege, opportunity, and means pursued university degrees (Thelin, 2019). Centuries ago, a university degree was not necessary to practice in professions, such as medicine or law, as most education took place outside the formal setting (Lazerson, 1998; Thelin, 2019). At its inception, the purpose of a university was more aligned with broadening a person's mind and a place for the elite to gather than the current focus of career pursuits (Musto, 2022; Thelin, 2019). As Thelin (2019) commented, a college education was simply a social, political, and even religious status intended for those typically male, white, and wealthy.

We can recognize that the institution itself was formed through the lens of privilege, status, gender, and race, noting that at the time of formation, Blacks [enslaved people] were not considered people, through a level of "dehumanization" (Nelson, & Williams, 2019, p. 102) thus, they were not included in the lens, and First Peoples's education was directed at educating the 'heathenness' out of them (Thelin, 2019). Therefore, through this lens, we can understand the construct of higher education today (Leonardo, 2004; Nelson & Williams, 2019; Thelin, 2019).

These lenses created a space formed from unique views, instilling a sense of cultural acceptance of specific individuals and academic belonging (Johnson, 2019). The privileged lens influenced higher education policies, management, and administration while also affecting and influencing the direction of society (Thelin, 2019). A college education during this time was centered around elite families and their social status, creating what Thelin termed the "colonial elite," a society removed from the rest of the American families (Thelin, 2019, p. 25).

During this colonial time, Thelin (2019) mentioned that universities listed students by their family rank in student rolls and were also seen in the scholarly academic robes worn, indicating the student's socioeconomic status. With a select population attending, even today, there is a constant reminder of this particular social class, as seen through the reminders of family names on buildings and student listings at universities (Thelin, 2019). Figure 7 shows the original idea of higher education, who was included in the early centuries of education [center circle], and those not included [outside of the center circle].

Figure 7: Exclusion and Inclusion of Higher Education Until the Mid to Late 20th Century (Figure, Self-work).



Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more inclusive universities were being developed, institutions catering to people other than the elite, white males (Musto, 2022; Thelin, 2019). However, even with the growth of these universities, higher education was lagging in any

attempts to create a more integrated student body; there was a disparity between the elite who attended universities and those who did not continue their education (Levin & Levine, 2014). The Morrill Act of 1862 was one aspect that provided both geographic as well as a demographic expansion in higher education (Key, 1996), and the second act established Black universities (Levin & Levine, 2014). Today, this act is credited for broadening the opportunities for undergraduate education through the growth of institutions focused on agricultural education to help society with the promotion of agricultural prosperity (Key, 1996; Musto, 2022). By securing lands to develop institutions, the federal government created more access to education for the common man. However, in truth, “The Morrill Act became part of a more comprehensive economic policy to promote national prosperity and increase government revenue through the donation of public lands” (Key, 1996, p. 215). In this, the federal government pursued academic growth not from a genuine desire for the education of its citizens, as one would think, but from a position of needed revenue (Key, 1996). The act was one of many ideas presented, focusing on reclaiming lost revenue from war debts and issues surrounding unpaid land purchases (Key, 1996). The Act was primarily focused on early education practices, not graduate work, which led to where we are today.

Nevertheless, for all the reasons leading to the passing of the Morrill Act, a long-term, indirect revenue stream was secured and, in turn, broadened access to education to more of the common, non-elite individual. These land-grant universities were focused on educational opportunities directed to the common citizen and career opportunities rather than the more liberal studies geared toward the elite (Key, 1996; Musto, 2022). Initially, only a handful of land-grant colleges were created: Ohio, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas,

Virginia, and California. The Morrill Act evolved to have a minimum of one land-grant university in every state and three institutional categories within the land-grant system (Croft, 2022). The first Act in 1862 was for establishing the original Land-Grant institutions, followed by the 1890 Act that provided for the inclusion of Black Colleges and Universities (HBC). Finally, the 1994 Land-Grant Act allowed for the inclusion and support of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) (Croft, 2022). Future amendments were instituted to include Hispanic-Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities (HSACUs) and Non-Land-Grant Colleges of Agriculture (NLGCAs). Today, there are over 111 land-grant universities in the United States (Croft, 2022).

At the same time universities were growing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Germany began changing the educational structure and how to deliver that education (Waaier, 2015). The initial education structure had students attend courses, absorb lectures, and learn from existing knowledge from those before them (Thelin, 2019). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Germany shifted focus on what they wanted from their students, changing to an education that consisted of performing research, writing a thesis, and producing articles while being supervised by an advisor (Musto, 2022; Waaier, 2015). This change created an overall restructuring of academia and was the start of the research university. In 1876, Johns Hopkins University was the first institution in the United States to embrace this German model of education (Musto, 2022).

With the increased focus on research, enrollment increased. Academic positions were expanded in terms of the type and quantity of positions to meet enrollment needs. Previously, academic assignments were composed of private lecturers or professors (Waaier, 2015). With the restructuring, an increase in faculty hiring allowed for a whole substructure of roles within

higher education and made room for academic freedom for the faculty (Musto, 2022; Waaijer, 2015). The growth of faculty positions fed into the layered faculty system, which started with the student researcher assisting faculty and continued through to post-graduation, from lecturers to junior professors and into the top position of full professor (Waaijer, 2015; Thelin, 2019). This new structure was called “Humboldtian” and was quickly embraced worldwide, including in the United States (Waaijer, 2015, p. 49). To visualize the system, consider it a tiered pyramid with more positions at the bottom, either non-paid or lower-paid, with fewer, more desirable, higher-paid positions at the very top (Waaijer, 2015; Thelin, 2019). This tiered top-down system is also seen as a caste system in other aspects of society.

This tiered system and research-focused education blossomed in Germany, where the country quickly dominated science research (Waaijer, 2015; Thelin, 2019). Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Humboldtian structure was actively imported into the United States (Musto, 2022; Waaijer, 2015; Thelin, 2019). This change in structure helped increase the number of individuals pursuing advanced degrees, promoted the development of the research university, and led to the modernization of the education system (Waaijer, 2015). This structure could also align with what Lazerson (1998) stated of the education system, that it “became the licensing agency for Americans who wanted to enter the professions,” businesses began requiring the college to secure specific careers. In other words, they created more access to higher education for those interested in the pursuit, and industry responded in like (p. 65).

### Demographic Changes

As university growth continued through the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>, the demographics of higher education began to evolve. These changes came through measures



contributing to increased interest and enrollment in higher education. A few measures that affected the demographic changes, in addition to the Morrill Act, came about through the creation of the GI Bill, Affirmative Action, and several laws directed toward women. Numerous other statutes and measures could be mentioned, yet these can be credited to the significant growth of first-generation students (FGS), non-traditional students, middle- to lower-income students, and female students.

However, even while these measures improved access to education, they also perpetuated barriers. An old culture can persist when higher education is open and pursued by individuals outside the typical historical student makeup. Therefore, knowing how universities have changed over the centuries and how the demographics are evolving will provide a better context for understanding the needs of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### G.I. Bill

Access to higher education began to change significantly after World War II, in the middle of what Thelin (2019) refers to as the “golden age” (p. 260) of higher education, a time of growth and opportunity. Two critical aspects during this time were that the war showed that the U.S. was markedly behind in scientific research, and the struggling post-war economy could not handle the influx of returning servicemen (Thelin, 2019). The formation of the 1944 GI Bill, or the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, came about to address both issues (Bound & Turner, 2002; Musto, 2022; Thelin, 2019; Turner & Bound, 2003).

The GI Bill was anticipated to garner little traction at its inception; however, due to healthy advertisements and programmatic changes encouraging its use, it was immensely successful for some of the population (Bound & Turner, 2002; Thelin, 2019; Turner & Bound,

2003). To understand the success of the Readjustment Act for service members returning from war, the pre-war undergraduate student enrollment was around 1.5 million; with the implementation of the GI Bill, more than eight million returning veterans entered academia within the following ten years (Musto, 2022; Thelin, 2019). In addition to the GI Bill, the push to advance our scientific pursuits saw increases in the growth and development of institutions, from private universities to community colleges, to meet the demands of students entering higher education (Thelin, 2019).

Many universities created during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century offered an education at reduced or even no tuition. The extremely low or no tuition initiatives were supported through state subsidies, as seen in California, Massachusetts, and New York, which helped further open doors to academia (Thelin, 2019). Through these tuition initiatives, higher education saw an influx of students from lower socioeconomic status or considered first generation (FG), those with little background or family history in academia (Waaiker, 2015; Thelin, 2019). However well-intended the GI Bill was to improve access, provide funding, and encourage all people to pursue education, the bill did not elicit a change in university admissions processes, especially for returning service members in the South (Bound & Turner, 2002; Thelin, 2019; Turner & Bound, 2003).

The bill was created without a standardization for implementation nor a mechanism to propagate equal opportunity (Turner & Bound, 2003). With that, not all returning service members who wanted to use the GI Bill benefited; some lacked counseling, were limited in their educational choices, and even discouraged from using it due to discriminatory practices (Thelin, 2019; Turner & Bound, 2003). In addition, at the time of the GI Bill, most institutions continued

restrictive practices based on race and gender (Bound & Turner, 2002; Thelin, 2019; Turner & Bound, 2003). Moreover, for race specifically, Turner and Bound (2003) indicated that the bill “exacerbated rather than narrowed the economic and educational differences between blacks and whites” (p. 172). This restriction affected these populations' trajectory regarding their educational opportunities, career paths, and current prosperity.

### Affirmative Action

Another measure enacted to increase students' access, enrollment, and diversity was the implementation of Affirmative Action in 1965. Affirmative Action was initially created to prohibit discrimination in employment; however, an aspect of the executive order was to remove bias in college applications to promote an increased fair admissions process by considering ethnicity, race, and other factors in the processes (Garces, 2012; Thelin, 2019). As mentioned, college campuses were still set in a practice like earlier centuries, a disadvantaged space for those whose race, gender, religion, national origin, or color were not the norm (Garces, 2012; Thelin, 2019). These disadvantages also involved academic and programmatic choices, including universities considered Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). As Thelin mentioned, “If the state’s Black institution did not offer a particular field of study or degree program, then how could it be equal” (2019, p. 305)?

Consistent with other researchers focusing on higher education during this time, Thelin (2019) indicated that “racial integration... was an effort almost always dismissed by governing boards as a nuisance to institutional advancement” (2019, p 305). The initial ideas surrounding promoting diversity and access were well intended, yet the focus was fraught with previous structures pushing back against the agenda.

In Bronner's (2014) research on the persistence of prejudice, he stated the following about a prejudiced person and or system:

In principle, he endorses inequality and the idea of competition. But only when he is on top or, better, believes he is on top. The problem arises when he finds himself on the bottom. Competition is good when it works for him. When it doesn't, . . . ., he will insist that his competitors are cheating-and that they cheat because it is a trait of their ethnicity, nationality, or race (p. 17).

In understanding the illogic of prejudice, we can recognize the resistance or reluctance to amend practices in higher education over the centuries. This is not to say that higher education is locked into prejudiced behavior, but structures and the academic culture could be. Instead, in higher education, we acknowledge that the institution is built on the fabric of strife (Garces, 2012; Thelin, 2019). Hoffmann-Longtin et al. (2021) explain this power struggle with marginalized students continuing today as they have found that students of color are experiencing, and have continued to experience, differences in their education compared to white students. Therefore, as doors of opportunity were opened in this last century, the system also cultivated abuses of power, was replete with financial misspending, and created new pathways of potential mistreatment of the same students they were trying to help.

Additionally, as we move into an era of bans on Affirmative Action, the nation could be set with a step back in educational progression, like what was experienced by the first states to remove it: the decline of students of color applying and enrolling in higher education (Garces, 2012). It took years for those states to develop and implement new methods to continue diversifying their student body (Garces, 2012). Lack of access and diversification were also seen with other aspects of the population, such as women entering higher education.

### Women in Education

Women entered higher education in the middle to later part of the nineteenth century, a time when their education was more focused on religious studies, domesticity, and other societal skills that could influence their cultural status and increase their marriageability (Bucur, 2018; Thelin, 2019). As women had few career opportunities, the post-education drive that began to develop for men was unavailable to women (Bucur, 2018; Thelin, 2019). The growth of Catholic families in the early part of the twentieth century increased the need for nuns, teaching, and other positions identified only for women (Bucur, 2018; Thelin, 2019). Women's colleges then grew in number across the United States to meet the educational demands, a growth that continued through the middle of the twentieth century. Then, as women's careers expanded and the times shifted from segregated to coeducational institutions, many women's colleges closed by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Thelin, 2019).

Another aspect of women's increased attention to education arrived with the passing of several laws affecting women that increased and broadened the demographics and access of those who attended. For example, the passing of Title IX in 1972 saw an increase in women attending higher education, resulting in a rise in women earning degrees at a level that currently has equaled, if not surpassed, men (Buek & Orleans, 1973; Musto, 2022). Title IX came about over decades of discussions addressing the issues surrounding equal access to education for all students, regardless of gender, and the drive for making education inclusive (Buek & Orleans, 1973; Musto, 2022; Thelin, 2019). Nevertheless, what came before Title IX may have been equally important regarding the gender diversification of higher education.

When the Food and Drug Administration approved a birth control pill in 1960 and the passing of 1973's Roe vs. Wade more than a decade later, the two acts allowed women

significantly greater self-direction in their futures rather than rest on centuries of practice of family first (Bankole, Singh, & Haas, 1999). These laws allowed everyone the opportunity for family planning, not only those of a particular race and privilege (Bankole et al., 1999; Cates, Grimes, & Schulz, 2003; Londoño Tobón, McNicholas, Clare, Ireland, Payne, Simas, Scott, Becker & Byatt, 2023). Some scholars such as Londoño Tobón et al. (2023) found that “Four years after being denied an abortion, women were three times more likely to be unemployed,” further mentioning that these same individuals tend to have “more debt, lower credit scores, and increased financial insecurity years after being denied,” aspects advanced education and improving demographics and diversity in higher education is set out to change (p. 4). Therefore, the connections between these laws’ impacts on diversifying higher education can be made, and they are part of the complexity behind improving demographics and influencing the socio-economic abilities of underserved populations.

Other measures to balance the gender discrepancies, such as the Federal Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1974, allowed women to move forward in their chosen lives by permitting them to secure personal credit lines (Blakely, 1981; Gelb & Lief Palley, 1977). Before the act, women were discriminated against based on gender, birth control practices, marital status, and several other measures deemed credit indicators for women (Blakely, 1981; Gelb & Lief Palley, 1977). At that time, fertile women were not a reasonable credit risk, even more so for those who were unmarried or divorced (Blakely, 1981; Smith, 1977).

The act was amended in 1976 to include age, “race, color, religion, national origin,” not only gender and marital status (Ladd, 1982, p. 166). Together, these measures improved the demographics of those attending college by granting women a choice of obtaining a higher

education with methods to support themselves through adequate credit, as well as putting a hold on family and launch an eventual career (Artiga, Hill, Ranji, & Gomez, 2022; Bankole et al., 1999; Blakely, 1981; Smith, 1977).

The culmination of these laws provided a means, a choice, and the ability to move forward in life in a way that was not traditionally typical for women. However, despite the increase of women in higher education, unfriendly academic climates persist today, stemming from the need for more female representation within certain academic fields (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022). In studies on gender gaps among STEM students, utilizing the Measuring the Effect of Research on Innovation, Competitiveness, and Science (UMETRICS) data set, Bostwick and Weinberg (2022) found that even when women were strong candidates, they were more likely to leave their respective programs compared with men. They cited that women in programs with no female peers were “11.7 percent less likely to complete a Ph.D. within six years than their male counterparts” (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022, p. 400). Of those who graduate and enter male-dominated fields, women enter workplace environments that can be toxic due to underrepresentation and unsatisfying experiences (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022). It would be remiss not to mention the converse of this same issue, the negative impact on male students when there is an increase in female faculty; in this, there was a reported slight decrease in time to degree for male students (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022). The findings show that female students’ effects were more highlighted based on “changes in peer gender composition” (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022, p. 425).

### Systemic Issues

The growth of higher education, particularly doctoral education, has persisted through the last century. The demographics of those seeking and enrolling in higher education have broadened. However, part of the issues surrounding higher education, particularly doctoral students, is the continued lack of research focused on the experiences of those outside the center of the higher education spectrum in Figure 7 (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022; Leonardo, 2004). Within the funnel of students entering the system, there are those brought up in a family history of higher education academic participation, primed and expecting to earn an advanced degree as their parents did before them; they have a leading edge on those who did not (Piatt, Merolla, Pringle, & Serpe, 2020). This edge can help students both in their admissions process and once they are within the folds of the institution itself. It is almost a student divide; how perceptions and experiences in higher education can vary from student to student needs to be addressed for their ultimate success. In 2020, Piatt et al. asserted that “Higher Education in the United States continues to reflect the deep divide represented by race and class that is evident in many other sectors of education” (p. 269) and mentioned that typically, “Whites are overrepresented (sic) among graduate degree recipients” (p. 270). Family wealth also continues to perpetuate higher education in degrees that secure higher wages, with those in lower earning brackets seeking degrees continuing the cycle of low incomes (Cole et al., 2020; Piatt et al., 2020; Tate et al., 2015).

### Moving Towards a More Inclusionary Practice

Piatt et al. (2020) state that higher education trends towards increased demand for people with a master’s degree from a more diverse population. They insist that increased innovation

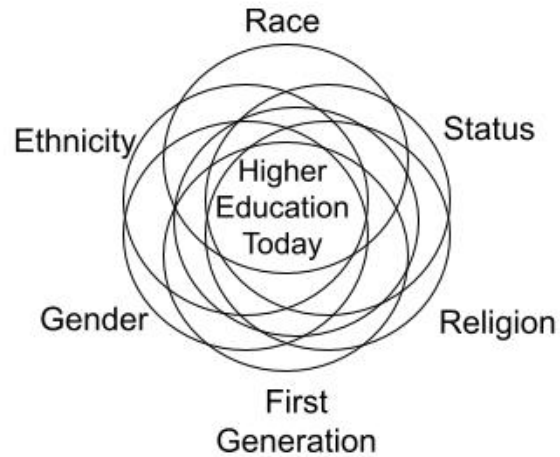


occurs when the workplace is diverse, which is needed to be competitive as a society. Piatt further mentioned, “Employment requiring a master’s degree is projected to increase by 17% and by 13% for doctoral and professional degrees through to 2026” (p. 270). Therefore, as demands change, so should educational inclusionary practices. Piatt further stated that “to meet hiring demands for highly skilled employees, the U.S. will need to increase the participation of all individuals in education and the economy” (p. 270).

Knowing that the competitive market needs diversity, the lens currently focused on higher education should be focused on the initial funnel of those who apply and how to support a diversified student population. Focusing on the entire student’s journey allows for a more robust understanding of a support framework befitting for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through a profound reflection on the university foundations, we can consider researched methods of doctoral student support that can aid all students, including those who are underrepresented.

From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to today, admissions practices now look more like Figure 8 than Figure 7. Call Figure 8 the intersectionality of admissions; doors once shut on different groups based on race, religion, and gender are now increasingly opened, providing the overlap of discrimination to be removed. Some doors have been opened with policy changes, while others have opened due to the shift in faculty demographics. Either way, these are changes in the right direction. However, even with the creation of systems of educational equality, there has also been resistance to changing the status quo of academic culture, which has been experienced for centuries.

Figure 8 Inclusionary Admissions Practices in Higher Education from the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Figure, self-work).



This academic culture, which promoted exclusionary experiences, can still be experienced by incoming students today, yet the doors have been opening. Nonetheless, the struggle with higher education's demographic changes is the illusion that students are all experiencing higher education identically and have equal opportunities for success. While some of these historical measures have opened doors, mistreatment faces the demographically changing student body, with academic hazing, misogynistic practices, lack of connection, belonging, community and engagement, and other exclusionary practices (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022; Cole et al., 2020; Gardner, 2013; Tough, 2019; Veilleux, January, VanderVeen, Reddy, & Klonoff, 2012; Tulshyan, 2022).

#### Applications and Attrition within Higher Education

The current higher education model focuses on attracting doctoral students toward innovative programs and unique research opportunities (Manning, 2017; Thelin, 2017). Conversely, more must be done to address the retention of those same doctoral students once

they have been admitted into their respective programs. As Crede and Borrego (2014) expressed in their research to unpackage the retention issues in the United States, “... an average of one out of every two graduate students will not complete their degree – an attrition rate that has not changed for more than half a century” (p. 1599).

This historical practice has also seen institutions and research units approach retention differently, with some spending little attention or resources directed at retaining the students once they are in the folds of the institution (Lovitts, 2001; Thelin, 2017). Alternatively, if there is training, it is biased and typically focused on careers inside academia, where most students will not find a job or may not be interested in pursuing one (Hoffmann-Longtin, Brann, Ridley-Merriweather, & Bach, 2021). As indicated in the DSS Conceptual Framework in Figure 2 in Chapter One, one reason the focus is not on retaining doctoral students is due to the demand for the institution’s programs.

### Supply and Demand

Think of the demand for doctoral education as a funnel to capture the interest, with a very thin pipeline of acceptance into a university or degree program, as presented in Figure 3, Chapter One; more people want a graduate degree than most institutions can admit. This capacity issue limits the volume of admissions due to research alignment, lab space, faculty, staff, teaching loads, and or funding. As the pipeline of students interested in a doctoral degree is relatively high, departments can select the best students and deny the rest, whether qualified or not: the capacity issue. This practice is not in question in this research, but what is in question is what happens to those who enter the institution.

When a department or faculty knows demand for their program is high, and when an admitted student is not performing as well as they could, there has been a historical practice of replacing students rather than working with those who struggle (Lovitts, 2001). This practice is a modern assumption of being more cost-effective (Lovitts, 2001; Thelin, 2017). Some programs remove students from their departments, while others stop working with or funding them. The department or faculty then replace the spot left by the departing students with fresh, eager students and start the cycle again (Lovitts, 2001; Thelin, 2017). It is apparent that the academic culture associated with doctoral student development needs to be imbued with retention at its center (Lovitts, 2001, 2008).

Research on doctoral student attrition indicates the causes of departures come from a variety of reasons, such as academic anxiety and the lack of belonging (Barry et al., 2018; Gardner, 2009; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Veilleux et al., 2012), depression (Munir & Jackson, 1997; Tough, 2019; Yusuf, 2022), academic isolation (Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Weidman et al., 2001) or academic biases, racial, gender, and personal prejudices (Leonardo, 2004; Tate, Fouad, Marks, Young, Guzman, & Williams, 2015), and imposter phenomenon symptoms (Byrom et al., 2022; Craddock et al., 2011; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2009). In addition, of course, there are other reasons students leave a program, such as a change in career focus, family or life responsibilities, or a loss of financial support (Lovitts, 2001). However, as Gardner (2009) explained, many students depart their graduate programs due to mental health issues.

### Academic Anxiety, Stress, Depression, Lack of Belonging

Doctoral students experience a variety of emotions throughout their journey. By understanding this psychological roller coaster, this research into doctoral attrition can unpack the doctoral students' feelings that could lead to their attrition. The anxiety doctoral students experience can come from a lack of understanding of their role as students, how to communicate with the faculty in their respective departments or committees, or the lack of knowledge of what to do and how to proceed in their work (Veilleux et al., 2012; Yusuf, 2022).

When a doctoral student is confused about their process, they could ask for clarification. However, in a system and culture built on the admissions of individuals who should be groomed and ready for a doctoral journey, the same system, through unspoken terms, often (overtly or covertly) discourages these conversations (Gardner, 2009; Veilleux et al., 2012). Gardner (2009) expressed that students may need more preparation for graduate education than academic institutions would like, and these students may need more skills, motivation, or tools to succeed.

Gardner's (2009) and Yusuf et al.'s (2022) research interviewed doctoral students and faculty, and they noted that attrition came from needing more assistance to prepare for the academic journey. These unasked and unanswered questions frame the doctoral student's confusion and, over time, can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of not belonging, that they were not meant for higher education (Cornwall et al., 2019; Gardner, 2009; 2013). Cornwall et al. (2019) noted that even now, issues surrounding anxiety, stress, and uncertainty in first-year doctoral students persist. As Yusuf et al. (2022) suggest, "building stronger relationships within programs by fostering a culture where faculty are more accessible to and supportive of graduate students can have positive implications" (p. 477).

Some of the stress associated with doctoral students' journey involves their time to degree. Time to degree is the length of the doctoral journey, from taking courses to conducting research and writing a dissertation, which can be up to ten years. The stress increases the longer a student is on that journey, especially if the journey is taking longer than expected (Barry et al., 2018; do Amaral, 2022). In a study investigating doctoral student challenges to degree completion, Barry et al. (2018) indicated an increase in psychological stress due to the length of the doctoral journey, particularly if there was a predetermined schedule. Their research suggests that unmet schedules correlate with increased pressure and anxiety, leading to attrition. These stressors can also be from the self-doubt surrounding the doctoral project, doubts surrounding completing the project, the lack of guidance or academic confusion the student feels, the inability to express and seek assistance, and other influences (Barry et al., 2018; Cornwall et al., 2019; do Amaral, 2022; Veilleux et al., 2012). Sadly, research has shown that mental distress is higher in the graduate community than in any other age-related population (Barry et al., 2018; Byrom et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2018).

Academic stress and anxiety can affect doctoral students to the point that some students lack confidence and competence, impacting their ability to participate in analytical work (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). This lack of competence then permeates the doctoral student's overall abilities, perpetuating the cycle of stress and anxiety. Lorenzetti et al. (2019) state that when doctoral students are engaged and satisfied with their work and experience a sense of belonging, they undergo less anxiety and have an increased sense of motivation. As researched by Yusuf et al. (2022), universities can work on ways to help students create a sense of community and networks and how to manage their emotional well-being.

Rendón (1994) indicated in their research focusing on increasing student involvement that students have higher satisfaction in their educational experiences when they are better engaged. Rendón 's validation theory surrounds the interactions and engagements that can affect student engagement, motivation, and overall satisfaction and are especially necessary for the unconventional student. By embracing the validation theory, which focuses on creating welcoming environments through healthy concern, respect, and productive feedback, doctoral student confusion can be mitigated (Rendón, 1994).

The interactions affecting students come from faculty and peers both in and out of the classroom, each informing and shaping a student's views, attitudes, and experiences in the doctoral environment (do Amaral, 2022; Hanson et al., 2021; Rendón, 1994; Veilleux et al., 2012). When the engagements can validate the student, for example, if their questions are like other students, or their confusion on performing a particular task is seen as typical, there is an increased sense of belonging and decreased sense of self-doubt, all leading to reducing academic anxiety (Creely & Laletas, 2020; Rendón, 1994, 2021; Veilleux et al., 2012). Furthermore, through improved socialization experiences, these same students can be further encouraged to belong to the academic community (Hanson et al., 2021; Weidman et al., 2001; Veilleux et al., 2012).

Through academic anxiety and lack of belonging, graduate students can also suffer from depression and mental wellness issues (Evans et al., 2018). Some additional reasons associated with depression can be experiencing stressors, conflicting family roles, school-work-life, lack of social connections, and discrimination (Cornwall et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2018; Munir & Jackson, 1997; Yusuf, 2022). Doctoral students' emotions and wellness issues have been

documented for decades; however, due to societal changes associated with the digital age, there is an acceleration, especially seen in the Internet Generation, or iGen population (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019).

Research by Lukianoff and Haidt (2019) indicated increased academic confusion among iGen students. The iGen are those born between 1995 and 2012, predominantly entering graduate programs today. Lukianoff and Haidt hypothesize that this population may not be “as ready for college as were eighteen-years-olds (sic) of previous generations” (p. 149) due to the reliance on personal devices, such as mobile phones. They postulate that, as humans, we have culturally experienced teamwork and social interactions that embrace belonging, but with dependency on digital devices, these skills are being lost. With an upbringing connected to the digital world, the iGen may lack the social skills to manage conflicts, work, and interact with others. These skills are necessary for successfully navigating higher education and future careers.

The quantity and quality of student experience and involvement interactions are part of Astin’s (1984) study and theory surrounding student involvement. In considering Astin’s research, the student experience has been thwarted in some parts due to environmental reliance on digital engagement. Astin’s research from forty years ago is relevant today. In graduate education, the quality of student engagement can be impacted by the influences of the students’ environment and personal growth. Lukianoff and Haidt’s (2019) research and others align with Astin’s (1984) in that from this dependence on the digital world, the iGen population has experienced an increase in mental illness, such as anxiety and depression. They further hypothesized that these experiences might result in higher needs and support from families, their communities, and the colleges they attend (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). These higher needs are



some bases for understanding the current doctoral student retention issues surrounding higher education.

### Academic Confusion and the Underrepresented Student

Over the last several decades, research has shown that students' needs vary by gender, race, ethnicity, culture, and other personal associations (Davis, 2012; Munir & Jackson, 1997; Cole et al., 2020; Rendón, 2021; Tate et al., 2015). Leonardo (2004) indicated that the term 'other' best represents the underrepresented doctoral students or those held separate by race, religion, gender, or other prejudices, including those experienced by FG and/or low-income.

It is well noted that even when there are student interactions, overall, the graduate student journey can be one of isolation that can inhibit socialization opportunities (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). This siloed journey can move any student into academic confusion, resulting in increased stress and episodes of depression, affecting some populations at higher rates (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). Academic confusion arises when students do not have the engagement they need, and through understanding the student and their perceptions, we can better unpackage and address their needs (Munir & Jackson, 1997; Yusuf et al., 2022).

Student experiences surrounding the typical student (white and upper class) were the basis of Smith's (2013) research into academic culture. Smith explains how academic culture is still viewed through the lens of the dominant experience, creating biases that can impact the achievements of the unrepresented student. In addition, through exclusion systems, colleges may be unaware that their practices focusing on the traditional student can disadvantage the underrepresented student (Davis, 2012; Leonardo, 2004; Rendón, 2006, 2021). A traditional student's skills can be typical and natural in academia and life. However, as Rendón (2021)

explains, higher education today is “a multidimensional, mixed-race student culture that is not trapped in binaries and that embraces not one or two, but several aspects of their identity” (p. 7).

When academia can appreciate that not all students enter the doctoral realm with the same tools, they may bring others that are not easily seen, such as work ethic, tenacity, or grit, that may be equally or even more needed in the doctoral realm (Davis, 2012; Duckworth, 2016). Research by Duckworth (2016) considered differences between individuals who appear naturally talented and those who have grit, stating, “By shining our spotlight on talent, we risk leaving everything else in the shadows. We inadvertently send the message that these other factors – including grit – don’t matter as much as they really do” (p. 31). Students arrive at a doctoral education with many skills; sometimes, the strongest skills are less apparent.

When research is focused on the underrepresented student, similarities in barriers and challenges, including prejudices, become apparent, and with these similarities’ programs addressing the needs can unite in their focus (Davis, 2012; Tate et al., 2015). For example, Tate et al. (2015) noted that underrepresented students “complete college at much lower rates than their counterparts and lack structural and sociopolitical support that are necessary to prepare for entry to and success in graduate studies” (p. 428.). In understanding the various needs of a graduate student, Cole, Newman, and Hypolite’s (2020) research focused on the sense of belonging and how “students of color, in particular, report a lower sense of belonging in comparison with their White counterparts due to negative or challenging cultural and social experiences” (p. 278). By embracing various needs in engagement and socialization and acknowledging how students’ success is impacted by their environments, graduate education can improve a student’s sense of belonging, how students interact with their environments and can

affect students' overall success (Cole et al., 2020; Munir & Jackson, 1997; Weidman & Stein, 2003; Weidman et al., 2001).

As Lukianoff and Haidt (2019) explained, women may experience higher stress and anxiety, with reasons pointing to this lopsided well-being directed to their unique and specific needs, suggesting that both the quantity and quality of interactions are different based on gender and life influences, further indicating that women might need more guidance. This mirrors Munir and Jackson's (1997) assertion that women in graduate education reported higher stress due to life challenges, socialization, stereotyping, and discrimination. In addition, Lovitts (2001) discussed that even when women earned higher grades than their male counterparts, they would leave their graduate studies at higher percentages.

By combining these experiences from the underrepresented students, Holley and Caldwell (2012) indicated that from designing and implementing effective doctoral mentoring systems, persistence and satisfaction increase when the student has more meaningful relationships. Their research is framed by Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and engagement, which states that when universities and education systems can embrace different approaches to student learning styles, there can be increased engagement. Holley and Caldwell reported that when students are engaged in stronger relationships and more frequent interactions with peers, mentors, and advisors, there can be increased doctoral completion. The feeling of belonging or being groomed for higher education is also identified in Tough's (2019) research, which investigates individuals who did not grow up with the college conversation and are also referred to as first-generation college students.

Those who identify as first-generation students (FGS) typically move on to graduate work at lower rates than their non-first-gen counterparts; they are also a majority of those considered non-White (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Gardner, 2013). Gardner (2013) indicated that those FGS comprised about 32% of doctoral degrees awarded (in 2010); this is from a population that typically has less inspiration or guidance to seek out higher education. Gardner (2013) mentioned that most research on FGS has revolved around undergraduate students; however, understanding the FGS is equally important at the post-graduate levels (Rendón, 2021).

The FGS bridges many factors of the changing demographics in higher education, as they can “(a) be considered low-income, (b) be older, (c) be female, (d) have a disability, I come from minority backgrounds, (f) have dependent children, and (g) be financially independent of their parents” (Gardner, 2013, p.45; Rendón, 2021). The challenges experienced by an FGS are mirrored in the perceptions of many of the unrepresented student population as a whole: students who may not have been exposed to the academic culture (Bañuelos & Flores, 2021). However, as Gardner and Holley (2011) state, this population of students can also be more resilient than others due to their life experiences when given the opportunity or, as Duckworth (2016) called it, being “grittier.” Rendón (2021) further mentions that FGS may have “hidden talents that propel them to succeed” (p. 9) and that it is the job of the university and advisors to help bring these strengths out through being “validating agents who affirm that all students can succeed when given proper resources and opportunities (p. 11).

The culture of academia is changing, as seen at MSU through various university-wide initiatives aimed at reforming the academic culture into a more holistic one, from admissions to

academic engagements. However, the application of resources at the academic department level, focusing on the unique needs of the student population to improve doctoral retention, often still needs to be improved.

### Academic Isolation and Imposter Phenomenon

A doctoral student's journey can have many moments of academic engagement, professional opportunities, and career-changing encounters, yet most of their doctoral experience is one of isolation. Hours spent in research labs and libraries, sifting through charts and endless data, all experiences where the student is solo in their thoughts and focus. This isolating doctoral journey can set that student apart from those admitted into the same program and even in the same term. This isolation insulates them from the ebbs and flows of doctoral academic journeys, students' emotional highs, and challenges (Girard & Musielak, 2012). As Lorenzetti et al. (2019) discuss in their research on mentoring and tutoring, "social connectedness or, conversely, feelings of isolation can impact graduate students' academic and learning outcomes" (p. 546). In this, students' isolation can cause feelings of self-doubt to creep into their experience, leading to the need for increased socioemotional support (Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). Over time, a student's self-confidence wanes with the chronic ignoring of personal emotional stress and self-doubt. When a student's confidence is affected, feelings of not belonging or being a fraud can re-immerse for some, a manifestation of the imposter phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978; Craddock et al., 2011).

Academic Isolation The doctoral journey can begin with coursework that engages the student with others. For example, students can enter a program within a cohort, all beginning their journey simultaneously, even under different advisors and exploring unique research.

However, even during this coursework, students begin the journey functioning in significant levels of isolated work, studying for their courses and the research needed for their dissertations.

The doctoral experience is one of self-discipline and can be filled with emotions from excitement to extreme distress. These wide-ranging emotions can come from conquering a difficult concept to understanding a particular data set to the converse and struggling with concepts or data sets. When elated about a process, they can feel encouraged about their journey and motivated to work – increasing self-efficacy; however, when confused about a process or research method, the student can move into feelings of self-doubt and increased stress levels (Creely & Laletas, 2020; Byrom et al., 2022). Feelings of self-doubt can cause students to question every aspect of their education, from their preparation to feelings of being a fraud (Golde, 1998). In isolation, all emotions cultivated in the individual, whether good or bad, can either encourage the student forward in their degree or drive them to a standstill, affecting their motivation to progress (Golde, 1998; Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

This motivation is critical when understanding that a large portion of the doctoral journey, after coursework, is completed in isolation. Once the coursework is completed, the next step of the journey is research and the subsequent dissertation writing phase. This period of the doctoral journey can be much more extended than a year of writing and conducting research; for some, it can be several years. Some students may have frequent, weekly advisor check-ins to help them proceed in their writing process, yet many others will experience long gaps between advisor meetings. Tenenbaum et al. (2001) mentioned that the more “socioemotional” support a student receives from their advisors, the more productivity, overall satisfaction, and experiences increase (p. 338). As mentioned, doctoral students may not ask for additional assistance if they

have feelings of doubt or question their ability (Smith, 2013; Weidman et al., 2001). The cycle of doubt and abilities increases in isolation, leading to higher stress levels associated with the writing process (Brill et al., 2014; Weidman et al., 2001). Anxiety, doubt, and isolation can affect doctoral students' research and writing, leading to long gaps of no work or ceasing writing altogether (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 1998).

As Astin (1984) expressed in the Theory of Student Involvement, students learn differently and can respond to different learning approaches. Additionally, Astin mentions that some students need connecting and validating experiences, which would underscore a missing aspect in the dissertation writing phase. In this, the isolation doctoral students experience in a doctoral journey are aspects of Weidman's (1989; 2001) Socialization Framework and Rendón's (1984) Validation Theory. Combining these ideas in addressing the doctoral students' needs could have a positive impact and assist in thwarting emotions that can affect their confidence. Sadly, as Hoffman-Longtin and colleagues (2021) noted, "Although the graduate student socialization and identification process has been discussed for more than 30 years, little has changed in practice" (p. 120).

Imposter Phenomenon (IP) Another factor that can affect a student's confidence and overall well-being is when they question whether they even belong in the degree program. This self-doubt, the feeling that they will be found to be a fraud and lack the preparation to persist in the program, that others would see them as doubting their abilities, is referred to as the imposter phenomenon (IP) (Clance & Imes, 1978; Craddock, 2011; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2013; Langford & Clance, 1993; Tough, 2019; Weidman et al., 2001). The isolation surrounding the doctoral journey can increase anxiety and doubt, further fostering these imposter-associated

feelings (Byrom et al., 2022; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2013; Langford & Clance, 1993; Tough, 2019). Early research by Clance and Imes (1978) pointed to “clinical symptoms most frequently reported are generalized anxiety, lack of self-confidence, depression, and frustration related to the inability to meet self-imposed standards of achievement” (p. 242), all symptoms which can be exasperated during a doctoral student journey. Langford and Clance (1993) mentioned that those with IP “chronically feared not being able to maintain their success” (p. 495); thus, doctoral students with it would continue to experience worries and anxieties throughout their doctoral journey.

Through understanding self-doubt and IP, the needs of the doctoral student can become more apparent. The socialization theory explained by Weidman et al. (2001) ties the needs of the student to a sense of community, especially during a time when students are most vulnerable and emotionally insecure. They noted that for graduate students to succeed in their work, they may need help transitioning into understanding the demands of higher education (Byrom et al., 2022; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Additionally, doctoral students may need further help moving from their previous role as undergraduate students or in a professional position to their new role as graduate students and researchers (Garcia & Yao, 2019).

In case study research on doctoral student socialization, Garcia and Yao (2019) focused on the first-year experience and the student’s needs. They noted that the student experience is not linear, meaning that the emotions students experience can fluctuate and change with each new experience, or as Weidman and colleagues (2001) stated, they move “from stability to insecurity and uncertainty and then back to stability again as they maneuver in their new environments” (p. 19). Garcia and Yao (2019) mention the critical role a university and program culture can play in



the socialization process through more robust integration and interactions of the students, their peers, and the faculty surrounding them.

Socialization experiences can mitigate the isolating experience, fostering feelings of self-doubt (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2010; Weidman et al., 2001). These experiences can start in the first year of onboarding and evolve through increased interactions between fellow students and faculty. However, as researchers have indicated, socialization should continue through the entire doctoral journey, especially during the most isolating years of work (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2010; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Weidman et al., 2001). Socialization interactions can boost an individual's feeling of belonging yet can also thwart them if they are not managed in a safe environment. In research conducted by do Amaral (2022), they indicated that when students need more help, they will not seek it unless they have already experienced a supportive and encouraging environment, stating that "when students feel less competent, they are more likely to avoid seeking help" (p. 137).

These emotional experiences affect students' psychological state and ability to work or attend courses and can appear as a lack of drive and focus (Gardner, 2009; Lorenzetti et al., 2019). Barry et al. (2018) indicated that doctoral students suffer from motivation and academic distress to the point that there is a direct correlation to dissatisfaction and departures from degree programs. Additionally, doctoral students can suffer from disconnection, unhealthy student-to-student competition, and discontent with their faculty and advisors (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Holley & Caldwell, 2012). This disconnection can be seen in doctoral students with their programmatic confusion, being the recipient of deficient or mediocre mentoring, a lack of guidance, and feelings of not belonging, especially when the academic community was not part

of their upbringing or previous college experience (Brill et al., 2014; Cole et al., 2020; do Amaral, 2022; Hanson et al., 2022; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Tough, 2019).

### Doctoral Student Preparation

Even knowing the reasons underlying doctoral student attrition, many universities claim the primary cause is student workload pressures or loss of funding (Crede & Borrego, 2014; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). In addition, there may also be a false assumption in academia that all incoming doctoral students arrive on campus with academic abilities and skills ready for their educational journey (Davis, 2012; Garcia & Yao, 2019). This misperception may be due to a need for more data from students at the time of their departure from the program or university. However, doctoral students may be less than candid with their responses when questioned by their faculty advisors due to worry of some retribution (Lovitts, 2001). Retribution can occur even after leaving, as students may attend other institutions and know that faculty may converse with one another, and any negative comments could trail the student to the next institution they attend. Therefore, more comprehensive reasons for student departures could be gathered through exit surveys by the University or national surveys. However, research over the past several decades by Gardner (2009), Lovitts (2001), and others has already provided significant information to understand student departures.

### Faculty, Staff, and Department Climate

Gardner (2009) cited that in one study of 33 faculty members, a third of the faculty respondents stated that the student's academic inability led to their departure. Going on to explain, Gardner (2009) reported that two-thirds of the faculty felt that the departures were purely a student issue due to being "unprepared through earlier socialization to meet the rigor

and expectation of graduate school and conducting research” (p. 98). When understanding that students do not all enter with a shared understanding of navigating graduate school, the student needs more help than a faculty or department is prepared to provide (Davis, 2012; Gardner, 2010; Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Bañuelos and Flores (2021) mentioned that Latinx doctoral students “were marked by unequal mentorship and professional development opportunities and racial discrimination among other forms of oppression” (p. 2). Other non-traditional students also experienced these unequal treatments (Holley & Gardner, 2012). Veilleux et al. (2012) commented on program climate as being an influence on students’ overall satisfaction and performance and mentioned that the perceptions of “research training environments influences students’ attitudes toward, and interest in, performing research” (p. 212). Requiring the students to reach out for assistance in a climate that may not encourage them to do so adds another layer of pressure to students already experiencing academic tension (Lovitts, 2008). This climate of challenged communication may only become worse due to the global pandemic of the past several years (Hoffmann-Longtin et al., 2021).

However, it would be remiss of me not to share that in academia, many faculty admit and onboard students and are prepared to work closely and consistently, fostering a supportive and engaging environment. When students are not in a supportive academic faculty and student relationship, we can appreciate the issues surrounding self-doubt, IP, and other well-being issues. Many educational researchers, such as Gardner (2010), Hanson et al. (2022), and Holley and Caldwell (2012), have indicated that when students receive academic support from the beginning of their doctoral journey, they can thrive in their new roles as graduate students.

Attrition affects academia in many ways, from department and faculty invested resources, financial resources, and the financial and time reinvestment in new students (Lovitts, 2001). Additionally, the loss is experienced with the future student-created contributions to the overall body of knowledge. Finally, when a student departs due to an emotional experience, as mentioned above, the act of departing further impacts the departing student emotionally and financially; as Lovitts (2001) stated, students can leave the university “demoralized, broke and often deeply in debt” (p.7).

### Doctoral Student Support

Decades of research have been conducted on student support initiatives in higher education initially focused on undergraduate students, notably when campuses recognized that transitioning from high school to college life could be anxiety-producing and confusing (Seidman, 2012; Smith, 2013; Tinto, 1993). It became apparent that when students received more guidance, support, and encouragement, they engaged sooner within their academic careers, and there was less attrition (Gardner, 2010; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Seidman, 2012; Smith, 2013; Tenenbaum et al., 2001). In response, universities created programs and services to encourage and foster a strong student connection even before students walk onto campus. From the research on undergraduate support measures, the lens shifted to graduate student support in the 1990s, with increased focus over the last decade (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Munir & Jackson, 1997; Patel, 2017).

The shift in higher education focusing on doctoral student success initiatives has underscored the need for supportive programming to improve retention for all doctoral students (Piatt et al., 2020). Doctoral student support is a commitment to the student from every level of

the institution, not just from a student's advisor (Barry et al., 2018; Girard & Musielak, 2012; Lovitts, 2001). The commitment to the doctoral student comprises a network of encouraging encounters and processes developed to integrate students into the culture of academia involving meaningful and enriching interactions that support students' well-being. Student support initiatives involve other students, staff, faculty, and the entire campus; however, they also include the student's family and community (Barry et al., 2018; Girard & Musielak, 2012; Lovitts, 2001).

The idea behind a support system or program is to recognize that students are entering a new environment with experiences that may not be familiar to them. The stress and anxiety of fitting in and understanding their roles and the work to be done can lead to confusion and uncertainty. This is not to say that a university should handhold or do the work for the students; it is simply a system designed to provide an opportunity to deliver the tools and training for all students to thrive.

A doctoral support system does not choose which students to work with; it is created for all students. Students from any background can experience anxiety, stress, and self-doubt at any stage of their doctoral journey. Doctoral student-supportive commitment is contradictory to the historical culture of academia involving student academic hazing and experiences which elicit self-doubt, encouraging IP to thrive in silos of student isolation through lack of community (Barry et al., 2018; Byrom et al., 2022; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). As Rendón (1994) explained, "Despite the fact that the student profile is changing, faculty continue to rely on an old model that forces students to assimilate, to compete against each other, to remain passive participants in learning, and to believe that separation leads to academic power"

(p. 47). Additionally, Rigler et al. (2017) reported that “doctoral students repeatedly identified the most consistent and significant barrier to their success in the degree program was a problematic relationship with the dissertation chair” (p. 5). A doctoral support system differs from the typical long-standing model, which fosters confusion and self-doubt (Brill et al., 2014; Caruth, 2015). As mentioned by Tenenbaum et al. (2001), the more advising that students experience, the more it can affect their academic success, leading to a distinct difference between only providing academic guidance and offering both academic and “emotional guidance” that they may be needing (p. 327).

Montana State University has implemented initiatives tailored explicitly for graduate students, some requiring them to take the lead in addressing their needs. Some of these surround primary conditions (e.g., housing issues, food insecurities, delays in degrees), peer community and collaboration, and empowerment and equity. These practices involve work to increase graduate student stipends, securing and providing childcare scholarships for student parents, and helping with affordable housing and mental well-being initiatives. Further, peer mentoring circles have been implemented within seven MSU departments, and community-building mini-grants have been developed to support student-initiated projects to focus even more on faculty mentoring practices and training. Finally, empowering students to be a part of their success through encouraging focus on program timelines leads to decreased time-to-degree, developing career focus and training grants, and providing other holistic methods for professional and personal development opportunities (i.e., GradCat 360). However, despite all the practices implemented on the MSU campus over the last few years, very few departments have developed

an internal process for doctoral (or graduate student) success, such as the Department of Education's methods.

A doctoral support system does not guarantee success; it simply provides the step ladder to reach the higher shelf. The student can grab the ladder, open it, and use it as instructed. A supportive program begins at recruitment and continues through to degree completion, involving the removal of barriers impacting those in the doctoral degree pursuit, a big ask for many universities suffering from staffing shortages, cultural incongruity, and underfunded programming initiatives (Gardner, 2010; Ross-Gordon et al., 2017; Thelin, 2017; Tough, 2019).

A doctoral journey should be one of acceptance, patience, and understanding of cultural, political, and personal beliefs and experiences (Johnson, 2019; Ross-Gordon et al., 2017; Tough, 2019). When defining doctoral student support, Golde (1998), Holley and Caldwell (2012), and others focused on enterprises geared towards socialization and self-assurance, diversity and inclusion practices, and cultural congruity initiatives (Johnson, 2019; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Weidman et al., 2001). Additionally, researchers such as Pfund et al. (2016), Ewbank (2016), and Smith (2013) focused on effective mentoring relationships, noting that mentoring involves a comprehensive understanding of student needs to be paired with the flexibility to work and nurture students during their education and throughout their doctoral journey.

In better understanding the mentoring models as a community of learning, Brill et al. (2014) explained successful mentoring as a mentor almost serving as a multifaceted coach when engaging with the doctoral student. The coach's role does not end with the training plan; a successful coaching and training relationship encompasses all aspects affecting their charge. Successful mentors are those who take part in post-career initiatives and guide students in

securing research grants and opportunities for presentations and focusing on completing a degree in a timely fashion (Kumar & Koe, 2017; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Patel, 2017; Pfund et al., 2016). The relationships forged between student and chair are seen as part of this coaching experience; meaningful and consistent communications can aid in doctoral student retention (Hanson et al., 2022; Rigler Jr, K. L., Bowlin, L. K., Sweat, K., Watts, S., & Throne, R. 2017). This understanding led the Department of Education at MSU to implement and deliver their Doctoral System of Support in the Fall of 2017.

#### Doctoral System of Support (DSS) in the Department of Education

In a doctoral support system such as the Doctoral System of Support (DSS), the program is focused on academic persistence by operationalizing theories such as student engagement and validation, which remind us that individuals feel stronger with a sense of belonging, that is, when they are connected and better integrated into the educational system, rather than being an outsider looking in (Astin, 1984; Caruth, 2015; Golde, 1998; Rendón, 1994; Weidman et al., 2001). As with an athletic team, there is a sense of connection and unity with common goals.

Doctoral support can create a stronger community, which aids in decreasing feelings of self-doubt, imposter phenomenon, academic confusion, anxiety, and more, many reasons leading to student departures (Barry et al., 2018; Byrom et al., 2022; Caruth, 2015; Gardner, 2009, 2010; Johnson, 2019; Weidman et al., 2001). Gardner (2009) indicated that working with struggling students, for some universities, could be a significant cost saving rather than replacing them, citing that a university could save a million dollars each year in stipends if retention were improved by only 10%. However, such cost savings are conditional and can only be truly understood by uncovering each university's student funding models, practices, and more.



Nevertheless, even if there was a noted cost saving, universities appear to be reluctant to reconsider their views of what leads to student departures.

As much as doctoral students focus on different research, the common goal is completing and earning the degree. The DSS comprises student support and training geared to any research mode. Nevertheless, it could also be developed to provide guidance unique to a program, department, or university with the goal of student success (Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Within the Department of Education at MSU, the faculty and administrators began considering the department's retention strategies in 2014. The precise timing and need for the change surrounding the department's expansion in doctoral degree options, as they were poised to create a Ph.D. track in addition to the Ed.D. track. In the department's expansion efforts, they realized that clarification of the track differences would and should also include practices to help students succeed in either track.

At about the same time, the department was expanding its degree options into distinctly different tracks, and new faculty members were discussing current data on retention initiatives. Although the department had low doctoral student attrition, the discussions led to the implementation of the suggested methods since the students in the department typically experienced a longer time to obtain a degree. It was also noted that rather than having every faculty member onboard every new doctoral student, creating a course could allow students to be onboarded as a unit while alleviating some of the pressure faculty have with ever-increasing schedules. With this knowledge, the department developed its unique program to facilitate student satisfaction, improving student time to degree and degree completion.

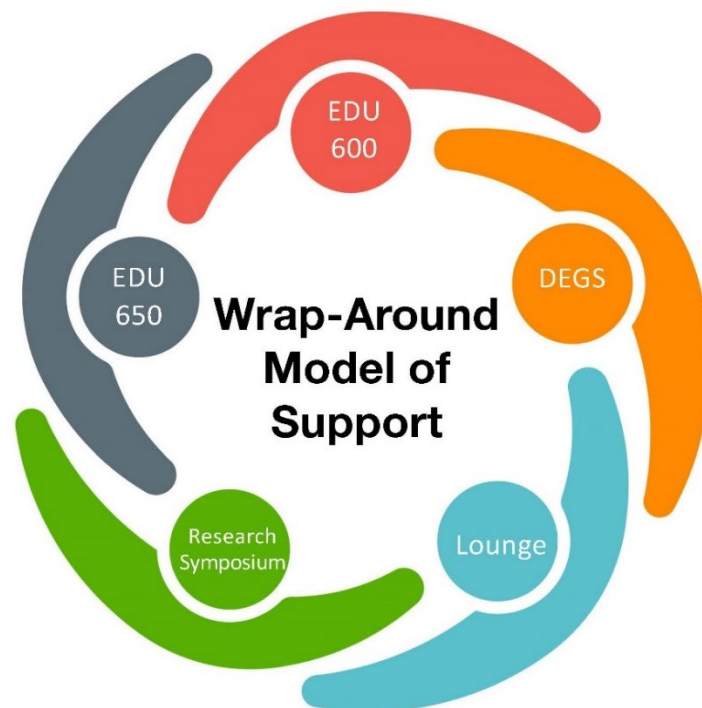
Their doctoral support programs consisted of cohort-type admissions processes to encourage student socialization and a sense of community and belonging from the onset of the doctoral journey (Brill et al., 2014; Cole et al., 2020; Garcia & Yao, 2019). This support can include mentor matching, a cohort method of student onboarding, increased faculty or staff contact and check-ins, and regular advising meetings throughout each term (Hanson et al., 2022; Pfund et al., 2016).

Additionally, a support program can have unique seminar-type courses to provide the knowledge necessary to navigate higher education and doctoral progress, such as courses that can teach students how to set up and write a literature review or write a grant, learn how to secure committee members, or how to prepare for comprehensive exams (Garcia & Yao, 2019). Holley and Gardner (2012) mentioned that “Higher education institutions should be cautious in terms of making the implicit assumption that all students enrolled in a doctoral program have determined how best to navigate the educational system” (p. 120). This underscores the need for programming like the DSS.

The Department of Education at MSU used Figure 9 in its vision when presenting the ideas to the faculty and staff. The vision consisted of what the department developed as a doctoral support system (i.e., EDU 650, 600, and DEGS, the Department of Education Graduate Club), with opportunities to increase socialization through unique learning spaces (i.e., lounge), professional development engagements (i.e., research symposium), and more transparent department communication, guidelines, and processes to decrease student confusion, i.e. more frequent faculty and department communications (Brill et al., 2014; Caruth, 2015; Gardner, 2010). By looking at all aspects of the DSS, this study will dive into what the literature has

mentioned and what the Department of Education implemented. The following provides a more robust understanding of the layers of the DSS as individual components make up the support system.

Figure 9: Department of Education's Doctoral System of Support



Creating Opportunities for Community When students are admitted into a degree program along with others, a sense of community, or almost a cohort educational experience, can develop. This is an opportunity to connect students and begin the process of what Garcia and Yao (2019) explain as a cohort or a learning community, fostering student socialization and belonging. This learning community allows students to take similar courses to connect and engage during the coursework portion of the degree. The connections created during the

coursework phase can then carry over into the dissertation writing phase, a process Cole et al. (2020) mention aiding student success.

In addition to fostering a cohort-type experience, support programs can also consist of an organized and structured process to match mentees with mentors, an aspect that the Department of Education did not use (Hanson et al., 2022). Mentor matching typically happens with individuals trained in the skills and knowledge necessary for successful and effective mentoring (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019). The mentor plays a key role, as Merriweather and Morgan (2013) explained the position to be “...watchers who unlock the gates of academia and accompany students on their educational journeys” (p. 2). Serving many levels, mentors are coaches, guidance counselors, validators, advisors, role models, research advisors, and overall supporters (Caruth, 2015; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Smith, 2013). The goal of mentoring in a doctoral support program is similar to the coach’s role, getting the athlete/student to the finish line. As Smith (2013) indicated, there is a positive correlation between excellent mentoring experiences and eventual degree completion. These individuals are guides, consistent communicators, quellers of student self-doubt, encouragers, and validators of success (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Patel, 2017; Pfund et al., 2016). In addition to cohort admissions and mentor matching, some doctoral support programs contain doctoral seminar courses. MSU’s Department of Education utilizes the cohort admission method as much as reasonably possible. However, mentor matching is not currently implemented.

Doctoral Seminar Courses At least for the Department of Education at MSU, seminar courses were created as book-ended experiences. An initial seminar course is taken at the beginning of the doctoral journey, and a second seminar is just before the dissertation writing

phase. Although it must be mentioned that at MSU, the second seminar course had been developed and required years before the start of the DSS to aid in the dissertation preparation and completion, the beginning seminar was added to the program in 2017. The initial seminar course at MSU, Seminar 600, was designed to dispel the myths of a doctoral journey and instill active, validating experiences. As Smith (2013) and Brill et al. (2014) stated, students can begin a program with academic confusion, leading to feeling overwhelmed. So, rather than assuming a student arrives at a doctoral program knowing what to do, the initial seminar course provided the tools needed to move into the next several years with more confidence successfully. This is one of the first stages of doctoral support, as seen in the DSS Conceptual Framework.

The Ed.D. and Ph.D. students took the 600-level course designed to socialize doctoral students into their new student lives, whether they were pursuing eventual scholarly research or practitioner careers; proper onboarding matters for students moving successfully through their program (Caruth, 2015). As Rendón (1994) explained, validating experiences that come early in the educational experiences, even in the first month of courses, are as crucial as those encountered throughout the doctoral journey. A seminar course can provide learning skills for success and be developed to foster a validating classroom, explain degree expectations (i.e., handbook), and imbue an environment of clear and respectful communication, which can set the groundwork for a healthier student experience (Caruth, 2015; Crede & Borrego, 2014; Rendón, 1994).

Through research on the subject, the course anticipated the potential academic confusion surrounding being a doctoral student. Therefore, the seminar provided regular class meetings, lectures, and guest speakers, as well as student guidance in areas such as conducting initial

research, methods of securing a faculty chair and committee, and how to formulate, track, and write a literature review while addressing any of the confusion in a collegial manner. The seminar even hosted recent graduate students to field questions and provide their journeys, acknowledging their highs and lows.

The initial seminar course has various methods of instilling the necessary information for the doctoral student's journey. It allows the faculty to facilitate the course and approach the seminar course differently than others. For example, my course featured a guest librarian scholar who explained how to perform more comprehensive searches on your subject, including utilizing national databases. There can also be a method to introduce students to potential committee members and even a chair if the student has not previously secured them. This aspect demystifies the process, uncovering which questions to ask and understanding how to select a faculty to serve on a committee.

The initial course introduces articles and books to help provide grounding knowledge on being a doctoral student, such as Bolker's (1998) *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis* or Booth Colomb, Williams, Bizup, and Fitzgerald's (2016) book titled *The Craft of Research*. The selection of books and articles is at the discretion of the faculty teaching the course; however, the purpose is the same. The goal of the course within the DSS model is to provide tools, readings, and tips to help alleviate confusion a student could experience at the start of their doctoral journey (Brill et al., 2014).

A bookend to Seminar 600 is a seminar course that comes just at the end of the coursework phase and before the dissertation phase, called Seminar 650. This final seminar

course created an opportunity to engage with students at a time typically imbued in isolation. This second seminar course provided a context to focus on the initial chapter of the dissertation, unpacking the components of writing this first chapter, how the initial chapter works with the remainder of the chapters, and any myths about the writing process itself. As Garcia and Yao (2019) mentioned, dispelling myths associated with dissertation development through exposure; “Being exposed to dissertations as a culminating component of a doctoral research experience helped the participants to understand what to expect more tangibly and also to strategize how they could focus in on a particular dissertation topic early on in their program” (p. 48). In addition, the final seminar allowed for opportunities to engage with fellow students and read published dissertations, articles, and books on the dissertation process.

This last seminar course also dove into a part of the doctoral journey affecting many students towards the end of the coursework phase: the comprehensive exam. Providing a platform to discuss expectations and experiences with others and students sharing their preparation and personal journey can dispel myths rampant in the doctoral culture. From rumors surrounding a percentage of students automatically failing to an academic type hazing experience some departments can encourage, a course that can serve to dispel anxieties leading up to this rite of passage provides a grounding point in comprehensive exam preparation.

In addition to the prescribed readings, Seminar 650 suggested several helpful books when starting the writing component of the doctoral journey. The faculty at MSU recommended books such as Howard Beckers’ (2008) *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* or Sharon Zumbrunns’ (2020) book titled *Why Aren’t You Writing: Research, Real Talk, Strategies, & Shenanigans*.

Dissertation Writing Course A supportive dissertation writing course is a course that has a facilitator and arranged meeting times, a group writing course, to foster a community of support and socialization during the writing process while also conducting several individualized meetings with students during the term (Garcia & Yao, 2019). The typical dissertation credits are not a structured class time or an agenda; instead, they are a part of the overall program requirements and a time for the student to meet regularly through the term with their committee chair. However, as Garcia and Yao (2019) mentioned, some faculty members are disconnected from the students' academic and personal struggles, which has them misaligning the students' actual needs. When the students' real needs are not being addressed, through their inability to express their needs or from the faculty's disconnection, continued challenges can contribute to the already isolating experiences of doctoral life. In addition, the struggles can feed into issues affecting motivation and self-discipline, both of which are required if students are to be successful and complete their degrees (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). It is worth mentioning that the dissertation course is in-load for the faculty, whether they conduct a group class or conduct meetings with their students during the term. As much as a course that provides meeting times can help some students, it is not necessarily suitable for everyone and may differ depending on the facilitator.

Research regarding doctoral student well-being suggests that addressing fears and academic confusion through increased guidance and validating experiences makes students less stressed and more prepared for their journey (Byrom et al., 2022; Garcia & Yao, 2019). The dissertation phase can be daunting when considered in isolation. A dissertating writing course where students and faculty meet can address fears, doubts, and anxieties while demystifying the



dissertating writing process. This class type can also encourage a continued community connection and camaraderie and has been shown to promote increased engagement and student success.

Reducing Isolating Experiences The dissertation can be daunting, especially when tackled alone or unguided (Girard & Musielak, 2012; Lorenzetti et al., 2019). As previously mentioned, the doctoral journey is one of isolating experiences, creating opportunities for students to chase rabbit holes of ideas and writing volumes of unnecessary research. With a sense of isolation, decreased motivation, and disconnections, students may need more time to complete their progress toward a degree and may drop out of their programs (Barnes & Randall, 2012). In as much as meetings with a committee chair or an advisor are part of the doctoral process, what is missing during this isolating time is the connection with other doctoral students (Barry et al., 2018; Byrom et al., 2022; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2009).

Garcia and Yao (2019) and Lorenzetti et al. (2019) have shown that isolating experiences create more self-doubt and can foster imposter symptoms. Through structured, integrated community engagement and a teaching environment where various faculty provide their unique views of dissertation writing through their experiences, a facilitator can foster engaging conversation and encourage a sense of belonging while keeping competitiveness at bay (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Lovitts, 2001). The fear of not being enough can weigh on doctoral students, and opportunities to dispel these feelings and fears through validating experiences can be the difference between completing a degree or dropping out. In addition, a structured, supportive environment encourages connection and bonding, which has been shown to improve students' self-image and retention in doctoral students (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Lovitts, 2001).

Healthy Accountability While some faculty still feel that students should be encouraged to compete with one another, the writing courses were constructed to create healthy accountability. As Bostwick and Weinberg (2022) indicate in their research focusing on gender differences in doctoral students, “women are less competitive, especially when competing against men,” and by placing students into a competitive environment, their backgrounds, their cultures, their experiences may create a disadvantages space (p. 417). Crede and Borrego (2014) mentioned that values could differ across cultures, with some more assertive and competitive than others. So, it can also be assumed that these differences can be seen through race, religion, and sexual orientation, which could all benefit from a healthier environment. Healthy accountability provides an opportunity to talk about the writing process and a safe space for students to develop while preparing to reach their goals within and after the degree program (Brill et al., 2014). Students can share their challenges or successes in an encouraging environment that fosters belonging. This is not to say that all people fall into one category or another; it is important to recognize differences among individuals, which could give one group a leading edge over another.

Scaffolded Writing Some dissertation writing courses can be created with a scaffolded writing approach (Crede & Borrego, 2014), a method utilized in some Department of Education courses. This approach unpackages the dissertation, chapter by chapter, section by section, dismantling the project into manageable pieces, such as how to write a statement of purpose or express the limitations of your study. A scaffolded writing approach provides a framework to help students build their writing in stages (Crede & Borrego, 2014). A scaffolded approach is also a method of writing that can be used in other courses outside of a dissertation-focused

course. The hurdles the faculty instructor or other students have experienced can be shared, keeping others from solving similar problems. Interactions are essential, as there is no one correct way to write a dissertation; methods that work for one person may not work for another. Given that most doctoral students will take at least 15 dissertation credits, taking either 3 or 6 credits at a time, the dissertation writing course will provide significant opportunities to learn from all during a year or more of dissertation writing.

Peer Sharing In addition to the faculty instructor and accountability, the dissertation writing course provides peer-sharing opportunities. Brill et al. (2014) state that students can be better prepared with opportunities to facilitate confidence and healthy engagement. Whether student to student or student to faculty/instructor, peer sharing is an opportunity to swap written work weekly to have an experience of reviewing others' writings and providing necessary feedback. This process facilitates a safe learning community to foster peer validation opportunities while learning how to offer and receive healthy feedback (Garcia & Yao, 2019). Providing constructive and kind feedback is a learned skill and can promote stronger writing through healthy dialog.

Barry et al. (2018) and Byrom et al. (2022) state that the more opportunities students have to quell self-doubt and IP, the more engaged and motivated they can be. Each opportunity in a dissertation writing course creates an environment of humanness, a realization that you are with supportive colleagues on a similar journey. Conversely, not everyone may find value in structured dissertation writing courses. Courses can be developed with the option of attending the sessions, allowing those individuals who choose to work alone to do so.

Many dissertation support programs provide other engagement opportunities for their doctoral students. For example, professional development opportunities were frequent in the Department of Education at MSU, a graduate student lounge and club were created, and more faculty contacts were encouraged.

Professional Development The issue surrounding professional development is that if the opportunity is separate from a course, with the thought that it is easier to fit into a student's life, this may not be true. As students have busier life-school-work schedules, the juggling of multi-layered lives can make it harder to attend events, even when they know they are beneficial. Also, some faculty discourage attending and participating in professional development, wanting their students to focus only on what they are working on. This academic and cultural practice could be due to the lack of understanding of the changing career markets in the US and beyond. As Larson, Ghaffarzadegan, and Xue (2014) reported, less than 17% of Ph.D. students seeking tenure-track positions in health-related, science, and engineering areas will secure one within their first three years of graduation. In addition, the growth rate of faculty positions is climbing slower than the demand for doctoral degrees (Larson, 2014).

This underscores that most Ph.Ds. completing their degrees should focus on non-academic careers through academic experience fostering those connections (Holley & Caldwell, 2012). This does not mean that the university should now begin to limit their admissions of doctoral students; it simply means that an institution should be directing their supportive measures to more than one career track of academia (Maher et al., 2020; Lovitts, 2001; Pfund et al., 2016). With more students choosing non-academic careers, professional development opportunities may bridge the world between being a student and entering a job. The

disconnection between career opportunities and those advisors assisting students has a chance to be addressed through supportive systems. Students may enter the doctoral journey hoping for a spot in academia, acknowledging that the ever-decreasing academic options must be addressed (Larson et al., 2014).

Graduate Student Socialization Opportunities A lounge space or club for students to connect and work together can foster socialization opportunities, as Gardner (2010) indicated that people with better socialization experiences completed at a higher rate. A doctoral journey is a solo venture; every student's research is vastly different; however, processes are all the same. We are all writing the same chapters and conducting data analysis, whether quantitative or qualitative. So even when faculty and departments can encourage the solo experiences of their doctoral students, going solo sometimes does not fit all students. In 1998, Golde discussed the problem as “The inability to become integrated into the campus community” (p. 61), which then can cause students to leave or “drift” from the program. Creating communities for students to collaborate and share in their journeys and troubleshooting sticking points can foster improved engagements, which research has shown can increase retention (Gardner, 2010; Hoffmann-Longtin et al., 2021; Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

#### Goals of a Doctoral Support System (DSS)

Many universities have the impression that most doctoral students leave programs due to student workload pressures or the loss of funding rather than reasons such as an uninviting campus or department culture, an academic environment absent of community or academic engagement, and poor mentoring and advising (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Caruth, 2015; Crede & Borrego, 2014; Gardner, 2009 Lovitts, 2001). However, when academic programming can elicit

a stronger sense of self, encourage positive experiences, and address doubt and academic confusion, these measures can be effective in retention efforts (Brill et al., 2014; Caruth, 2015; do Amaral, 2022; Gardner, 2010).

### Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature regarding cultural, political, and societal influences permeating higher education. These influences created and allowed a climate of othering to persist. Nevertheless, even with this separateness, pursuing a doctoral degree continues to grow for all populations. However, with this growth, the most significant attrition percentage could be seen in these same ‘other’ (already underrepresented) people. Within this context, a realigned focus came into improving retention in schools.

By understanding the culture and the political influences, we can consider the difficulties in changing a centuries-old educational focus. With researchers such as Lovitts (2001, 2008), Gardner (2009, 2013), and others, higher education can refocus to improve student experiences, satisfaction, and success and increase retention. The research indicates that with a few changes in supportive practices, such as providing more guidance, creating a more inclusive culture, and teaching courses on all aspects of a doctoral journey, some students could thrive to degree completion when, without it, they would depart.

Finally, Chapter Two leads us to how a mentoring system was developed and implemented at Montana State University for the Department of Education for their doctoral students. Again, having several years of experience delivering and refining their more student-oriented program, assessing if their practices improved the doctoral student experience is

appropriate. In the following chapter, I will explain how the study was created and the population sample selected.

## CHAPTER THREE:

## METHODOLOGY

This instrumental, qualitative case study aims to examine doctoral student perceptions in MSU's Department of Education during their degree journey. This research was based on an epistemological assumption that the research could be observed and explained through the participants' experiences within the Doctoral System of Support (DSS) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Their perceptions and experiences will provide a better understanding of the department's impacts, unfold the potential for the rest of MSU, and show how this research could support other universities considering similar practices.

Chapter Three outlines the research approach and the rationale, including revisiting the research questions. This chapter also provides the context of the researcher, history, and ethical nature of the study while also containing detailed research methods, rationale, sampling, and site selection. Finally, this chapter addresses data management, collection, storage, and trustworthiness. The methods explained in Chapter Three allow for a greater understanding of the following chapters, which will involve the research results, discussion, and future recommendations.

Research Approach

This research design followed an interpretive framework, utilizing an instrumental case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study design was selected to present findings on how we can affect and improve current supportive measures for doctoral students, including those considered to be, as Leonardo labeled them, 'others' (2004). The study was also bounded within



the Department of Education at MSU and with their doctoral students, expressing their experiences and recognizing the DSS's impact (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using an instrumental case study approach allowed for examining the DSS and its effects while considering how it may lead to increased student satisfaction and degree completion. The method provided an opportunity to be aware of the impacts a DSS has on doctoral student success, what students find valuable about the support they received during their doctoral journey, how it could impact degree completion, what creates a sense of student belonging, and what student-perceived challenges may be mitigated through its use.

### Rationale

This research is necessary to help the department better understand the efficacy of the DSS program implemented in the Fall of 2017. The department is situated at a time to learn about the effectiveness from the students' perspectives to inform future practices. Additionally, this study could be disseminated across the MSU campus and potentially used at other institutions, considering aspects of supportive measures geared towards the retention of their doctoral students.

Research in the social sciences can follow several study methods: quantitative, qualitative, or a mixture of both, referred to as multimethod. To determine which research approach to use in this study, an initial pilot quantitative study was conducted in the spring of 2021 to analyze degree completion. In reviewing the population of doctoral students who started from the Fall of 2014 through to the Fall of 2021, the results proved to be lacking, simply due to the nature of education doctoral students' lengthier time to degree. Therefore, the data could not determine the DSS's merits or lack of value in a short snapshot that began in Fall 2017. From

this, the true impact of the DSS may not be quantifiable, at least not for a few more years. However, the quantitative pilot study was not without its merits. It was from the initial pilot study that I began to ask the more pertinent questions surrounding this research, questions underlining the students' perceptions and their unique experiences, which could help uncover the impact of a DSS program (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The pilot study provoked questions surrounding degree completion and student perceptions. Specifically, what were the students' doctoral perceptions if degree completion were to be the same in both groups (pre-DSS and DSS)? In addition, how did students feel about their doctoral journeys after departing the program, whether with a conferred degree or not? Moreover, in what ways did their doctoral journey influence those experiences? From these questions, a second pilot study was conducted in the Fall of 2021; a study mirroring my current research involved students choosing to answer a series of questions through a survey or to participate in an interview. The second pilot study showed that the responses to both the survey and interview would impart the necessary voice to the doctoral student experience; however, the survey responses were slightly lacking in detail compared with reactions from the interviews.

The pilot studies determined that a qualitative instrumental case study was the best fit for this research, and using both the survey and interviews would provide the best data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process helped to develop the two main research questions, as well as ask the three additional supporting research questions, as follows:

- Research question 1: What experiences did students recognize as contributions to their academic, social, and personal well-being?

- Research question 2: What aspects of the DSS did they identify as helping them complete their doctoral degree?
- Sub-question A: How did the DSS prepare students for the academic expectations and rigor of the doctorate?
- Sub-question B: How did it provide socialization?
- Sub-question C: How did the DSS affect students' well-being?

Along with the pilot studies, the literature review also helped corroborate the use of a qualitative approach in this study. In reviewing research surrounding student support and mentoring programs, many studies utilized the qualitative method, and from this, it was determined that it would be appropriate for this research project. Research studies regarding doctoral student support initiatives by Garcia and Yao (2019), Gardner (2010), and Holley and Caldwell (2012) indicate that an instrumental case study could provide the student insight necessary to address the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, many researchers utilized qualitative studies through semi-structured interviews to give voice to their subjects. Following their lead, I prepared the groundwork for using interviews to secure this study's doctoral student perspective. This student perspective contributed to the context of individuals sharing their views and experiences rather than simply relying on literature or other research previously conducted on similar studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Researcher Positionality

It is essential to understand what influences led me to this research and why I am driven to understand more about the retention of doctoral students. I have a unique point of view as a

researcher with an understanding of admissions, retention, and attrition from a student and career perspective. My desire to research the DSS stems from personal experiences as a non-traditional master's student who lacked the guidance and direction I needed, with infrequent or delayed responses from an advisor. Responses contained few comments yet were typically favorable. Knowing my writing challenges, I knew that the comments could not be as accurate as I needed; therefore, I sought guidance from another member of the MSU faculty. With this mentor, I received much-needed encouragement and support to continue. This personal experience began the seed of this research journey, as I knew if this experience happened to me, it must have happened to others.

My experience frames my beliefs about enhanced, structured support programs when people pursue new journeys. In my past career, I was an educator, endurance coach, wellness educator, and personal trainer; my educator background framed my coaching methods. The experiences I had in seeking a graduate degree align with the goals of an athlete and coach; the relationships are inherently connected to the athlete's success. I realized that through education and a supportive system, people could overcome most challenges with proper training and guidance.

As the Director of Graduate School Recruitment and Admissions at MSU, I am privy to the data reflecting attrition and retention at all levels of graduate education. My role involves what is referred to as the funnel, the recruitment, and admission (or denial) of students who apply to the university. Nevertheless, this view means I am aware of the other side of that funnel: those students who do not complete their degrees. Knowing the admission rates provides an easy comparative analysis when considering degree completion rates. The analysis indicated an

extreme imbalance of attrition to retention, which became the second driving force behind researching MSU's Department of Education's DSS system. The knowledge from this study could be used to change retention initiatives and serve as a recruitment strategy, earmarking MSU as a university to seek out as a doctoral program that focuses on retaining students to completion.

With the understanding of my professional role, it must also be mentioned that my position could impact responses to the survey requests in several ways. When students learn who I am in courses, they often believe I have controlled their ability to be admitted into their degree program, which is not the case. From this perception, students may feel obligated or reluctant to participate or present perceptions that could affect their journey or benefit the future growth of graduate education, not necessarily for the research study. However, in graduate education, departments or faculty determine who will gain admission into their programs, not someone in my position. Additionally, in recognizing my stance, efforts will be used to ensure authenticity due to my comingled student and professional experiences to reflect the research accurately.

As a researcher, I am integrated into this research scholarly and professionally, and it is apparent that my focus and passion are aligned with student success, making clarifying personal concepts necessary to help ground the presented ideas. Also, as mentioned, the survey and interview responses will be selected to garner truthful results and learn the effectiveness of the DSS. Further, ethical considerations were considered not to present a risk to current students, staff, faculty, or those who have already left the campus. Finally, there were no benefits to individuals participating in the research, as the purpose of the study was to present a non-biased

research analysis through an acknowledgment of the effects of the DSS for future transformational change across the MSU campus.

### Research Methods, Rationale, Theoretical Framework, and Design

This instrumental case study is intended to provide students' perceptions to better inform the Department of Education of the effectiveness of the DSS (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The methods used in this study mirrored those by Holley and Caldwell (2012), Posselt et al. (2018), Maher et al. (2020), and others; therefore, a qualitative approach was used to indicate the narrative experiences.

### Interpretive Framework

A single instrumental case study, following a transformative framework, was used to capture the uniqueness of the DSS and provide a descriptive story of the students' perceptions (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay, 2019). The transformative framework is an aspect of research that guides a study focused on seeking information that could improve lives and possibly society (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of this research is to look at the individuals impacted by the changes within the department, give these individuals a voice, and use the narrative analysis of their perceptions to assess the impact of the program and potentially affect change to the current program and guide future changes across the MSU campus (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design was derived from researchers such as Patel (2017) and Holley and Caldwell (2012), as their research focused on methods to mitigate doctoral student departures through various mentoring strategies and programs.

### Case Study Design

The bounded study population (Creswell & Poth, 2018) included doctoral students in the Department of Education at MSU between Fall 2014 and Fall 2021. Students considered for the study were those who entered the department's degree program before and after the Doctoral System of Support (DSS) implementation in the Fall of 2017. Including both groups of students (pre- and post-implementation) was valuable as their experiences could aid in understanding how those who started their program in 2014 could be different from those who began in 2017, uncovering a potential effect of the DSS. Through epistemological assumptions, the perceptions and experiences of all involved with the DSS were necessary to answer the research questions. I was able to engage with the participants through semi-structured interviews and surveys to understand their journeys better. The participants' subjective experiences provided the rich context necessary to unpack doctoral student perceptions.

### Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

Through retention research, the higher education system should be in a position to be more inclusive of doctoral student support. Understanding doctoral journeys and the lengthy time to obtain a degree can provide universities with context on how to move to a more improved method of doctoral engagement. The study did present limitations, such as with the participant sample. Those who may respond may not be honest due to fear of some retribution, while the participant may have embellished other responses due to my unique role as a researcher. Responses may be diluted by time, such as those who departed the university years before this study; other responses may have come from those who were too early in the doctoral journey to garner meaningful information or may not have provided sufficient details, as seen in some

survey responses (Mills & Gay, 2019). Finally, selection diffusion through student interactions could be a limitation, as the students may have an opportunity to share their experiences, understand the potential connection of their responses and the long-term impacts and future of the DSS, and then be swayed to a different view than what they may have had independent of influences (Mills & Gay, 2019). This commingling within the Department of Education could affect accurate perceptions, biasing the data from another stance than the individual would have independently had.

### Delimitations

The research is delimited within Montana State University and the doctoral students within the Department of Education. There may not be transferability based on the results from a bounded sample with the Department of Education at MSU (Mills & Gay, 2019). This lack of transferability to other departments or outside institutions could come from variations in teaching methods and academic department and university cultures. Nevertheless, the study framework and research design could be transferred to other departments and universities, as the design and implementation of the DSS system are transferable.

### Assumptions

This research will follow the assumption that the responses from the study will be honest and will reduce the gaps in understanding the effects of student support initiatives at the doctoral level in the Department of Education at MSU. With these assumptions, students who experience a more supportive system could be more satisfied. This assumption further leads to the theory that with a higher degree of satisfaction, there would be an increased degree completion rate than those with less. It is also important to point out that as this research seeks to understand doctoral



experiences, and due to limitations, subjects may not provide the full reasons for why they may leave a doctoral program. As research has indicated, doctoral students depart for many reasons, from loss of funding to emotional well-being. The responses will all prove valuable and could provide the details necessary to understand the doctoral student experience better.

### Sampling

The population of students being studied included all doctoral students participating in the doctoral programs within the Department of Education: Educational Leadership, Adult and Higher Education, Curriculum & Instruction between the Fall semester of 2014 and the fall semester of 2021. The population also contained current and past doctoral students, capturing those still working towards their degrees, graduated, or left the program without completing it. This sample could then present both commonalities and differences between students: those who arrived at the department before the development of the DSS (Fall 2014) and those who have received additional guidance through the program beginning in the Fall of 2017.

The purpose of having a study that included all of the students in the department is to acknowledge the doctoral student body while noting that experienced generalities can provide the context needed to develop programs to meet the needs of all students. It is important to note that the Department of Education has a predominantly higher population of female doctoral students and an older age group (compared to doctoral students across the rest of the MSU campus). Therefore, the goal for this study was to be as inclusive as possible by contacting all doctoral students in the Department of Education from the Fall of 2014 through all the terms until the end of admissions for Fall 2021.

For this study, the two groups of doctoral students will be referred to as the pre-DSS, or Cohort One, students and DSS students, or Cohort Two. However, due to the length of time required to complete a degree, experiences will overlap as many pre-DSS will have experienced some aspects of the DSS. All students admitted and who enrolled during Fall 2014 through Fall 2021 were considered and contacted through their preferred email listed in the MSU Banner system and their original doctoral application (Example email, Appendix B). The email explained the nature of the research, the reason for the study, how the research could inform future practices, and the request to participate in an interview (through Webex) or a semi-anonymous survey (using Qualtrics), a method to allow for some anonymity if desired. Webex is a platform to conduct online meetings, where a video and transcription of the conversation can be retained; Qualtrics is a survey tool that also provides transcriptions of detailed responses; both are used to verify for accuracy. The research design, instruments, and participant consent form were all approved by the MSU Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### Data Collection

The population used in the study consisted of relatively equal proportions of pre-DSS and DSS students to be contacted due to the years selected. Utilizing a case study method, students' perceptions and experiences were presented (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). As mentioned, the field-tested pilot studies gave the current research a concise focus, with the finalized survey and interview questions, which can be found in Appendix C. The questions were generated to establish validity for the aspects of the doctoral student support system and the students' overall experiences in their doctoral journey. The questions were grouped as general experiences (Questions 1-6), DSS-specific (Questions 7-9), and faculty and staff connections (Questions 10-

12), and an open-ended question at the end called 'other' for any final thoughts the participant, or survey taker, would like to convey. Approaching the questions in the overall experience and in a more specific way directed to the DSS allows for another layer of triangulation for the data analysis.

The research used a two-step process of a request to participate in a semi-structured interview; however, if the participant chose, there was an optional survey. It could have been argued that only interviews should have been used, yet the questionnaire presented a chance for potentially more respondents, especially those who wanted to remain anonymous. This two-step process allowed for a maximum response rate of participation. The reluctance to participate could surround the timing of the request to provide feedback, in that the participants may have been straddled with school or career demands at the particular time of the request or may not have been interested in participating. Using the interview and questionnaires increases the opportunity for a higher response rate, allowing for a more thorough understanding of doctoral student perceptions and more data to be collected from the population.

The questions in Appendix C were written in a manner so students could describe their overall experiences and, more specifically, aspects of the DSS program they felt were instrumental in their doctoral journey. The students' responses provided a rich narrative necessary for conducting case studies and using questionnaires and interviews to generate sufficient evidence to answer the research questions (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

The Qualtrics surveys were downloaded using Excel and placed into a secure computer file for future analysis. The online Webex platform was used because many students in the doctoral education program at MSU are not local to the Bozeman area. Using an online platform

provided better interview availability and the opportunity to record the interview. The Webex and Qualtrics transcriptions permitted details of participants' stories to be recounted accurately, which could be downloaded directly into a spreadsheet for analysis (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

### Data Sampling

This research focuses on the experiences of doctoral students in the Department of Education. There were 99 students identified from Fall 2014 through Fall 2021 admitted to the department's postgraduate programs. I chose this population as it was within the Department of Education that supportive programming and practices were implemented in 2017. With this selection, there could be a comparative analysis of respondents' experiences representing both department populations. Of this population, the students may have completed their degrees, dropped from the program, and have some students working on their degrees. From this initial population, 25 responded to the request to participate in either an interview or complete a questionnaire.

### Data Management

Data management became necessary once the interviews and questionnaires were gathered through Webex and Qualtrics. The data management process began with downloading Webex transcripts and the Qualtrics questionnaires and placing the data into a secure, password-protected personal computer and files (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In managing the data, it was essential to safeguard the participants' privacy by excluding as many personal or identifiable traits or comments (Saldaña, 2021). Therefore, once the data was downloaded, a pseudonym was used for sorting and managing the survey and interview responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Saldaña, 2021). Additionally, any personal identifying comments or names of participants or faculty noted in the transcripts or coding were manually amended and replaced with pseudonyms before any notation was made or presented in this document (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). A pseudonym will be used as much as possible to create a more dialogue-friendly analysis in Chapter Four.

### Data Analysis

The interviews and survey grouped the stories into themes and sub-themes, creating a rich narrative and visceral story (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). These themes provided the answers to the overarching research questions and the sub-questions. Authenticating the story of doctoral students' perceptions, the responses were utilized without embellishment, which means that the research was not selective or harvested for the most convincing stories (Saldaña, 2021). Reading the interview transcripts and surveys created an initial reflection and summary for each, a process that Saldaña (2021) suggests helps bring out categories, themes, and emerging concepts necessary to code qualitative data. By summarizing the participant's ideas using my interpretation, a process that also pulled in participants' direct quotes, ideas emerged and were noted for the next phase of analysis (Saldaña, 2021). A second summary was also created on my reflections and thoughts; my interpretations could eventually be used for the coding and theme creation and in this study's analysis and discussions portion (Saldaña, 2021).

After all the surveys and interviews had been summarized and cataloged into a spreadsheet, the specific words, phrases, and ideas became apparent, a process referred to as the first cycle of coding the data (Saldaña, 2021). First-cycle coding is similar to brainstorming with the words and phrases taken from the narrative and critical ideas that become apparent while

reading, listening, and reviewing the transcripts (Saldaña, 2021). Even after creating a summary, a second or third hands-on review of the transcript and recording was necessary to ensure clarification.

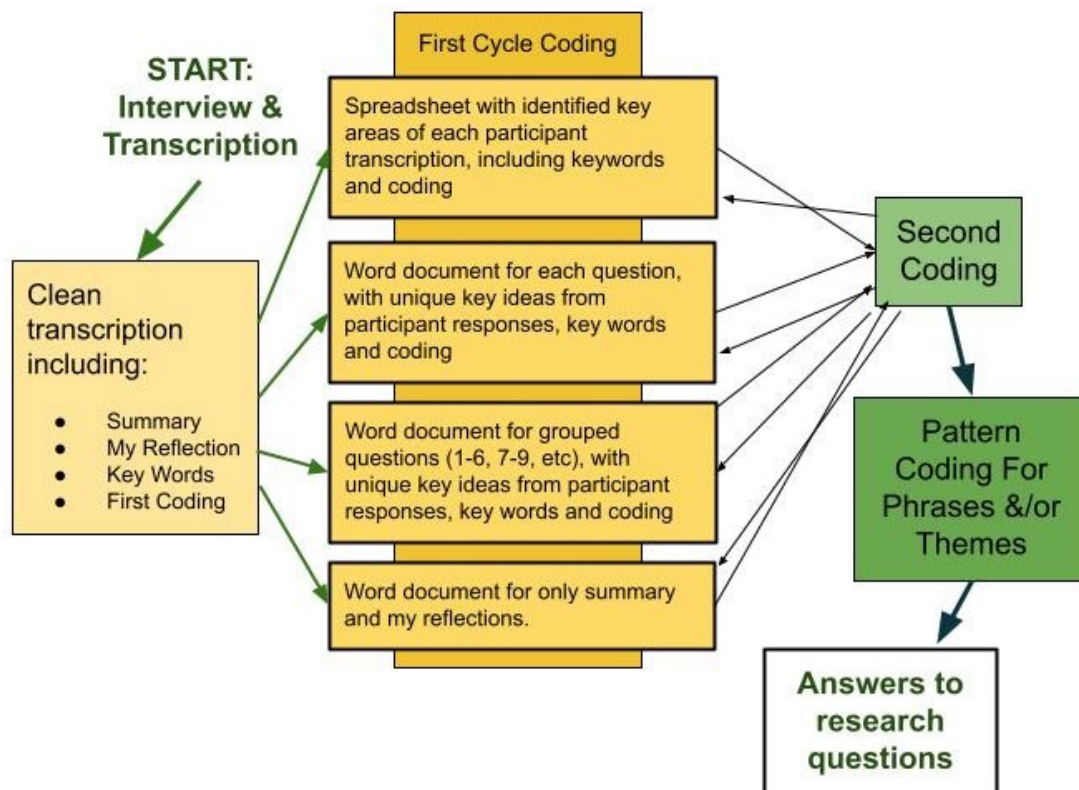
Summarizing and reflecting on the participant stories is vital in determining the first cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2021). Saldaña (2021) indicates that overall compatibility is essential when considering coding; those chosen with a purpose in mind, including how they will lead to themes necessary in answering the research questions. Several types of coding became apparent after reviewing the summaries; they were “value coding” (p. 167), “in-vivo coding” (p. 137), and “concept coding” (p. 153).

The three coding concepts were identified because they could pull in participants’ viewpoints, feelings, or perspectives (value coding), underscore more significant ideas (concept coding), and allow participants’ voices to become apparent (in vivo coding) (Saldaña, 2021). The chosen codes are not presented in a manner that would cause an idea of rank, as they are equally valued. The following section will explain each code and provide several examples to help you understand their use in this study better.

Value coding derives from participants’ overall attitudes, values, and beliefs, determined from summary reflective ideas such as “felt like an outsider” when a participant explained their initial classroom experience in their first term of study or “supportive environment” used by the same individual, once they stuck with the term and began to experience the support of their cohort and advisor (Saldaña, 2021). The second coding to pull in more significant participant perspectives was Concept Coding, phrases that summarize multiple smaller ideas such as “disjointed experiences” to describe how some students could experience a welcoming

environment and others are left traumatized, or “best practices” to describe the various learning experiences which vary from “exceptional” to “lacking” (Saldaña, 2021). Finally, In Vivo was the voice in the research; the direct participant comments, as seen in statements such as “I felt like I did not belong” when a participant described their first term experience in the doctoral program or “capable of success” when the participant responded to a survey question asking about a positive experience in their doctoral journey. In keeping the research questions in mind during the analysis, the first coding summarized vital ideas and concepts. An example of this first coding analysis is in Appendix D. To reiterate how the analysis was conducted, Figure 6 shows the analytical process used to answer research questions.

Repetition of Figure 6: Analytical Process (Figure, self-work)



Then, by alphabetizing repeating ideas presented in this initial coding, the data was re-categorized into concepts for a second coding round (Saldaña, 2021). The second level of coding allowed for some apparent patterns to emerge, such as repeating words or ideas (Saldaña, 2021). These words and ideas included cohort, camaraderie, guidance, and advisor relationships. These similar ideas were then clustered into groups based on where the quotes, ideas, and concepts were centralized, such as seminar courses and faculty engagement; this began to tell the story of the doctoral experience. Appendix E shows an example of this clustering process.

This second analysis, referred to by Saldaña (2021) as second-cycle coding, followed several types of coding: Causational, Emotional, and Values. To define Saldaña's terms, causation coding is seen as a connection between a cause and an effect or outcome; the research found statements such as "I was kind of just like drowning when somebody said Lit. review. I didn't even know what that was" if participants comment about feeling doubtful or questioning their abilities. Additionally, the use of Emotional Coding was used to draw out unadulterated yet impactful statements, such as statements such as "waste of my time," "anxiety-producing," or "second-class citizen" (Saldaña, 2021).

Finally, views surrounding respondents' attitudes, beliefs, and values were apparent in student perceptions, using phrases such as "collegial" or "supportive." When using a two-step process of identifying main concepts followed by a second coding, specific terms such as collegial, mentoring, advising, anxiety, self-worth, and department support begin to resonate. The purpose of conducting first- and second-cycle coding is to provide an opportunity to synthesize the interviews and surveys and distill them into central ideas necessary to understand the doctoral story.



Central ideas become helpful in answering the research questions through terms or codes; the lists were then reorganized further to coalesce for subthemes to become apparent. The subthemes are generated from the second coding analysis and grouping. Once the sub-themes were identified, they were rearranged into functional overarching or central themes (identified in Appendix F) that focused on answering the research questions and could embody the doctoral story (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). An example of a main heading from this analysis is Faculty and Chairing: The Divergent Student Experience.

In addition to coding and themes, word clouds will help provide a visual to the narrative throughout Chapter Four. A word cloud is a graphic representation of a qualitative analysis's contextual layers of meaning. Figure 10 is an example of a word cloud representing a participant's overall feelings about their doctoral journey. The size and repetitive words show a higher frequency with each word used and could indicate the level of importance.

Figure 10: Word Cloud of Participants' Feelings Surrounding their Doctoral Pursuit.



Coding qualitative data involves a lengthy evaluation process and re-reviewing written and verbal transcripts. This process was necessary to understand the genuine and authentic perceptions of the doctoral support system in the Department of Education. The themes and ideas presented in this research are the first step to understanding the research implications and provide the basis for understanding and addressing the research questions surrounding the program's effectiveness and how and if the program should be amended.

#### Authenticity, Credibility, Dependability, Confirmability, and Transferability

In qualitative research, a level of trustworthiness is necessary. To establish trustworthiness, various acknowledgments surround the investigation, including authenticity, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Each of these elements is intended to establish trust in the study, that the study is valid, reliable, and authentic, and that the research findings are confidently presented without biases and, therefore, the research findings could be applicable and useful for other units within this university, or other institutions (Lincoln & Guba, 2007; Mills & Gay, 2019; Saldaña, 2021).

#### Authenticity

The research design garnered multiple perspectives from past and current students, allowing for a richer, more complete, authentic narrative. Additionally, direct quotes of student perceptions were used. Presenting my feelings as a student in the program will be done with as little bias as possible, focusing on my perceptions and experiences.

### Credibility

As a researcher, I am confident that the research presented in this study is credible and was interpreted correctly with very little bias. This confidence comes from the methodological triangulation, cross-sampling student data (Cohort One & Cohort Two), using two methods of data collection (surveying and interviewing), as well as including the data secured from the direct quotes, authenticating the findings (Mills & Gay, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). By spending time with the data, reviewing, re-reviewing in many cases, and then using the participants' own words, the emotional, causal, and value-directed coding necessary in answering the research questions and to learning experiences, students indicate as valuable.

Credibility was also established through theoretical triangulation by including theories of student involvement and validation (Astin, 1984; Rendón, 1994) and a basis of the graduate socialization framework presented by Weidman (2001). Each element provides an understanding of student perception, needs, and interpretations of experiences and assists with the triangulation to validate the study and confirmability while allowing for dependability (Mills & Gay, 2019).

### Dependability

This research can be considered dependable based on all methods used throughout the study, and the findings are consistent with what was discovered through the literature review. Given the details of the research methods and data collection, the study could be replicated. Given that those interviewed and surveyed would differ in other populations, the findings may vary, but the methods used to conduct the research are sound.

### Confirmability

The data in this study was secured through the participant experiences as recorded through the interview or survey transcripts, and the analysis of those transcripts provided the details of this study. Each step of the study was tracked through detailed record-keeping, allowing others to follow the methods if the study were replicated. Before conducting the study, it was reviewed by the research advisor and committee and found sound. Participants were re-contacted for validation purposes, and some provided clarification. As the researcher was also part of the study, regular reflexivity was conducted to examine biases or assumptions that were not part of their particular experience.

### Transferability

This study may provide some transferability by recognizing the overall doctoral student needs and how those needs should be addressed on campus. Knowing that every university and its departments are unique, this qualitative study could not truly be replicated to garner the same results. However, many ideas in this research can be utilized and applied to other entities on this campus and outside universities. In addition, through this appreciation of student perceptions, the findings could provide suggested ideas to consider in other contexts when forming similar support systems across the campus.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter provides the methodological background for using an instrumental case study design. As much as doctoral students differ significantly from program to program at MSU, the research was designed using a bounded sample to understand overall perceptions of

the DSS program better. This chapter provided the reason for the study and the overarching research question, which considered how students perceive their doctoral journey. By acknowledging students' perceptions, we can recognize the efficacy of a Doctoral System of Support (DSS). This broad question utilized additional sub-research questions: 1) What mentoring experiences do students indicate as valuable for doctoral degree completion? 2) What components of the Doctoral System of Support create a sense of student belonging? and 3) What student-perceived challenges are mitigated through a Doctoral System of Support?

Through a pilot study and preliminary analysis, the rationale of using a qualitative instrumental case study was determined to be the best approach for the initial analysis of the DSS. In addition, the interpretive framework created the backing of this research, as the ultimate concept for the study, to guide potential best practices and methods to improve doctoral student retention. This choice was corroborated by many similar case study designs noted in the literature and cited in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 also contained the necessary background of the researcher and how I arrived at this study, including ethics in having a position as both an employee of the campus being studied and as a student within the department. The overall research methods, rationale, and design followed this. Chapter 3 also included the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions, which would help other researchers perform a similar study or generate amendments or improvements for this study within other opportunities at MSU.

Finally, Chapter 3 provided the necessary background to understand how the data was secured, collected, managed, and analyzed. The elements in Chapter 3 can serve as a guide to future studies in similar foci of study. This chapter has been presented in such detail to affirm the

reliability of this study, which is also indicated in the last section of this chapter under trustworthiness. In the following chapter, Chapter Four, the analysis of this study will be presented systematically, utilizing the identified themes secured from the student interviews and surveys. This analysis will also include background demographics to help with overarching context.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

## RESEARCH RESULTS

If you count something you find interesting, you will learn something interesting.  
—Atule Gawande, *Better*

The purpose of this study was to identify the doctoral students' perceptions as they experienced the Doctoral System of Support (DSS) in the Department of Education, allowing for a better insight into the department's implemented changes. Using Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory and Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory, as well as Weidman's (1989; 2001) Socialization Framework, help to understand why aspects developed by the department could affect retention (Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020). Recall that the framework and theories had undergraduate students as the foci; however, student involvement, learning approaches, validation, and isolation aspects also align in the doctoral journey, as indicated by Caruth (2015), Garcia and Yao (2019), Gardner and Holley (2011) and Lorenzetti et al. (2019).

The study involved interviewing and surveying doctoral students in the Department of Education, those who came before the DSS, beginning in the Fall of 2014, and those who arrived after its implementation, through to the Fall of 2017. The respondents were asked specific questions to unearth the student experience, both students who experienced the unique courses developed by the department and those who may not have, all to explore the student's overall experiences within their doctoral journey. This chapter will discuss the findings of this research by presenting the ideas through the lens of the framework and theories.

This research used a transformative case-study design, using phenomenological methods, to present perceptions of doctoral students' experiences. As the researcher, I formulated my

interview questions after reading similar studies. The initial questions written were used within a pilot study to determine their effectiveness; they went through several iterations until arriving at the questions for this study. This process will then address the following:

- Research question 1: What experiences did students recognize as contributions to their academic, social, and personal well-being?
- Research question 2: What aspects of the DSS did they identify as helping them complete their doctoral degree?

In addition, the research also answered the following sub-research questions:

- Sub-question A: How did the DSS prepare students for the academic expectations and rigor of the doctorate?
- Sub-question B: How did it provide socialization?
- Sub-question C: How did the DSS affect students' well-being?

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the data analysis involved securing participant interviews and surveys, taking those materials and performing a transcript reduction, pulling key ideas, and developing coding to determine underlying and central themes (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). This chapter will explore the data, where I will provide categories of information and the first and second coding of data, following Saldana's coding method (Saldaña, 2021).

### Data Analysis

Before analyzing the data, the transcripts were reviewed and edited to anonymize the students and faculty members mentioned. This process was followed by removing student and faculty names and personal identifiers or changing names to pseudonyms. Other identifiers such



as educational focus, graduation date, and gender pronouns were changed to “they” or “them.” Then, using a method of recording the transcribed information on several platforms, I could pull out central ideas as they became apparent. I analyzed the data using a memoing process, which consisted of summarizing the qualitative data in both a spreadsheet and word processing documents; each document represented research questions or themes as they became apparent (Saldaña, 2021). Keeping the research questions in mind, I analyzed the data inductively to identify patterns and categories as they became evident (Saldaña, 2021). This process also allowed for numerous reviews of the transcripts and initial coding, significant cross-referencing of the information, and re-categorizing as necessary.

The qualitative study results are organized into four sections based on the central themes uncovered and presented in Table 1. These themes are Programming for Doctoral Success: Misaligned Opportunities, Faculty and Chairing: The Divergent Student Experience, The Doctoral Community: A Necessity, Doctoral Journey: Perceptions, Suggestions, and Overall Feelings. In addition, through the analysis, subcategories of compelling and ineffective experiences were presented, which comprise subcategories of themes, all shown in Table 1. Many themes indicated binarism, but this is not to say that the data is generalized. Simply by providing a binary analysis, the student experiences that appear to work and those that are not working are identified. This process increases the complex underpinnings of dissertation support systems.

Table 1. Central Themes and Subcategories

Central Theme	Subcategory	Subcategory Themes
Programming for Doctoral Success: Misaligned Opportunities	Seminar 600	<i>Effective Initial Course Out of Sync Course Timing</i>
	Seminar 650	<i>Cohort Community and Connections Misaligned Course Timing and Objectives</i>
	Dissertation Writing 690	<i>Benefits of Group Dissertation Writing Unnecessary or Ineffective Course Times</i>
Faculty and Chairing: Diverging Experiences	Faculty and the Student Experience	<i>Faculty Guidance, Support, and Motivation Lack of Support and Engagement</i>
	Committee Chair and the Student Experience	<i>Connecting, Supportive, and Flexible Misaligned, Disconnected, and Unhelpful</i>
The Doctoral Community: A Necessity	Student Connection, Collaboration, and Support	<i>[Same as Subcategory: Student Connection, Collaboration, and Support]</i>
	Informal Connections and Networking	<i>[Same as Subcategory: Informal Connections and Networking]</i>
Doctoral Journey: Perceptions, Suggestions, and Overall Feelings	Effective Experiences	<i>Faculty flexibility, guidance, and support Family support and personal disposition Learning, growing, and other opportunities</i>
	Ineffective Experiences	<i>Better advising and guidance Imposter Phenomenon (IP) and self- doubt Family and outside work obligations, Departing faculty from the university More online options and other opportunities</i>
	<i>Additional Support and career objectives</i>	<i>Increased professional development and training Improved Writing Center Resources Department of Education Graduate Student Club</i>
	<i>Career &amp; Beyond</i>	<i>N/A</i>

The following section will present my results using central themes and subcategories (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). Also, each section will provide significant individual responses, both in a synopsis and in the form of relevant participant quotes. The quotes were edited for readability purposes to remove distracting aspects of conversational speech, such as “um,” “really,” or “I think,” unless they were impactful for the statement. Other aspects of the quotes were changed, such as false starts or “and,” replacing it when appropriate using an ellipse (...). Before moving into this analysis, I have provided the demographics of the 25 participants in this study. To reiterate, the names used in this study are all non-gendered pseudonyms.

### Participant Demographics

Of the 99 individuals contacted for the survey, 45 were in Cohort One, and 54 were in Cohort Two; of this group, 25 responded to the survey or interview request. To better understand the participants in this study, the following demographics present the students' degree progress, overall experience, relationship status, first-generation status, gender, age and race, cohort status, and employment.

Of the respondents, eight were in Cohort One (Three had not completed their degrees; five have completed degrees), and 17 were in Cohort Two (Five have completed degrees, 12 have not completed). For uncompleted degrees, this could mean either those who may have permanently left the university without completing a degree or those still working on their degrees; a higher number completed their degrees in Cohort Two simply due to when students entered the degree program. One respondent could be categorized in Cohort One and Two, as they had a previous doctorate from MSU and the Department of Education, earning their first degree as an Educational Specialist. The Educational Specialist degree is a post-master degree,

coursework only, and not equivalent to a doctorate, as it does not have the dissertation component. I placed this student into Cohort Two to translate this information as they had not taken either seminar courses or dissertation credits in their first degree. Those in Cohort One completed the survey and the interviews equally (Four each). In Cohort Two, seven participated in interviews and ten completed surveys.

There were 14 surveys and 11 interviews, with 25 respondents of the 99 contacted, a 25% response rate for the population. Of the respondents, 15 still need to complete their degrees, and ten have completed their degrees. To look at this further, six interviewees still need to complete their degrees, and five have completed them. In contrast, nine participants who participated in the survey have yet to complete their degrees, but five have already done so.

For a general understanding of the doctoral student experience (corresponding to question two of the survey), nine responded that their doctoral experiences were bumpy, ten commented on having both a bumpy and smooth doctoral experience, and six felt their experiences were smooth or mostly smooth. Of the students in Cohort One, five reported a mixture of smooth and bumpy experiences, two a bumpy one, and one a smooth doctoral experience. In Cohort Two, five reported a mix of smooth and bumpy, seven were bumpy, and five were smooth or mostly smooth. A caveat of this is to mention that COVID-19 hit this population during the Spring of 2020 through the Fall of 2021, which could impact their perceptions during the program.

Most participants were in a relationship (80%), with only three commenting on being single and two being divorced. Of these, only a few expressed having limited support from family, friends, or work colleagues. When asked about first-generation status, in the traditional sense of undergraduate degree participation or completion, only three respondents in Cohort Two

were first-generation, making 92% of the population not first-generation. However, from the responses, only one indicated a family influence with a graduate degree. This information is vital as it can indicate how many students are unfamiliar with a graduate journey, particularly a doctoral journey, and why particular programming, such as the Doctoral System of Support (DSS), could be impactful.

Seven respondents described themselves as male; the remaining 18 were female (72% of the population). It is essential to mention that this gender breakdown is indicative of the student base in the Department of Education. Additionally, five respondents indicated they were in a minority group, three chose not to respond, and 17 considered themselves non-minorities (68% of the population). The question on minority group membership was general, without specifics to a particular minority group, to provide an overall context to the make-up of the student population and to maintain participant privacy.

The respondents' ages had two individuals in the 20-30 age range, seven in the 31-40 age range, 12 in the 41-50 age range, and four respondents were  $\geq 51$ . It is essential to mention that for the Department of Education, a significant percentage of individuals pursue education doctoral degrees after working in their respective fields for several years or decades. Noting that 92% of the participants were over 30 years of age does not indicate the uniqueness of this sample but rather the reality of doctoral degrees in education (NCES, October 2023).

Most participants expressed that they were working full-time or in a capacity equal to full-time work. The doctoral programs in the Department of Education can cater to individuals with professional experience seeking advancement and working professionals in various education settings. Full-time work was considered 40 hours or more each week; part-time is 19-

20 hours a week. Of the participants, 20 worked full-time (80%), two participants fluctuated between part-time and full-time work, two respondents were GTA/GRA's working 19 hours a week, and three respondents were GTA/GRA's who also worked outside of the GTA/GRA position: equaling full-time employment. Of the respondents, all worked in some capacity.

In reviewing the descriptive statistics in Table 2, demographics between Cohort One and Cohort Two appeared to be balanced, except for areas such as an earned degree. Most doctoral students' typical time to earn a degree can be five years and up to ten years, so the higher non-completed degree for Cohort Two is understandable.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Participant Demographics		Overall	Cohort One	Cohort Two
Degree completion	Completed	10	5	5
	Not completed	15	3	12
Study participation	Survey	14	4	10
	Interview	11	4	7
Survey & degree completion:	Completed	6	2	3
	Not completed	7	3	6
Interview & degree completion:	Completed	4	3	2
	Not completed	8	1	5
Age	≥ 20-30	2	0	2
	31-40	7	3	4
	41-50	12	3	9
	≥ 51	4	2	2
Gender Designation	Male	7	2	5
	Female	18	6	12
Race/Ethnicity	Minority	5	1	4

	Non-minority	17	6	11
	No response	3	1	2
Doctoral Experience (Smooth or Bumpy)				
	Bumpy	9	2	7
	Mix of Bumpy/Smooth	10	5	5
	Smooth/Mostly smooth	6	1	5
Relationship Status				
	In a relationship	18	6	12
	Single	3	1	2
	Divorced/Single	2	0	2
	No response	2	1	1
First Generation Status				
	Not First Generation	19	6	13
	First Generation	3	0	3
	No response	3	2	1
Employment Status				
	Full-time work	17	5	12
	Part-time and some full-time work	2	2	0
	GTA/GRA + additional work equaling full-time work	4	1	3
	GTA/GRA	2	0	2
	Non-working	0	0	0

Students were primarily not first-generation students (FGS), yet as previously mentioned, one indicated a graduate degree. Family or friends may have supported students in their journey for an undergraduate degree; still, a question surrounds whether these students received guidance, support, or encouragement when pursuing a graduate degree. Pursuing a graduate degree, particularly a doctoral degree, is vastly different from an undergraduate degree, and the definition of a first-gen student at the graduate level continues to be redefined (“Who is a First-Generation Student,” n.d.; Davis, 2012). Some institutions, such as Brown University and the University of Washington, are using more broad terms in defining who is a first-gen student to include graduate students who may have had family who received an undergraduate degree or even a graduate degree yet did not have exposure to graduate education, cultural norms,

expectations, and lack the support of the demands for the doctoral (“How do I Know if I am a First-Generation College Student?”, n.d.; “First-Generation Graduate Students,” n.d.).

Nevertheless, traditional definitions of an FGS are still the primary definition.

Participants were varied in their responses to their pursuit of a doctoral degree (Question 1), such as Oboro, who stated it was a “lifelong goal.” Others indicated that the education was impactful, and they could see that it would lead to helping more students with their goals, including one who mentioned their future “teaching teachers.” Some, such as Flynn, were lost and “did not know what else to do.” Flynn pursued a doctoral degree as something to achieve till they figured out the next phase in their career or a path was presented. Another student, Montana, commented that the doctorate was a “bucket list” item; they already obtained several master’s degrees and felt a doctorate was the next step.

People sought the degree for personal and professional growth, overall knowledge seeking, advancement in school administration, or to become an expert, as Ellison stated. One comment from Rowan went as follows: “I thought I was not smart enough to pursue higher education due to frequent messaging from a parent - that it was a waste of time.” Rowan went on to state that the doctorate was a life-long goal.

Overall, students wanted to learn about research, work to become professors, and had an overwhelming passion for education and the love and joy of learning, sentiments reflected in Figure 11-word cloud. As mentioned, word clouds allow for a quick visual representation detailing participant responses. These word clouds will be used periodically throughout this chapter, helping to underscore key ideas and perceptions thematically during the analysis.



Figure 11: Word Cloud of Why Students Pursue a Doctoral Degree.



The doctoral journey comprises years of coursework, preparing for comprehensive exams, developing and proposing a research concept, connecting with fellow students, and advising faculty and committee members before a dissertation proposal and a defense. It is an experience of solitude and classroom group connections, including online and in-person experiences. These findings tell the story of the doctoral experience, from the students' overall feelings to their relationships with faculty and chairs and the specific aspects of the Doctoral System of Support (DSS).

### Programming for Doctoral Success: Misaligned Opportunities

In order to understand the elements of the student experiences associated with the doctoral success program, questions 7-9 of the survey and interview were asked. The questions were directed to the students' interpretations and experiences in Seminar 600, Seminar 650, and Group Dissertation Writing 690. However, even the more general questions (questions 1-6)

provided additional context to the student experience as they pertained to the three particular courses. To better understand each of the specific courses, the student's experiences will be presented for each course while also identifying the cohort for each student. Each section will also detail how the experiences may have differed by comparing Cohorts One and Two.

### Seminar 600

Recall: Seminar 600 is an onboarding-type course intended for first-year doctoral students to gain a foothold in their journey. This course was implemented in the Fall of 2017 and laid the foundation for literature reviews, securing committee members, finding a students' advisory chair, and more. The following are the experiences that doctoral students had upon taking this course, also represented in Figure 12-word cloud. As the responses in this section are primarily from Cohort Two, the responses should be presumed to be coming from Cohort Two when reading unless otherwise indicated. It was also discovered that those in Cohort One who took the seminar course took it well after the intended time. It was quickly apparent when reviewing the surveys and the interview transcripts that there were two contrasting experiences: the effectiveness and the disjointed experiences; some students felt both. The contrasts were determined through the intensity of emotion of the respondents, as well as the overall data coding. In addition, some recurring patterns emerged surrounding these unique courses, referred to as misaligned opportunities. These experiential themes are outlined in the following subsections: Effective Initial Course and Out-Of-Sync Course Timing. As the section will highlight, it is evident by both cohorts that taking the course later than the term ideally intended proved less effective and affected their overall experiences negatively.



The course provided aspects of connection and confidence building, expressly noted by Jordan, stating that the course was “essential in building relationships and community within my cohort,” and by Miley, when they felt it was a necessary “bonding experience” and provided a framework for “reflective feedback from peers and professors.” It was in 2022 that Hanson et al. indicated that having a course that could lay a framework and start a sense of community proves to be highly grounding at the beginning of the doctoral journey, almost helping the student step off in the right direction. Seminar 600 appears to be a course that addresses the imposter phenomenon (IP) and fosters positive, encouraging experiences, aspects of Rendón’s (1994; 2021) Validation Theory and Astin’s (1984) Student Involvement Theory. As mentioned, research into IP by Craddock et al. (2011) underscored how even the first term of a graduate program can have IP flourish. Therefore, having a course that facilitates and encourages validating experiences from faculty and fellow students is impactful for retaining students (Rendón, 2021). When students feel part of a community, they see themselves as integrated and the same as others; they experience less anxiety and self-doubt (Caruth, 2015; Garcia & Yao, 2019).

The DSS Conceptual Framework indicates that a course environment can directly affect students, especially when it fosters and encourages self-validation and positivity. This initial course addressed student self-doubt, which is important for those new to graduate education. Doctoral students can begin their doctoral journey in an environment of support, belonging, and guidance rather than one that fans feelings of doubt –particularly important for FGS or those who are traditionally marginalized (Cole et al., 2020; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner & Holley, 2011; 2021; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

These sentiments were mirrored by others, who commented on bonding and connecting at just the right time, as mentioned by Bridger as “instrumental in my success in my program, and these relationships were all established in the seminar course.” This seminar course contributed to opportunities for a cohort experience, unpacking the doctoral process and helping establish expectations. Dorian mentioned how this initial course helped diminish imposter feelings and that the course and cohort enabled them not to “feel the imposter syndrome I had felt when I started my master's degree.” A course recognizing that not all students enter a degree with a traditional background and higher education knowledge can decrease these students' challenges, easing a transition into higher education with fewer complications (Cole et al., 2020).

Kamara also stated that the course boosted their “confidence in important ways to get published after my previous, difficult experience.” Remy and others in Cohort Two mentioned the help Seminar 600 provided them in guidance and instruction, particularly when discussing the “weird” experiences of securing advisory chairs and committee members. This “weird” experience students mentioned is a dance between finding someone who aligns with your focus and then asking them to chair your committee. More than one mentioned that they were unprepared for the odd feelings akin to asking someone out.

Finally, Rowan clarified why a seminar course is ideal for the first term of a doctoral journey when they stated that it was:

Set up with a purpose, teaching steps of being a doctoral student. It was an opportunity to find my chair, learn better steps to researching through the library, details on literature review, but most importantly - I met a group of amazing people whom I have continued to lean upon throughout my entire doctoral journey—the perfect first class to take.

The Seminar 600 course promoted student connections and dispelled myths. It appeared to set a new doctoral student up for success, encouragement, and feelings of belonging. The positive

experiences are all reflected in the DSS Conceptual Framework, aligning with experiences that encourage a student to succeed rather than leave a program.

Out of Sync Course Timing On the opposite side of the student experience were those who felt Seminar 600 was ineffective. These ineffective experiences mostly surrounded taking the course at the incorrect time, which led to a lack of community and missing necessary instruction. The lack of community stemmed from feeling outside of a unit that already appeared to have connections, a social connection that they missed out on.

When taking the course out of sync, the students expressed frustration and anxiety, areas which could be alleviated when taking the course at the most reasonable time. Astin (1984) mentioned in their research that when students are not connected with the academic community or their fellow students, it can affect their engagement and how they may even proceed within their degree program. Again, Astin's (1984) theory surrounded the undergraduate realm. Nevertheless, the correlations to involvement and persistence and what can impact a student's engagement can be experienced by any level of student, including doctoral students. In 2019, both Garcia and Yao and Cornwall et al. presented research showing that some students mentioned that the lack of or insufficient socialization at the start of their academic careers impacted their experiences. Garcia and Yao (2019) stated that "early socialization of new scholars is critical for the transition to successful doctoral education" (p 48).

Many students, such as Stacy in Cohort One and Basile and Luca in Cohort Two, reflected that they took the course much later than they should have. Stacy felt they "did not learn anything new" when they took it, while Basile thought the course was good and still

received quality information. Luca was much more upset, stating it was a “terrible experience” as an audit revealed that they should have taken the course years before.

Others like Aldis, in Cohort One, and Remy, Adley, and Tayler, all in Cohort Two, mirrored the helpfulness but mentioned that it would have been better if it were the first course they took, especially guidance in writing literature reviews and connecting with their cohort. Foundational training is imperative at the beginning of any project or journey, just like an athletic pursuit. These students lacked guidance on writing a literature review, ultimately impacting their experiences in the program in what could be seen as an avoidable situation. Caruth (2015) mentioned that some students do not persist in their doctoral degree simply due to a lack of skills to be successful.

Adley, who did not know the importance of Seminar 600, took the course well after the intended time and stated the following about writing a literature review, “I was kind of just like drowning when somebody said Lit. review. I did not even know what that was.” In some doctoral programs, such as those in the humanities, a literature review is crucial to a doctoral degree, and writing it appeared daunting for respondents. With the importance of this course and the framework it serves to build a student's journey, taking this course at the most reasonable time is crucial to success. Also, assumptions that students at the doctoral level should already understand foundational aspects, such as a literature review or performing research necessary for degrees within the Department of Education, could inhibit student progress and lead to departures (Lovitts, 2001; Tough, 2019).

Some of the fundamental learning came from aspects of the reading materials provided in the course. However, it was my feeling that as much as Bolker's (1998) book on writing a

dissertation, “15 minutes a day,” proved impactful, it would have been better served if introduced in the second seminar course (seminar 650). This is mentioned as the materials are helpful, but it is about when they are introduced into the student's academic journey.

Doctoral degrees differ depending on the discipline, so this issue underscores that there could be components within other doctoral programs that are sticking points for doctoral students, areas that create challenges or confusion that could easily be remedied. When realizing that students can enter degree programs from non-traditional backgrounds, assumptions surrounding everything from academic navigation to foundational training should not be made (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Lovitts, 2001). As Davis (2012) mentioned, the “insider knowledge, the special language, and the subtle verbal and nonverbal signals that, after one has mastered them, make one a member of any in-group, community, or subculture,” something that can be missing from the non-traditional or first-generation graduate student experience (p. 29).

Adley also mentioned a vital aspect of the course and their experiences with a lack of community and overall connections when they stated, "I could see people were making connections and having friends ... and that is what I really missed out on. I did not really have that connection." Adley further mentioned that they were unaware of what they were missing out on until they were in the class and saw firsthand how the students engaged with one another. The isolation Adley was experiencing was a lack of connections from the onset of their journey, the feeling of being outside of a space that everyone seemed to be inside. Only when they realized that they did not have a connection with a group of people who all started at the same time as they did; that it became apparent to Adley that their doctoral journey was different. Adley may have met people when they took the course, but these were students newer on the journey, not as



far along as they were, so they again felt like outsiders. Even though Garcia and Yao's (2019) research focused on online education, aspects of their research surrounding "early socialization" for new scholars can seamlessly be seen as essential for in-person doctoral programs (Garcia & Yao, 2019, p. 44). Their research mentions the importance of fostering students' engagement with others early in the doctoral journey.

Students who start into a program seeking community, or more importantly, feel that they may be an outsider of a community, could be significantly and negatively impacted, such as Adley was. By creating an environment of belonging at the onset of a doctoral journey, students could quell any initially experienced anxiety; the purpose of Astin's (1984) and Rendon's (1994) theories focuses on student success through socialization, validation, and strengthening experiences. Anxiety is also one of several symptoms that are typically discussed in terms of those who can also suffer from IP (Clance & Imes, 1978).

A sense of community is one of the main reasons for Seminar 600. Taking the course outside the most opportune time can serve against their journey as they may miss the opportunity to create a community at the beginning of their journey. As Lovitts (2001) mentioned in their research, some doctoral students leave their programs precisely due to not having initial community-type experiences. Weidman et al. (2001) further highlight the need for socialization, mentioning that "socialization is a continuum of experiences," meaning that some students need more than others (p. 19). Those who need it fluctuate "from stability to insecurity and uncertainty and then back to stability again as they maneuver in their new environments" (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 19). What is apparent is that the needs of students vary, and those needs evolve during their journeys.

A keenly apparent aspect of student departures is also mentioned in Lovitts' (2001) research when they discussed that students “from different national and regional backgrounds value clear expectations” to aid their success (p. 1621). However, what happens if they do not receive explicit guidance? In 2001, Lovitts argued that the learning experiences could sometimes be so disappointing that they can drive a student to depart. Underscoring this sentiment was research by Davis (2012), Brill et al. (2014), and others on the importance of providing proper guidance and structure to prepare students. The ramifications of guidance at the most opportunistic time are highlighted in Luca’s response when they felt the course was a “terrible experience.” Luca further stated that when a course is not taken at the most opportune time, they “should not be forced to take” the course later on.

The department intended for Seminar 600 to start a doctoral journey by providing grounding processes and to help foster a learning community for the students. Student Engagement Theory and Validation theory explained the focus and intentions of Seminar 600 and appeared to be experienced by those students who took the course at the most opportune time (Astin, 1984; Rendon, 1994, 2006). I was guided to take the course early in my journey and was thankful for the guidance and cohort-type community. Many people I met in that first course exchanged personal contact information and connected in outside study sessions and writing groups. We have been encouraging each other along our journeys, whether in classes or simply connecting.

Overall, Seminar 600 was well received, with a unanimous, positive student experience by both cohorts. The intended aspects and purpose of the course also seemed to be met. The students indicated that the course was valuable and could start them in the right direction by

creating validating experiences and not assuming they know the aspects of being a doctoral student. Additionally, the course achieves the goal of guiding department expectations of their student while simultaneously creating community and dispelling self-doubt and anxiety about the journey; this course provides the framework to assume nothing.

Considering the differences between the cohorts, the Seminar 600 course supplied an additional opportunity to foster the educational community, which was unavailable to Cohort One students. Students in Cohort One appeared to have found their community on their own through courses, study groups, and other connections. Nevertheless, students like Stacy and Ellison expressed struggling with cultivating these relationships independently, with Ellison stating, “There was not much of a learning community.” In contrast, Cohort Two students did not express this same struggle.

It appears that creating a sense of community resonated with both cohorts. Having a course that encouraged this was beneficial and made a difference in the overall doctoral student experiences with Cohort Two. Additionally, the timing of this initial course offering is essential, as expressed by even those students who did not take the course at the correct time, as these particular students felt the lack of community and connection, which they missed out on experiencing.

Taking the course well after starting a doctoral program appears counterproductive to the course's objective and even creates further disconnection and outsider-type feelings. I had not anticipated that students would have such negative experiences from taking the course at the incorrect time, yet research by Brill et al. (2014), Lovitts (2001), and Tough (2019) have mentioned just that: students who feel they are not part of a learning community are impacted,

possibly leading to their departure. In the realization that the timing of a course could significantly impact students, the requirement for taking the course can be questioned. Therefore, I found myself asking why students in this situation were not advised to take the course in their first term. Moreover, should the course be required when taken out of sync in a student's program?

Another question persists while reviewing the perceptions and experiences of this first seminar course. Suppose significant research has pointed to foundational seminars being essential to foster a healthier onboarding of doctoral students. Why are more universities or this university underutilizing this type of programming? As mentioned, numerous researchers such as Barry et al. (2018), Lovitts (2001), and Toutkoushian, Stollberg, and Slaton (2018) discuss doctoral students' increased anxiety and doubt, stemming from the very beginning of their journey and continuing throughout. Tough (2019) commented on how some students bring insecurity, fear, and a feeling of lack of intelligence with them into academia. Craddock et al. (2011) discussed that when students bring these anxieties, IP can thrive in this daunting environment (p. 431).

Then, compounding typically experienced doctoral student stress and confusion, IP could be experienced even further by the non-traditional student. Gardner (2013) stated that with this population, “students often do not even know the questions they should ask, much less to whom they should” ask, yet again highlighting how programming such as the DSS could support these and all students (Gardner, 2013, p. 47). It would seem pertinent to consider the changing demographics and needs of graduate students, much as we do for undergraduates, not only in the recruitment but also in the retention of our doctoral students.

### Seminar 650

A bookended course to Seminar 600 is Seminar 650. It is intended to be taken at the end of doctoral students' courses, ideally timed at or near a student's comprehensive exams, preparing for their dissertation proposal, or starting the dissertation writing phase. When Seminar 650 is taken at this time, it can continue to foster community, work to dispel myths and provide foundational training for the next phase of the doctoral journey.

Seminar 650 had started before 2017 but experienced a rubric change when the Ph.D. was added to align with the research sequence for all students. The course was always required by the students in the educational doctoral degree, regardless of the rubric. When comparing the syllabus from a previous rubric, EDCI 594, to Seminar 650, the nature of the course was the same. Still, a curious discovery was that several students who graduated from Cohort One did not appear to have taken the course or chose not to comment even after additional prompting. This lack of response may have been due to the course's identification with another unknown older rubric, even after further inquiries with the department. Alternatively, the lack of response could indicate that the doctoral student did not remember taking the course well enough to comment with a few who left the program before taking the course. I confirmed that out of the group from Cohort One, Aldis, Chale, Grey, and Zoe took the course. Zoe commented that the course was "ineffective for their needs," primarily due to moving into the Educational Specialist Degree.

The following are the experiences that doctoral students had upon taking this course, and similar to experiences in Seminar 600, they surrounded critical areas of effectiveness and ineffectiveness. When taking the course at the appropriate time, students seemed to have a positive experience. Although, when the course was not at the most opportune time (similar to



Once students complete their courses, they typically work on their dissertations outside of advisor meetings. Having a course to re-connect a group of people at the beginning of the writing phase appeared beneficial. The course served to counter feelings of self-doubt, even for those students who appear, on the outside, to be very strong. Through socialization opportunities and other engagements, research indicates that these experiences can lead to higher persistence (Cornwall et al., 2019; Golde, 1998; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Lovitts, 2001, 2008). Programming developed to address these isolating times is necessary for student success (Lovitts, 2001; Thelin, 2019). Lorenzetti et al. (2019) noted that most graduate research and dissertation practices limit socialization engagements due to the isolating nature of doctoral work. They commented that students could “feel disconnected from their peers,” and this disconnection can further stress and impact overall motivation and persistence (Lorenzetti et al., 2019, p. 550). Research in 2019 by Cornwall et al. indicated that addressing changes in doctoral student onboarding may need to happen at the organizational level, administratively developing programming to aid in student retention - suggestions similar to the DSS.

The respondents, such as Luca, Dorian, Oboro, and Rowan, enjoyed and appreciated the course and felt the format provided the framework and guidance to think about the dissertation process and write the first chapter. Dorian and others commented on their cohort connections and continued opportunities for a supportive community, that these connections “made me feel part of a cohort instead of on an island.” When talking about the course, Rowan stated that it was “helpful when starting my comprehensive exams and clarifying the first three chapters of my dissertation. I enjoyed having a faculty walk me through what should be in each chapter, helping define” and clarify their writing.

In Cohort One, Chale recalled taking this course and expressed that having a supportive network, student interactions, and community were necessary for their journey. As mentioned earlier when discussing Seminar 600, community and encouraged connections were necessary aspects within Seminar 650. Chale commented:

I found the process helpful, and the advice from students already started was really helpful. I loved how the instructors used the comparison of writing a dissertation to building a house. The class was helping us build that strong foundation. I found I went back to the ideas and processes presented ... as I worked on the dissertation to make sure the foundation was strong. I could tell when I wandered off the foundation and had to bring myself back. It also helped with scope creep. When our foundation was set, we could build upon that but had to stay within the foundation and not spread out.

Dorian suggested that the course was so helpful that they wished there was a course for each dissertation chapter. I felt that this comment was helpful to include, as it may highlight the lack of clarity experienced in course outlines and objectives and the need for further direction and guidance, again underscoring the need to make the requirements more explicit (Lovitts, 2001, 2007). However, providing a course for every chapter would be a significant lift for any department, suggesting that this student may have needed more direct advising from their chair. Dorian's comment reiterates the students' need for more explicit direction during the dissertation phase rather than assuming students know what to do at every step of their journey, another aspect of dispelling myths, aspects in the DSS (Gardner, 2010; Lovitts, 2001, 2007; Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

Another student, Jordan, felt the course was "essential and incredibly beneficial" when it aligned with their degree completion timeline. Jordan expressed that the course provided a chance to discuss program expectations and "the opportunity to ask questions about the more nerve-racking aspects of the program," such as comprehensive exams. These experiences serve



to be validating and encouraging and continue to foster improved self-confidence at a very opportunistic time, at the transition junctures within a doctoral journey when students begin to, or continue to, doubt their abilities (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Lovitts, 2001; Rendón, 1994).

My experience with 650 was also positive, as the course was taken at the most opportune time during my journey; it was taken at the end of my courses, right when I was preparing to propose my dissertation and begin writing. I found that the outlines and regular meetings provided the framework to step forward into my chapters while serving as a support group when preparing for my comprehensive exams. I reflected during that phase and made notes of the stress I was feeling, and I could not imagine the isolation I would have experienced if I were alone. As a non-traditional student, I was thankful for the support and guidance of the class and my classmates.

Misaligned Course Timing and Objectives As with Seminar 600, the timing was the dividing factor in whether the course felt effective. Taking Seminar 650 at the wrong time, as experienced by Cohort Two students such as Tayler, Basile, Remy, Kai, and Flynn, made them feel they took the course too late to have it beneficial. When the course was taken too late, such as with Remy, they mentioned that it “is not useful anymore.” Remy and others felt the course would be more beneficial if taken when they truly needed it. Flynn also felt the course “useless” and “frustrating” when taken out of sync. Kai experienced further frustrations when they took the course, mentioning that when taken out of sync, it affected their mental health. Kai stated that taking the course too late “was not making me feel good about myself.” They further expressed how they compared themselves with others and felt behind where they should have been. As mentioned, Gardner and Holley (2011) suggest that students can drop out of their programs when

they experience feelings of disconnection, frustration, and lack of support. These experiences can be heightened particularly with non-traditional, first-generation graduate students (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Similar to experiences in Seminar 600, students expressed adverse effects when taking the course at an incorrect time and mentioned that the benefits were lost. Having students feel that the course is a waste of time suggests that they could have used it earlier in their education, and results in the course working against the mission of the DSS. As before, the question persists whether the course should be required if it was not assigned and taken at the most reasonable time. In recognizing the detrimental effects the course could produce, it would seem the implementation of alternative coursework offered or even more focused advising to ameliorate the situation from arising.

A few students provided suggestions, such as those provided by Flynn, on best practices for course creation. They all appreciated the courses and reflected on what they felt could be improved. For example, Flynn indicated that faculty taught the courses so differently when they compared notes with other students that they thought the department lacked a framework. This may be due to the individualized nature of doctoral dissertations or how each faculty had their own experiences to lean on, experiences that could be both positive and negative. It was Oboro in Cohort Two who expressed the following about the course:

If I am being really honest, it was helpful to hear what everyone else was working on in 650, but at this stage, it feels like a waste of time to hear about everyone else's projects. ... I need every minute focused on my project. I love everyone in the cohort, and their research is important ... but it feels redundant. We have all heard about each other's projects for a long time.

Oboro and Flynn present an excellent point that processes may need to be clarified to understand the course direction, purpose, and how each element is intended for the student's growth.

Basile was another who provided some context to their suggestions, feeling the course was good but that it was possibly not meeting all students' needs based on where they were in their journey. Basile stated:

We started kinda' thinking about drafting chapter one, which I do not feel like I was ready to write ... How do I write about what I am going to do when I do not know what I am going to do? I almost feel it would have made more sense to do chapter two first ... a broad foundation of where we stand and how we got to where we are, then do chapter three.

In my own experience, it seemed that students in my class who requested to work on a different chapter were allowed to, so Basile's frustration could have been addressed by allowing students to focus on any of the first three chapters. Students would also learn from each other through peer sharing their papers, helping them move into their next section more confidently. Miley, a Cohort Two student, was the only one who felt they took the course too soon to have it beneficial. They felt rushed through their program and took this course, wishing they had waited longer to take it at the right time. This issue could easily be solved through better advising.

As with Seminar 600, it would appear that Seminar 650 is a crucial opportunity to continue to nurture student connections, boosting students' feelings of competence and quelling IP. The class seems to provide additional support, and students may seek to continue moving through their program if they take the course at the right time. When the course was taken at a time around students' comprehensive exams and when they were starting their doctoral writing process, they appreciated the guidance and community. A course that continues to foster community is valuable at this phase of the doctoral journey, where students can lean on each other, peer share chapters, and have the support of their colleagues in the program. In this, the DSS courses bookend and reinforce the community throughout the doctoral journey.

It would seem that this course was beneficial for Cohort Two students in their overall doctoral journey. The benefits of the course were even noticeable with Cohort One students as well, as either cohort commented that the concepts and direction that this particular course assisted with provided necessary foundation work and guidance. The course could serve the student's needs; even so, both seminar courses appeared to have the same negative experiences as when students took the course out of sync with their doctoral journey.

Similar to Seminar 600, when 650 was taken, no matter the cohort, the biggest problem with the course was when it was taken. When taken too early or too late, it proved counter-productive to the student's needs; the most opportunistic time matters. The frustrations of taking Seminar 650 are avoidable through better student program planning and advising, with alternative courses made available for anyone who missed this required course at the optimal time. A student who takes a course that would not benefit them experiences feelings of frustration and increased anxiety and works against the initial intention. It seems counter-productive to require the course, especially when we learn how effectively the classes are synced with a student's journey.

#### Group Dissertation Writing, Aka. Doctoral Thesis EDU 690

The final DSS course consists of credits required of all doctoral students, Doctoral Thesis credits; the difference in the Department of Education is that there is an optional, faculty-led course with a cohort meeting time that serves as a writing group. Typically, doctoral programs have students enroll in dissertation credits to account for their dissertation work. These credits generally are taken when students are writing their dissertations. The group writing course also

appeared to be split between comments that were both productive and successful experiences and those that were ineffective experiences, as seen in the word cloud in Figure 14.

The subsection in this chapter is Benefits of Group Dissertation Writing and Unnecessary or Ineffective Course Times. Some students did not have a response to the question, which either correlated with their stage in their doctoral journey or that they were studying a program that did not require a dissertation. Nevertheless, when those who replied indicated that a group course was unnecessary for their journey, the respondents still found that it could be helpful for others. Finally, at the end of this section, a summary comparison between Cohort One and Two will be made.

Figure 14: Word Cloud Indicating Views of Group Dissertation Writing 690.



Benefits of Group Dissertation Writing Most respondents felt that the dissertation writing group benefited them, and they were encouraged by the writing environment. The group format

elevated socialization and camaraderie, contributing to further cohort connections, an aspect of the DSS. Brill et al. (2014) mentioned that learning communities or cohort learning experiences, environments that support students and foster informal student connection opportunities, can lead to increased student success (Scott & Miller, 2017). Connections are necessary at this level, stressing the research aiding student success and completion. Several students from Cohort Two, such as Dorian, Luca, Rowan, and Miley, expressed this. Dorian stated, “There were people in the class that were at the same point in their writing that I was... [it] made me feel part of a cohort instead of on an island.” Luca felt that with the cohort connecting, listening, and supporting each other, the writing group helped make them “feel as if I am on the right track” and enjoyed the meeting time, an aspect that Scott and Miller (2017) discussed then they touched upon the type of peer mentoring that can happen informally. The course provided the framework for confidence-building and connecting at a fragile time in doctoral students' journeys (Barry et al., 2018; Brill et al., 2014; Lorenzetti et al., 2019). Veilleux et al. (2012) reported that graduate students leaned on their peers and that their support and friendship helped them through stressful times. They mentioned that these relationships influence the overall climate and contribute to a “respectful and collaborative learning environment” (Veilleux et al., 2012, p. 212).

In 2019, Lorenzetti et al. reported that due to the isolation in doctoral work, students might not have opportunities for engagements, leading students to “feel disconnected from their peers” (p. 550). They went on further to mention how “Stress, social isolation, and a lack of work-life balance” can pull at students' focus, inhibiting their “motivation and self-discipline needed to complete their degrees” (Lorenzetti et al., 2019, p. 550). Cornwall et al. (2019) also mirrored Lorenzetti et al. (2019) in their research on first-year doctoral student work-life balance

stress. They stated that students may need assistance finding that balance, and part of that balance comes from understanding what happens when they do not have it. Finding balance was part of what Rowan expressed when commenting on the course. They said the course was valuable in keeping them connected and focused on their work. Along with the connection, other students mentioned that the required check-ins were beneficial.

In Cohort One, Miley mentioned that the course framework assisted with writing and reviewing their dissertation, precisely what they needed to keep them progressing. Since many doctoral students depart from degrees at what is referred to as the ‘all but dissertation’ (ABD) phase, further guidance, academic support, and encouragement during this fragile time are imperative (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001).

The required check-ins helped Cohort Two students Jin, Rowan, and Flynn stay accountable, mentioning how important the course was in keeping their writing progressing and having guidance from the faculty leading the classes. Flynn stated that the course “was critical for me. I am removed from campus, so weekly check-in is my touch base with colleagues.” They went on to mention that occasionally, only several people showed up for the course without requiring check-ins, and the lack of attendance took away from their experience and the usefulness of the course.

Flynn raises an essential question about courses and requirements: If a group writing course such as this is required, what happens to those individuals who may not benefit from it? Are they required to attend, or can these students continue to have another option? Additionally, if students find that they write more productively at times that do not align with course timing, how does a department create a required course for writing that all can attend? These questions

were also brought up by several students suggesting course improvements, including Cohort Two students Oboro, Kamara, and Dorian. Oboro did not participate in more than one group class, not for lack of effectiveness but due to when the course was offered (mentioned in more detail in the next section, Unnecessary or Ineffective Course Times). Oboro felt:

The course was so beneficial in that it provided space to really start thinking about my dissertation and to start drafting the first chapter. What I ended up with was not what I imagined, but to have the dedicated time to begin the process with so much guidance was so helpful! I have participated for one semester and chose not to participate for two.

Kamara and Dorian appreciated being held accountable and seeing their colleagues from other courses. However, they had suggestions of creating more delineated writing sections based on chapters the student was working on or including more discussion topics to help with writing rather than having all chapters of the dissertation “covered” in every course. One student, Dorian, was unaware there were actual group meetings. Once Dorian found out about the regular meeting, they stated:

It was nice to be held accountable and see colleagues. The first nine weeks were hard because I felt so alone and isolated. At least with a weekly check-in, you had people asking questions, and you had to report in. Each professor does EDU 690 differently, and I have found each way beneficial in the writing process.

Dorian’s comment highlights the importance of explaining course requirements, mainly when different options exist. In several of my group dissertation writing courses, I noticed that more students were registered than those who attended. Were these students similar to Dorian, unaware of a group meeting, or were they choosing not to attend? If they were choosing not to attend, what advice were they receiving? Were they experiencing regular check-ins from their chair? As Hanson et al. (2022), Lovitts (2008), and Rigler et al. (2017) noted, consistent meetings with chairs with meaningful positive dialogue have increased student retention. I noted



that some students in my group dissertation course were multiple years into the dissertation phase, making me question the guidance they were receiving.

A few commented on their solo-dissertating writing experience, mostly expressing favorably on their guidance from their advisor, with one student, Harper, commenting that they could have used more help. Harper, a student in Cohort One, stated, “I thought I was pretty self-disciplined, but it turns out maybe not so much.” When Harper was able to take one of the group courses, they commented:

Structured time to work with other people to have somebody to talk to if I had a question and other people who were working in different places on their thesis at the same time. I wished I had had that two years prior; it would have made such a difference.

Overall, students in Cohort Two provided positive feedback about taking the group dissertation writing course, with limited to no comments from Cohort One. As mentioned, there was a lack of response from Cohort One, who either did not take or were unaware of the optional group dissertation writing course. Nevertheless, a few in Cohort One, such as Miley and Harper, did take the course and expressed that they needed it to help them progress through their degree. Harper indicated a unique perspective, as they could compare the difference between solo dissertation writing and the group format and found the group meetings helpful.

Unnecessary or Ineffective Course Times Some students who took the 690-group writing course for their dissertation found it ineffective. These comments surrounded the course timing, structural issues, personal feelings of anxiety, and increased imposter-type symptoms. Quite a few students did not take the group writing class or did not provide any comments on their experiences, even in their one-on-one writing experiences with their advisors. The potential lack

of comments from students on their experience is part of the limitations of this study.

Nevertheless, the following responses represent individuals in both cohorts relatively equally.

In Cohort Two, Basile, Oboro, Bridger, Taylor, and Remy felt that aspects of the course were effective, such as the “check-ins” during the course, participating in some discussion, or exchanging papers for a peer review. Nonetheless, they also felt that the evening courses were a challenge for people who worked full-time or had conflicting family obligations, especially for trying to be creative during the block of hours in which the dissertation writing course took place. The course timing indicates the nature of programs in the Department of Education; many courses are offered on evenings and weekends, some are only online, or courses are offered primarily in the summer to accommodate the typical student in their program. Oboro, who did enjoy the first class, did not attend future courses because:

The night-time meetings are hard for me and do not work well for my family. This question has made me realize that having all the classes at night was the hardest thing for me about this program. My brain does not function well at night, and having a kid at home makes evening time chaotic.

In many cases, these students did not attend the course, commenting that they knew they would be ineffective. Some commented that they felt their writing abilities were strong without the meetings. These same individuals commented about being more creative in the morning, planning their writing in larger blocks when they knew they could be effective, which did not necessarily correlate with a timed course.

It was Rowan in Cohort Two who felt that some of the writing classes could use better structure, especially surrounding student sharing, stating that they were “at a stage in my work I need to focus on writing, and wasting an hour of my time listening to people present their research is not optimal.” Along this thread, Flynn, also in Cohort Two, did not find the peer

paper sharing helpful, finding it a “big waste of time,” although Flynn agreed that sharing papers with faculty was helpful. They felt this as the faculty was already a scholar and that they had something to offer. As much as researchers such as Garcia and Yao (2019), Cornwall et al. (2019), Holley and Caldwell (2012), and others suggest that opportunities for peer engagement are crucial for student success, Flynn’s comment points out that students are still in a learning phase and therefore may require more direction on the purpose and goal of the assignments. Students may not understand the nature and intention of peer sharing and feedback and what students can benefit from this structure within a writing course. Students may need more guidance on reading and providing feedback on how these techniques are helpful for any career pursuit.

Students also acknowledged that finding a class time for the 690 course and offering in-person and online courses that could work for everyone would be challenging. Offering both was a sentiment mentioned by Taylor, stating that “dissertation writing should be offered both in person and online.” Taylor acknowledged that they understood why the course moved to online during COVID, but post-Covid, they felt professors were not interested in face-to-face classes.

Additionally, some students expressed frustration when the course was offered (i.e., only evenings, no in-person offerings), and others felt increased anxiety and self-doubt when taking the course. One student felt that the course produced more anxiety for them, as they thought they were comparing themselves with others, which generated further self-doubt - especially when there were students much further along than they were. Mentioning the goal of DSS and opportunities for removing anxiety and self-doubt, it appears that not all students found the

course aligning with its intended goal. For example, Kamara in Cohort Two felt increased anxiety when they stated:

I found that it generated more anxiety (for me) when I showed up. We had to talk about what we did over the week. ... productivity was not my problem. I kept comparing myself to my classmates in unproductive ways. I was constantly beating myself up.

My journey had me experience both taking the group course and choosing to take a term off from the group experience. I had mixed feelings when taking the course and found, at times, that the format and timing were unhelpful. The dissertation phase can span several years for many full-time employed students, such as myself. In this, I had ample time to compare the differing methods presented in the course.

I found the course was occasionally helpful and supportive while producing feelings of doubt, similar to what Kamara in Cohort Two expressed. Support came from hearing from others' journeys, relating to struggles, receiving guidance when most needed for my path, and experiencing validation on my writing. However, I also experienced feelings of doubt, particularly when comparing my writing with others or being introduced to a method of how to write a particular aspect of my dissertation when it was already written; feelings which surrounded a lack of competence and other imposter-related symptoms.

I did not want to participate in a group when I felt these feelings of doubt. I would have preferred to stay focused and supported along my journey with my chair, as they could steer me and provide what I needed at the most opportune time. In so much as Barry et al. (2018), Garcia and Yao (2019), and others discuss the need for increased validation experiences to dispel doubt, well-intended programming can inflict the same thing trying to be avoided.

Additionally, my experiences aligned with those of Basile, Oboro, and Bridger. I did not write best during evenings and was self-motivated at other times, typically early morning or on weekends. When I wrote on my own, with occasional meetings with my advisor, my writing did not suffer; I continued to move through further chapters without the aid of the course. Nevertheless, students like Aldis felt it was a good idea even when they did not take the course, mentioning that they thought it was a “good idea.”

Explaining their thoughts further, Aldis felt three credits seemed too much and that additional credits could come from more “academic-related courses” as a better use of doctoral credits. Aldis's statement has me questioning if the students understood that dissertation credits were the same whether they guided a group or were involved in independent meetings with their chair. Dissertation credits are required as they pertain to the time invested in writing each semester they are taken. This possible confusion again underscores the purpose behind courses and ensuring students know the goal and outcomes.

In reviewing the responses from both cohorts, some respondents felt the course's structure and nature were ineffective, expressing that dedicating more time to “solving problems and having academic discussions” could have been helpful with less peer-paper sharing. Implementing a more comprehensive course description may be beneficial. Describing the course, the structure, and elements, such as the need and purpose of peer-paper sharing, could aid students in the benefits of a group dissertation writing course. Then there were others, such as Kamara, who experienced more anxiety and that, overall, the course was unhelpful on their journey. Kamara was frustrated and vulnerable with all the sharing; they felt they were constantly comparing themselves to their classmates in “unproductive ways” and beating

themselves up for not doing enough work. The sharing created anxiety and stress, and this was with a person who already was self-motivated.

Along this thread, if students did not take the group dissertation writing, they relied on regular structured meetings with advisors to progress. Kamara chose to take the standard dissertation writing credits, working with their advisor weekly, who provided a “regimented writing schedule.” It seems to indicate the need for this phase in the doctoral journey: individualizing the experiences and allowing students' needs to be considered to determine how a student can be successful.

No matter the cohort, when students did not have structure or regular meetings, there appeared to be a lack of motivation and a slowing of dissertation progression. If a student had regular meetings with their advisor, even with a group, there did not appear to be issues with motivation or progress. The problem appeared primarily when there were infrequent meetings or meeting structures.

Harper had monthly check-ins, which were helpful until they took the group course, and they did not realize what they were missing; the connections with others who were further along in their dissertations “would have been nice to have.” When Harper took the group dissertation writing course, it provided the help they wished they had, as other students experienced when they started their doctoral journey. Others mentioned that they had regular meetings but did not expand on how those were structured, or they explained intermittent or inconsistent meeting times without structure yet needing accountability. This mirrored my own experiences in my master's study.

Overall, the group dissertation writing course appeared to provide aspects of support needed by both groups, removing isolation, and providing accountability necessary for writing progression. Nevertheless, it does not appear that the group format should be a requirement for all students. If the department continues allowing students to self-select the group course or the advisor-led, it would seem an opportunity for the department to ensure more structure for the advising process. It appears that the advisor-led option could have more detailed expectations and possibly more tools to mentor students better to uncover the guidance each student needs, which can differ from person to person (Tenenbaum et al., 2001).

The term regular advisor meeting was nebulous, as there did not appear to be a uniform timing or structure given to these important meetings. Some students expressed weekly meetings; others mentioned meeting their advisor once over the term. It appeared that students compared their experiences, which could increase anxiety in questioning their relationships with their advisors. Should department processes be aligned for this continuity and structure? How would this structure work for faculty advising, since the teaching and research can change each term, including the potential for sabbaticals disrupting the students' scholarly journey? Are there best practices used as guidelines, or are faculty engaging in these critical meetings in the same manner they experienced during their doctoral journey? What did their experiences bring to the format they used? Was the guidance the advisors provided more explicit, as Lovitts (2007) explains, or were the meetings more implicit and possibly lacking clarity?

#### Faculty and Chairing: Diverging Experiences

Understanding how students perceive faculty and their chair is integral to the overall doctoral student experience; questions 10 and 11 focused on students' perceptions of faculty and

chair experiences. This section will contribute to answering both main research questions and provide the necessary context to understanding students' needs. It could be assumed that a department and faculty would know what students need, yet without learning from them, it could be hard to predict and plan accordingly.

Faculty and the Student Experience

Doctoral students are all different, coming into their journey from varying backgrounds, histories, experiences, or the lack thereof, as seen through the historical dive in Chapter Two's literature review and the visual aid of Figure 15-word cloud. This section will show the results of the interviews and surveys, and it is apparent that their experiences were across the board. Students cited receiving solid advising, inspirational and motivational conversations, valuable experience, and the hope for better feedback and guidance.

Figure 15: Word Cloud Indicating Positive Student-Faculty Experiences.





### Faculty Guidance, Support, and Motivation

Several students in Cohort Two expressed their feelings surrounding faculty connections and support, such as Jin, who commented that they received “Excellent support from faculty and staff [who] helped me navigate the journey better than [they] originally thought.” Alternatively, Kai felt the faculty helped to inspire them through frequent conversations; that “having a deep discussion(s) ... [were] very instrumental” and were inspirational to them and their education.

A student also expressed this thread of motivation and guidance in Cohort One, Harper, when they talked about their experiences with faculty as helping them "advocate" for themselves. Through methods of teaching and mentoring and presentation skills, they felt they secured "a new perspective" on how they could genuinely utilize their education. Harper even stated that as much as they were initially “floundering,” the faculty “took the time to provide me a little guidance and encouragement, and that is what they needed.” When support or encouragement came from supportive faculty, those students were likelier to seek help (do Amaral, 2022).

Positive experiences could also be taxing, as described by Jacinth, a Cohort One student who felt that good faculty “challenged and pushed [them] to excel.” Like Jacinth and Kamara in Cohort Two, they felt that solid support and advice were crucial to their success, especially in feedback on assignments, critical areas highlighted in research by Hanson et al. (2022). Kamara “valued the narrative, written feedback,” going as far as to explain why they disliked grades as “somebody's way of trying to quantify learning and created more stress than they provided benefit.” These students further explained why they appreciated the feedback they received in the Department of Education doctoral classes: "Useful because it took the contrived nature of grades

off the table (because they were unnecessary) .... I think good advisers will coach you when you are ready and not let you go before you are ready.”

### Lack of Support and Engagement

Caruth (2015) indicated that students leave a doctoral program mainly due to “conflicts between faculty, departmental staff, and advisors” (p. 192). They further mentioned how essential these relationships can be for student success, although some students in this study did not experience this. Some reported ineffective relationships, particularly surrounding support or engagement, as experienced with Bridger, a student in Cohort Two.

Bridger reflected on their experiences with faculty, particularly when discussing their feedback to assignments, directly in opposition to Kamara’s abovementioned experience. Bridger appreciated receiving feedback but felt that it was “lacking,” preferring “honest feedback” and going as far as to repeat the statement by saying, “to have honest, brutal feedback ... [not] cookie cutter feedback ... shows your instructor is not truly reading your work or giving the time to help you grow as a scholar.” However, contrary to this challenge to how feedback is delivered, Bridger also explained how they felt that the faculty was good at grooming them for their future and providing solid guidance.

Bridger was not the only student with this mixed type of response; Chale, a Cohort One student, mentioned their experience in many classes as a second-class citizen since they were not a full-time student (but worked full-time). Chale explained that they appreciated the education, faculty knowledge, and education they received: “I think the whole department has always been supportive of the people. You know, so that is why it is interesting to me that I felt like a second-

class student." This student experience resonated in their commentary, typically surrounding opportunities provided to other full-time students, such as attending conferences.

Finally, Ellison, a student in Cohort One who ultimately left the program, had felt that: "no one [was] interested in what I was doing... I knew that it was not the right fit... I was not quite getting what I came for." This lack of connection, or fit, was an outlier response, with several students mentioning similar experiences, particularly when discussing their committee chair or other unsavory experiences. This last point is important to note as not all the experiences fit nicely into the two types of groups.

Overall, it would seem that students in both cohorts seek guidance and connection from their faculty and within the courses taken, with solid and timely feedback that matters. These engagements served to inspire and cultivate further engagements. It is apparent that no matter the cohort, students sought a community and connection with their faculty, feeling a part of the learning community.

#### Committee Chair and the Student Experience

A student's committee chair, their advisor, is integral to the student experience. This position is vital to guiding and developing the student in their research, writing, and overall journey, including post-degree career support. Rigler et al. (2017) commented on this relationship as being one of the "most critical factors in the successful completion of a doctorate," especially if the relationship was non-hierarchical (p. 5). In this, question 11 of the student survey/interview asked students specifically about their relationship with their chair. The

responses from the 25 participants leaned more towards a consistently positive experience, but there were also those bent towards the contrary, as indicated in Figure 16-word cloud.

Figure 16: Word Cloud Indicating Views of Student-Chair Experiences.



### Connecting, Supportive, and Flexible

Chair and student relationships were perceived as more effective, mainly when students felt understood and accepted, and that relationship was not embedded in a hierarchy (Rigler et al., 2017). Pfund et al. (2016) mentioned the importance of these relationships during a doctoral journey as ones that can lead to higher degrees and career satisfaction. Overall, scholars indicated that when the relationship between the chair and doctoral students is misaligned and focused on only their agenda or one which creates communication barriers, they can lead to decreasing program satisfaction and completion rates (Brill et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017).

Positive chair experiences came from both cohorts. Montana, a student in Cohort Two, stated that their chair was “always available, very easy to get a hold of, responded very quickly

to emails, and truly got me. I feel [they] got to know me outside of my coursework." Kumar and Johnson (2017) indicated that the opportunity to engage and have meaningful conversations could lead to a more "positive learning experience" (p. 138). In addition, several other Cohort Two students, such as Oboro, were excited when discussing their chair, referring to them as "supportive and amazing," saying, "I cannot imagine [making] this journey with anyone else." At the same time, Luca felt their chair was "instrumental in my journey, and I would not be where I am" without their chair's support and influence. These sentiments are indicated by researchers such as Rigler et al. (2017), Lovitts (2001), Hanson et al. (2022), and others, who have identified that individualized support, clear expectations, and encouragement made the difference in doctoral student success.

Other students, such as Deven, Basile, Bridger, Aldis, and Zoe, felt their experiences were exceptional, supportive, flexible with work-life struggles, and had an overall positive experience. Basile explained that they had "developed a personal connection" with their chair, discussing families, life, and additional aspects of an academic journey. Bridger's experience went further into their relationship with their advisory chair as they dove into how it impacted their current standing as a professor:

My advisor taught me basically everything I know about what it means to be a professor ... designing/teaching courses, submitting to conferences/journals, writing grant proposals, collaborating with colleagues, and many other areas [my chair] was instrumental in my growth and success. [They were] my biggest critic and also my biggest fan. [They] pushed me to be a better researcher than I thought I could be. I am extremely grateful.

Several students in Cohort One stated that their chairs were instrumental in their guidance, such as with Zoe. Zoe commented that their chair guided them and "set me up for success." At the

same time, Aldis felt very lucky to have their chair, which appeared to communicate effectively for them, stating that a chair was "the most important puzzle piece to your journey."

### Misaligned, Disconnected, and Unhelpful

Divergent to these more positive experiences were some comments of the student and chair relationships as being "misaligned," "a wasted experience," that they "could not connect" with their chair, and that they did not gain the guidance or mentoring they were seeking. Rigler et al. (2017) even commented on the fact that "not all faculty make good dissertation chairs, but they are one of the greatest assets to the doctoral program" (p. 6), a fact that creates a misalignment in the entire process. Research by Pfund et al. (2016), Kumar and Johnson (2017), and others mentioned that the relationship is critical in students' success, even leading to more timely degree completion. The importance of this aspect is stressed within the DSS as leading to doctoral attrition. In Lukianoff and Haidt's (2019) research on student populations arriving on campus in the last decade, many seek more engagement than previous generations. Additionally, as Barnes and Randall (2012), Pfund et al. (2016), and Rigler et al. (2017) discussed, some unsuccessful chair and student relationships can be due to a lack of training.

Flynn, a student in Cohort Two, talked about their chair experience as being "such a waste ... such a disappointment." Flynn did not feel the relationship was contentious but could not figure out why they did not connect. They wondered if it was a "personality conflict or an expectation" that they would have a mentor who would do and be more for them. In 2019, Lorenzetti et al. mentioned that this guidance needs to be solid when it comes to guidance "Inadequate supervision, or perceptions of such, can impact the amount and quality of support students receive, possibly resulting in poor academic outcomes and increased attrition" (p. 569).

Hanson et al. (2022) went further to suggest that some faculty may need the training to understand the needs of incoming graduate students, a sentiment mentioned by Flynn, who asked if the person had not received training on being a “good advisor” and ended this conversation with the following comment “It just was not a substantial partnership, I guess.” Another Cohort Two student, Rowan, talked about their chair in this manner:

I cannot say that it is a strong relationship; not like I have heard others talk about theirs. I feel that I am a burden sometimes, so I do not reach out as often as I would want to. I find that I try to ask questions of other faculty [to clarify] ideas or direction and gain support from others, too. It is not that they are not helpful, as they are, but I feel a disconnect, almost like I am a checkbox on their CV.

The experiences of Rowan and Flynn bring to mind relationships in the doctoral journey as a partnership, a mentoring-type experience that may change depending on the students' program. Merriweather and Morgan (2013), Pfund et al. (2016), and other researchers have indicated that the educational system is seeing an increase in non-traditional students who bring different experiences, cultures, and histories into their doctoral journeys. The Department of Education is a different education system, particularly in that the education and training in their programs are focused equally on eventual research work and professional training. There are elements of the doctoral journey that can be experienced by all students - regardless of the program. These changes highlight the need for the education system to recognize student differences and how their needs differ from the traditional student body (Rigler et al., 2017; Smith, 2013).

Smith (2013) further commented that the typical academic culture had focused mainly on the traditional student while possibly forgoing those from non-traditional backgrounds. Student differences and needs must be considered when recognizing student-chair relationships' impact on doctoral outcomes (Hanson et al., 2022; Merriweather & Morgan, 2013; Pfund et al., 2016; Rigler et al., 2017; Smith, 2013). I must point out that the differing needs are due to differences

seen between traditional and non-traditional students, as individuals in this study represented a variety of demographics.

Nevertheless, to continue explaining the needs of doctoral students and a solid student-chair relationship, a few doctoral students in Cohort One explained their experiences as “hard to figure out” and “unhelpful,” even going to other committee members for more help. Jacinth and Dorian reported going to other committee members before going to their chair. Jacinth stated that their “chair did not grasp [my] research [leading them to turn] to committee members for guidance,” whereas Dorian said they had a “good relationship with my chair” but could not figure out how to utilize them truly. They stated that “for much of my first year, I think I was trying to impress [them] instead of using [them] for what I needed.” Even today, Dorian states that they utilize other support, committee members, and others before seeking support and guidance from their chair. They further commented that they felt it had more to do with their issues than the chair; they were unsure. It was Chale who expressed their feelings of lacking the mentoring they needed when they stated:

I think maybe that word mentor is what is missing there for support and guidance, but the mentoring takes on a different role where you are helping them prepare them for the next career and helping them take those steps introducing them to this person, who might want to hire them doing those things. Those are the things that I saw them doing for those full-time students. But not for the ones who are already employed somewhere. So, maybe it is that mentoring word you want to focus on.

The cohorts again converge on their feelings and experiences of their relationships with their chairs. Whether in Cohort One or Two, students expressed similar needs for connection, supportive interactions, and guidance while revealing what was lacking, aspects of what Cole et al. (2020), Hanson et al. (2022), and other researchers focused on belonging and connecting.

When students indicated they missed out on supportive connections and mentoring experiences,



when there was a misunderstanding on how to tap into their chair for guidance, and overall expressed disappointment in the relationship, they expressed frustration and feelings that there is room for improvement.

### The Doctoral Community: A Necessity

The doctoral community was overwhelmingly an aspect most desired by the students who responded. They commented on the student connections, collaborations, energy, and friendships built through the years of working together, of a cohort-type experience, experiences that align with research (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Golde, 1998; Lorenzetti et al., 2019). The perceptions presented in this section came from responses to questions, as there was no specific question about the experiences surrounding the sense of community. This emergent theme surrounded participants alluding to or commenting on community, friendships, collaborations, and other elements, mentioning their importance within their overall experiences and courses. From these comments, it was seen that students appreciated the learning community and connections, which they felt would take them through the program and beyond, sentiments reflected in the word cloud in Figure 17.



opportunities to support, vent, and collaborate on projects. There were others, like Aldis in Cohort One, who felt that the connections did not just happen in the classroom; informal opportunities also helped forge strong relationships.

### Informal Connections and Networking

Some student connections happen due to taking similar courses or being assigned groups within courses, for example, while other engagements happen more organically and are encouraged in the graduate education process (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Weidman & Stein, 2003; Smith, 2013). Aldis felt that "It was through the informal experiences and having the informal dialogue [to be] most valuable." Aldis indicates how the doctoral experience is so immersive that stepping away from it is very important. Encouraging connections outside the classroom, in more social settings, or student-initiated study groups benefited some students.

In Cohort Two, Kamara found that these informal times were vital for their mental health. Kamara said they also had to "learn how to have recreational times with my colleagues and cohort friends, and not let those turn into a means for comparison." These opportunities helped Kamara learn the nature of a supportive network, commenting that the doctoral experience could "quickly turn into something where it is just ugly one-upmanship." A healthier learning experience, opportunities for positive validation, and an academic climate such as these have been stressed by many scholars as an aspect leading to an increased sense of community and student retention and are encouraged as part of the doctoral journey (Crede & Borrego, 2014; Lovitts, 2001; Rendón, 1994, 2006, 2021; Veilleux et al., 2012).

Additionally, another Cohort Two student, Basile, appreciated the networking the courses provided and "getting to know people on a real deep level that you would not get a chance to

otherwise.” This connection was even more helpful as so many of their cohort were also work colleagues, and they felt the connections could help build rapport. Basile mentioned that these connections with peers and work colleagues make “the work easier ... fun and...you were able to tie into something you are doing for work.” Luca, another Cohort Two student, continued on this thread that they have “forged friendships with former classmates with whom I still am in communication.”

One individual, Ellison, in Cohort One, left the program and felt, at that time, they did not experience “much of a learning community.” Upon arriving, Ellison anticipated connecting with others in the program and working together regularly, but this did not happen. Additionally, Ellison was admitted before securing a faculty advisor, as was the practice by the Department. In the case of Ellison, it appeared that the research topic was well outside the spectrum of research by any of the faculty at that time. This lack of research connection also created a disconnect, not just with fellow students but with faculty as well. This situation appeared to be an outlier in the overall participant responses. However, it felt important to underscore the need for organized learning communities and for students to be connected early to faculty.

Others commented that the cohort was more organic, usually formed through several courses. These individuals desired a more formal attempt at cohort implementation. So, in looking at these responses, it seems that many students sought a more formal effort to create a learning community. Nonetheless, connecting is essential to the doctoral journey, regardless of their development. When students did not feel this connection - a part of the learning community - they struggled. Students develop networks and friendships, vital for success when part of a supportive community, whether brought together from a class, study group, small class sizes, or

organically through non-course related encounters. Lovitts (2001) indicated this as the “socioemotional integration” (p. 42) of a student's journey, something which was not only colloquial but included social engagements outside of academic engagements; connections helped with rapport building and contributed to overall student success.

### Doctoral Journey: Perceptions, Suggestions, and Overall Feelings

Understanding the effectiveness and ineffective experiences of the doctoral journey are vital aspects that contribute to answering both research questions. As with the previous section, this portion of the analysis does not come from any particular question; instead, the perceptions, overall feelings, and suggestions became apparent after reading the transcripts. This next segment provides a deeper look into the students’ perceptions of their experiences outside of those mentioned earlier. These areas involve experiences in two areas: of a more positive nature and of those deemed ineffective. In the following sections, I have ordered the experiences with the most pronounced and frequent comments at the beginning, moving through the less frequent or outliers.

In the area of more effective experiences, there are the following subsections: faculty flexibility and guidance, family support, personal disposition, and growth opportunities. For those less-effective aspects of their overall doctoral journey, which will include areas surrounding family, overall advising and issues surrounding committee members, misaligned course opportunities, IP and self-doubt, issues surrounding committee members, and other ill-achieved opportunities.

## Effective Experiences

Faculty Flexibility, Guidance, and Support It was apparent that many doctoral students felt that flexibility in their course offerings, both in-person and online, was the key to their success. Explicitly mentioning the faculty flexibility and course offerings (online and in person) was Jacinth, who appreciated the weekend courses (even though they may have disrupted their family life. As Lorenzetti et al. (2019) indicated, balancing home life and work with school can create additional stressors and pull students away from the learning or academic community. In understanding the demographics of the student population, we can appreciate how to provide opportunities or change academically to meet more of the student body's needs. The online degree options allowed some students to pursue the degree, yet the in-person options gave them "opportunities to get to know faculty and classmates." Along the thread of flexibility were comments from several students who appreciated that the program was aware that many students worked full-time. For example, Montana mentioned this about summer course offerings: "The program worked around those of us that are employed full time," allowing them to take the courses they needed on time. Also mirroring this sentiment was Adley, who knew that online options were critical to their success, stated:

Had I been on campus, it would have been a stronger experience. But then again, being where I am and then getting what I am asking for, like a doctoral degree [not living in Bozeman], I think I am getting the best I could possibly get. So, I think the flexibility of the instructors has been fabulous.

Students also commented about the faculty's solid guidance and support during their journeys. Montana mentioned a personalized experience, with support from staff and faculty, which made all the difference. Montana stated, "Having an actual person reach out to you and make those connections and walk you through the process and be willing to answer all your questions" was

what they needed. Many scholars have indicated that guidance, whether in groups or one-on-one academic mentoring or advising sessions, is the key to doctoral completion (Crede & Borrego, 2014; Barnes & Randall, 2012; Barry et al., 2018; Gardner, 2013; Kumar & Coe, 2017). Oboro, Miley, and Remy mentioned that their success was due to their supportive advisors and faculty along the way.

Jordan and Harper went on further, explaining that planning their programs of study in detail with their advisors was most helpful. Jordan mentioned that they could “build out a realistic timeline, which, in turn, made the completion of my program realistic as well.” Harper stated, “We planned out my first two years. So, it was very clear where we were going and what we were doing.”

Family Support and Personal Disposition Doctoral students mostly expressed their journey as smooth, especially when mentioning the support they received. Montana and Jacinth expressed how family, connections on campus, and how faculty could empathize with their competing demands helped their overall success. Grey mentioned the importance of friendships and encouragement they received from others they met from previous degrees, stating that these people were “helpful and inspiring ... that people from similar backgrounds wanted to obtain their doctorate.” Grey indicated they were American Indian; they felt “it was powerful to me that many reservations were represented” in the degree program. These points make me realize how essential it can be to address support and community connections at the beginning of a doctoral journey. In the Seminar 600 course I took, a course assignment specifically addressed my doctoral journey, who would be my support through my educational pursuit, and more. By indicating this in writing, I committed to my supportive plan and doctoral journey, utilizing the

friends and family who agreed to be on this journey with me, from meetings utilizing WebEx or in-person coffee dates to discuss everything from content and editing to the eventual dissertation defense.

Some students, such as Rowan, Remy, and Basile, commented directly about their disposition. Basile described themselves as being more laid back and unworried about not finishing, mentioning that they were a 3rd generation graduate student and they:

Have always just been laid back about it and just trusting that the process will work itself out and I will get to the end. I think that is a little bit of a personality disposition ... Like [if] dates have been pushed back as far as when, you know, actually going to finish and things like that, but I have just kind of rolled with it, and I do not feel bad about it. I have never felt like it was at the point where I [would not] complete or finish my project or anything like that.

However, the point Basile brings up is that of continuing generation students (CGS), who have experiences that non-traditional or first-generation students may not have. There continues to be an assumption that those who enter into a doctoral degree have a level of confidence that Basile has, but this is not usually the case. The level of confidence necessary to complete a doctoral degree typically can come from those who are brought up in families discussing higher education, as that confidence is not always apparent in first-generation students (Langford & Clance, 1993; Mehta et al., 2011; Piatt et al., 2020; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Tate et al., 2015; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). As noted, imposter syndrome is more prevalent in non-traditional students, which can lean these students towards a lack of confidence in completing (Clance & Imes, 1978; Craddock et al., 2011; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2013).

This is not to say that only those with a family history of continued generations in academia are always confident. Remy and Rowan did not mention family history involvement, yet they expressed confidence in completing it, suggesting an ease of knowing they would finish.



Other life experiences can also lend themselves to overall confidence and tenacity that can assist in the doctoral journey (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022; Byrom et al., 2022; Duckworth, 2016; Gardner & Holley, 2011). It just would seem important not to assume confidence comes with the doctoral student; therefore, cultivating confidence through validating experiences and supportive engagement from the very onset of their doctoral journey should be a regular practice (Byrom et al., 2022; Caruth, 2015; Craddock et al., 2011; Davis, 2012; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Rendón, 1994, 2006, 2021; Smith, 2013).

### Creating a Stronger Student Experience

Doctoral students in the Department of Education also commented on their growth, development, and other available opportunities. Flynn said a statement that I tell myself regularly, “The more you know, the more you do not know.” Flynn further explained their appreciation of the program as it allowed them to engage “on a higher level, conversation, and engagement. A statement like Flynn's could benefit their journey, but it could easily be thwarted in a less supportive and encouraging academic environment. Countless scholars such as Craddock et al. (2011) and Weidman et al. (2001) have indicated that students can move through levels of certainty and uncertainty, which is also part of the imposter phenomenon (IP). Interestingly, Craddock et al. (2011) also indicated that people with IP enter into a doctoral program with these feelings and then fail; they “attributed their successes to external factors and blamed themselves for their failures” (p. 432). Supportive environments can help all students, such as Flynn’s, during their journeys.

One student, Luca, appreciated the opportunity with the on-campus experience and mentioned that the campus community aided their growth by utilizing the library and having in-

person meetings with committee members, staff, and faculty. They mentioned the importance of speaking “directly to the instructors and had face-to-face meetings with my advisor. Also, to be able to see the books in the library physically [this] was very beneficial for me.” As mentioned, the connections, whether in person or online, are foundational and essential in the academic journey (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Hanson et al., 2022; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Mehta et al., 2011; Rigler et al., 2017).

Others, such as Zoe, Oboro, and Bridger, commented on their work conducting research and as graduate teaching assistants, a role that helped prepare them for their future. Bridger furthered this thought, mentioning that the research they performed with their advisor:

Was a major factor in obtaining a tenure-track faculty position upon degree completion. My advisor always wanted me to be researching, so I was able to leave MSU with [numerous] publications [and] conference presentations and [several] ready-to-publish manuscripts .... My research productivity was a major aspect of my success in the job market.

It appears that regardless of the method of instruction, students seek connections and growth opportunities. From their responses, students look for, or need, more engagements that foster a healthier, supportive environment. They also seek more occasions and training to grow both academically and professionally.

Ineffective Experiences As indicated in the survey and the interviews, students who felt frustrated when they needed more faculty support or engagement were disappointed. The primary areas students perceived as ineffective were lacking advising or seeking better guidance, IP, self-doubt, departing faculty from the University, family and outside work obligations, and more online and other possibilities. Each area will be covered briefly in this next section.

Better Advising and Guidance Several students mentioned that the lack of advising impacted their perceived effectiveness in their doctoral Journey. Gardner (2013) pointed out that some non-traditional students “work harder to understand and navigate the system” (p. 47), and in this, with better advising, they would not have to. Furthermore, Tate et al. (2015) stated that completion rates decrease when advising is missing or lacking from a student's journey. Gardner (2009, 2013), Ehrenberg et al. (2007), Tenenbaum et al. (2001), Lovitts (2008), and other scholars have indicated that advising was the one thing that pushed the degree completion rates higher. It could be assumed that students at this level should be at a point where they are confident in figuring out their next steps and how to navigate the higher education system; but, as mentioned previously, assuming this misses some students who need more guidance than others (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2013; Lovitts, 2008; Tenenbaum et al., 2001).

Advising can help students understand their changing roles, learn about expectations, provide socioemotional support, and guide their growth during the journey (Byrom et al., 2022; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2009, 2013; Hanson et al., 2022; Tenenbaum et al., 2001). It would seem that proper advising would be imperative when a student is moving into a new phase of education; advising can ease transitions by not assuming knowledge is known (Cole et al., 2020; Craddock et al., 2011; Holly & Gardner, 2012).

The questions surrounding securing a chair or committee were presented as a challenge for students to understand how to navigate this unusual experience. One student, Basile, mentioned a lack of clarity in securing a chair and committee. Basile indicated that when reaching out to faculty, some did not respond to their requests, not even simply stating they were uninterested or could not advise the student. Gardner (2009), Ewbank (2016), and others have

recommended that students need assistance selecting committee members; this assistance can happen in various forms of advising, mentoring, or inclusion within first-term courses. In recognizing the importance of this phase of a doctoral journey, re-mentioning why taking a course such as Seminar 600 proved valuable for many students when taken at the correct time (Cornwall et al., 2019; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Gardner, 2013). It is also essential to mention that committee chairs are selected after a student begins their doctoral journey for some doctoral programs, such as the degrees in the Department of Education. However, this selection process can happen in other departments before the student applies to the degree program, an element not addressed in this study.

The lack of faculty engagement or poor connections with those faculty is another area one student mentioned as a challenge in their journey. Flynn felt their engagement was not what they needed, stating that they “did not develop a relationship with my advisor, and I expected to be challenged through that relationship.” This idea of understanding students' needs as individualized rather than generalized support was underscored in research by Lovitts (2001), Rigler et al. (2017), and others. Flynn went on to state that they are:

Not getting a rich experience ... as rich of an experience as I could if I had a different advisor. I am disappointed, and I intend to give that feedback after graduation. I would even say I am trying to think of a word to describe that ... It is burdensome ... it is not enriching. My advisor did not really advise me ... I came in having just graduated with this master's degree and had to convince this person to transfer in some of my credits, and I had to pull all of the forms [to transfer credits, and if I did not] ... It could have added a whole year of coursework. I knew immediately this was not going to be what I was looking for because I [could] do that myself, but what I was looking for in an advisor was that high-level [of] connection.

Another area mentioned the lack of advising when students took courses out of sync; this appeared to be the bumpiest part of a student's journey, no matter the cohort. Students such as

Remy, Tayler, and Bridger mentioned the bumpy journey due to not providing guidance on which courses to take and when. Some courses were not well aligned with these student's course plans, as the courses in the department are set up in a yearly rotation, even though the department listed them on its webpage. Other courses were thought of as coming too soon in a doctoral journey, as Rowan mentioned taking statistics before a person established their research topic. Rowan stated that “the classes would have made more sense. Practicing and picking apart a subject that I was passionate about from the beginning.”

This misaligned course offering, or rotation, appeared to be the most problematic for students like Grey, Adley, and Oboro. Oboro stated, "It forced me into classes simply because they were the only ones available and missing ones I wanted to take. However, I did benefit from the courses I took regardless.” Adley further commented about their confusion, partially due to taking initial courses as a non-degree-seeking student. Taking courses as a non-degree-seeking student is when a student has not been admitted into a degree program. When students such as Adley choose this route, they do so to explore the experience and courses or, for some, improve their grade point average before applying. For Adley, they stated that they:

Should have talked to somebody who would have given me better classes to take the very first time ... I did not really have a plan. I do not want to say those first three classes were wasted, but I really could have used them in a better way.

Adley shared that they did not apply directly to the doctoral program as they were unsure if they could “handle the amount of work,” choosing to test out the experience first to make “100% sure I could handle it.” However, in doing this, they “did not have a lens to look through ... thinking of what would be interesting verses what to do [for their doctorate]” and thus, missed foundational learning such as creating a literature review, and felt that they “kind of shot myself in the foot.”

Bridger was another person who commented on their confusion in their first term, stating that they “had no idea what I was doing. I did not know what courses I needed to take when these courses were offered, how to find relevant conferences/journals, [and] how much research I needed to [do].” Bridger stated, “I felt like I did not belong as many of my peers seemed to be more familiar with the literature and research methodology.” Nevertheless, on a positive note, they did mention that as their doctoral journey unfolded, their advisor addressed most of the areas of uncertainty, and when they didn’t, they found the answers on their own. Bridger continued this reflection, mentioning that they found this initial confusion, which, in hindsight, helped them find their way and helped them “become more independent and confident as a researcher moving forward.”

Finally, Chale mentioned the delays they experience outside their control due to institutional barriers and processes, such as the old methods of the IRB approval, pushing their degree out a year. Delays can create further frustrations and challenges that could be avoidable if students are aware of institutional processes. In Chales’ situation, they were unprepared for these roadblocks to slow their progress, mentioning that if they expected them, “it would not have thrown me for so much of a loop,” causing them to hurry through the data analysis to “get the results, and it just felt like this giant rush to get done.”

Imposter Phenomenon (IP) and Self-Doubt Students can experience emotional stressors during a dissertation due to school pressures, writing demands, and preparing for comprehensive exams or presentations. Some students arrive at doctoral work carrying these insecurities with them, which can manifest and become apparent as self-doubt in their academic abilities, with an overall feeling that they do not belong, or as Gardner (2013) mentioned it as “an internal

experience of intellectual phoniness” (p. 51). In discussing the first-generation student, Davis (2012) stated that these students actually “think and learn differently from their non-first generation” peers; universities need to consider this in their approaches within a learning environment. Davis’s research is on the undergraduate class, yet these same students enter graduate schools, bringing the same insecurities of the ambiguity of pursuing a graduate degree to the lack of preparation.

Imposter phenomenon (IP) encompasses feelings of doubt, lack of belonging, and uncertainty, creating anxiety, depression, levels of concern, and other emotions that can increase during a doctoral journey, appearing during classes, within groups, or while working in isolation (Byrom et al., 2022; Craddock et al., 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Langford & Clance, 1993). Adley mentioned that the lack of family and colleague support challenged their emotional state, mentioning that they are in isolation, working on the degree solo, even when others are in the program. Another student, Tayler, described their initial class experience as horrible, with self-doubt and IP swimming to the point where they were:

So intimidated by [the instructor] and felt like I had no idea what was [happening]. It felt like ... the class knew what was going on, and I did not. I did not know how to read like a graduate student. I was so overwhelmed about the amount of reading [the faculty] required or assigned [in class], it felt like [they were] dismissing [what] I was saying... I felt like the dumbest human ever, and I went home and cried. I was on the bathroom floor ... sobbing. Like, I am so dumb .... Why am I even in this doctoral program? I know nothing. [The professor] thinks I am stupid. Everybody thinks I am stupid. I went [into] this downward spiral, drank a bottle of wine. But got up on Saturday and went to class, even though in my head, I had already made the decision that I was going to drop the class.

Tayler was not alone in this initial class experience. Bridger also mentioned that they were:

Lost and confused. After my first night class, I walked back to my dorm crying. I am not very emotional ... but I felt like I did not belong in the Ph.D. program because my peers seemed to ‘know what they were doing’ while I knew that I was

clueless. I felt like it was a mistake to have started my Ph.D. because I felt like an idiot.

Other students mentioned their self-doubt as debilitating, their feeling of inadequacy heightened during courses, and that when faculty mentioned or talked about these experiences openly, it helped them work through them. The acknowledgment was something Jordan said, as they felt “fortunate” that they had a faculty who stated something, and in doing so, it helped them benefit from the course. Jordan went further to talk about IP in this way:

It is almost impossible to navigate a master’s or doctoral program without facing some feelings of imposter syndrome. Feelings of being inadequate can be quite debilitating, though I am not sure where these truly come from or originate.

It is important to mention a follow-up to Taylor's initial experience. Taylor explained that once they had taken several courses, including Seminar 600, the course provided the framework and validation they needed, so when they re-took the course a year later, their experience was profoundly different and positive, even going as far as to say that the professor was their favorite. Wherever it derives itself, support and encouragement from cohort, family, faculty, and more can help students succeed.

Family and Outside Work Obligations Several students mentioned that family and work obligations were competing factors in their overall effectiveness as students. Oboro, Luca, and Stacy mentioned that family obligations or competing work priorities required further juggling than typical graduate students, as mentioned by Oboro when they stated, “I had to work hard to be purposeful about my time and energy to make it” a smoother experience. Being a parent or a single parent made the journey more challenging, especially when working, as the balance of student and home life could never be smooth. Stacy stated that due to educational costs and family obligations, they could not take more than one class at a time and worried they would not



complete their degree within the ten-year time limit. They mentioned missing out on other aspects of school and social life due to a “lack of balance.”

Stacy mentioned that they “have zero time to do anything aside from take classes and work on my degree, “yet they find all the coursework beneficial.” Stacy further explained that they were “struggling in life to keep my head above water. Only one instructor has ever been helpful/understanding. I am lucky I am not a quitter.” Scholars such as Golde (1998) and Lovitts (2001) point out that, for undergraduates, when students struggle with balancing school and home lives, they may not have the same learning experience as a traditional student who fully incorporates into the learning and academic community. This research can coalesce with the graduate world as well, as shown in the work by Yusuf et al. (2022). With this, they may not have the support, encouragement, validation, and tools to balance their graduate journey. Girard and Musielak (2012), Cornwall et al. (2019), Lorenzetti et al. (2019), and others examined the stresses of balancing work-home-school lives. They suggested that anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions could lead to early attrition.

Departing Faculty from the University As with any job, people can transition from them anytime. This fluidity is not different in higher education; faculty transition into and out of a university every year, as with any career. These departures can foster “feelings of abandonment” as the student may have aligned their degree, focus, and journey on the continued work with a particular faculty (Brill et al., 2014, p. 29); a few students commented about faculty leaving the university and how it impacted their experience.

Several students, such as Kai, Rowan, Jordan, and Harper, openly shared the lack of communication as it surrounded faculty who departed the university and those who had

disruptions in their committee makeup. It was Harper who expressed that even though they received a simple letter explaining that the faculty had left, the letter created more confusion. Harper expressed that due to the nature and role this person had in their doctoral journey, they would have appreciated that someone “talked to me about what was going on,” a conversation would have been less confusing, both on what was happening as well as the next steps they needed to take as a student. Suggestions to ameliorate this confusion could have been through more transparent communication to departures, providing steps for these students to proceed seamlessly without confusion. Nevertheless, even with this movement, the students who experienced these hiccups in their journey were positive overall. For example, Rowan mentioned, “I have focused on my end goal, and I felt the bumps were more like ripples.”

#### More Online and Other Possibilities

Finally, students mentioned additional outlier-type comments. These comments concerned taking in-person versus online courses, the costs associated with traveling to campus, courses presented in a scaffolded manner, opportunities to present work, and experiences surrounding discrimination.

Some students commented about appreciating taking in-person courses. Nevertheless, it was a deterrent for those traveling to Bozeman: the high costs of driving and winter driving, staying in hotels, and sleep deprivation (affecting their ability to engage fully in class). Students commented that if programming required students to come to campus, more emphasis should be placed on utilizing the in-person group learning experiences. If the purpose of being on campus was to have more of a campus connection, as much as weekends were a good opportunity for the classes, the rest of campus is closed or has limited events to participate in.

Another student, Chale, enjoyed all the courses yet wished more were scaffolded. Scaffolded courses build on each other and are presented in a manner that one project can lead to the next. In this same vein, scaffolded assignments in a class provide a stepping process and purpose. Many programs within the Department of Education provide coursework in a scaffolded manner. However, when they do not, students like Chale feel that un-scaffolded courses lack effectiveness, stating, “You couldn’t really see the purpose.”

Increased opportunities to engage in conferences and experiences appeared to play a minor response theme. A few students, like Remy and Rowan, wished for more opportunities to present and publish their work. They felt that they did not experience the same degree of engagement from faculty in how to publish or present their work as those students who were more connected with their chairs or committees. A few students also commented about forms of discrimination that impacted their experiences.

Chale mentioned they felt discrimination was experienced between full-time students and those who worked and went to school. They stated the following:

I am going to be really blunt with this one. I felt like there were two types of students, so there were those students who were full-time students, and they were just doted on, you know, and anything that they could do to help them. And then there were staff members going through the program ... and they saw us as already employed. You are set. We do not have to invest anything in you ... We were the people making up the numbers. Not the people they saw going forward in our careers and using this in our careers, and it was really interesting seeing the difference between the two.

Another level of discrimination was mentioned by only one participant, stating that the faculty in one course was not respectful to the “Native experience.” Luca commented that they did not feel welcomed by this faculty and had noticed that “other non-Native students had nothing but praises for this [faculty], and I had a negative experience.” Luca traveled a great distance to attend

classes, driving through the night in some cases, arriving exhausted and attempting to be engaged, only to experience comments from faculty that they were not participating enough or not a good “team player” or “good classmate.” This situation led Luca to avoid courses taught by this faculty and stated:

I felt the instructor was not happy I was in [their] class, and some of the comments [they] said only applied to some students. Myself and a fellow Native student felt discriminated against, and overall I would do everything in my power not to take a course from that particular instructor ... I had warned other Natives to be careful if that instructor was teaching a class they were contemplating.

Hearing this student's circumstance, as much as it was an outlier in the comments, it was also crucial to include it as they underscore the reasons for students who are considered non-traditional. Understanding the diverse student body and needs can provide background in growing programs and amending current practices. Developing programming to meet students where they are and understanding their needs and experiences will assist with this (and other departments) learning how to grow with the diverse student body.

Professional Development and Career Focused Support Overall, very few comments came from the participants, mentioning either seeking or participating in other additional programming or support services available to them as students. Even though their comments were brief, it was necessary to mention them as it is worth considering why very few students commented about additional development, training, and support. Was it due to not knowing of their existence? Or perhaps they knew of the opportunities but did not utilize them? I question if there is a disconnect between services provided by the department and the university and how graduate students learn about or utilize them.

One area mentioned was possible ways for the department to consider increasing professional development and other career-focused training opportunities. Some, like Aldis and Remy, felt they needed to work more quickly to move through their program, partially due to the cost of education and the challenges associated with low stipends, not affording them time to take advantage of professional development opportunities, such as conferences. Low graduate student stipends are a systemic issue in many graduate programs at this and other institutions. Even so, outside of the low stipend, the Department of Education could have done more to guide students to these opportunities.

Several students felt they did not take or receive enough guidance on publishing, preparing, and presenting at conferences. Barnes and Randall (2012) referred to this issue, particularly for students in a research-focused university, that students “may not be getting the opportunities to publish, attend professional conferences, develop professional networks or gain teaching experience, all of which are becoming increasingly more important to obtain positions in the professoriate” (p. 68). Research has also indicated that students feel unprepared for the academic job market (Garcia & Yao, 2019). Possibly, there has been less focus in this area due to the decreasing job market in academia; yet, as Barnes and Randall (2012) and others indicated, it would be even more imperative to have increased opportunities due to the shrinking job market.

In 2012, Barnes and Randall discussed the shrinking job market and the need to acknowledge that not all doctoral students may consider academia as a career. Additionally, since there is a shrinking academic career pathway, wouldn't this indicate that the Department of Education should increase professional opportunities for non-academic careers, especially noting that many in this program do not pursue a professoriate path? Co-publishing opportunities and

attending conferences can be career-building, whether in academia or not, and can build confidence, boost communication skills, and increase student engagement (Brill et al., 2014; Hoffmann-Longtin et al., 2021).

Another interesting point was that Aldis stated they would have appreciated other types of training associated with higher education, such as managing “toxic work environments” or “navigating the promotion and tenure process.” The ideas surrounding better guidance in an academic career, particularly topics including toxic environments, could seem curious. Nevertheless, workplace toxicity, bullying behaviors, and dysfunctional leadership in academia are, unfortunately, real issues plaguing universities, as many researchers, such as Gardner (2012) and Smith and Fredricks-Lowman (2020), mention. Keashly and Neuman (2010) pointed out that this toxicity is more problematic in higher education than in general work environments. Possible guidance for future academic careers could include being cognizant of workplace cultures or conflict resolution (Gardner, 2012; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020).

Understanding workplaces, cultures, academic bullying, and more is increasingly important when considering the non-traditional students graduating and entering tenure track positions. Gardner (2012) discusses the workplace environment being different depending on the university, particularly for the non-traditional person, mentioning how gender, race, and age can influence their experiences. Given the changing demographics of higher education, understanding research and potential solutions could be encouraged as part of academic career planning.

Nevertheless, overall guidance on planning for a future tenure track position could be problematic, as each university handles the job market and tenure and promotion differently. Even with that said, a universal understanding of the hiring process, negotiating a position and pay, and preparing and organizing prior to promotion and tenure could give a leg up to students navigating an academic career (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Aldis commented on how they graduated, secured an academic position, and were immediately confronted with an atmosphere they were unprepared to handle. They went on to mention that other training on “transferable skills” could have been helpful in their faculty position at another institution. Therefore, the potential for guidance in assimilating into a tenure-track career could benefit future alums.

Improved Writing Center Resources Another challenge that a particular group of doctoral students mentioned was their need for more assistance in writing. These comments came specifically from international students, all mentioning how academic writing in the United States differed significantly from in their home countries. Remy, Jin, and Kai each mentioned that having someone specifically capable of helping both doctoral and international students would have been helpful. They commented that the writing center provided significant guidance and support for the undergraduate population but felt it was not geared toward working with doctoral students. In Cohort Two, Remy suggested that a course, such as “advanced English classes about academic writing,” could be helpful. Other suggestions surrounded a possible course on academic writing or in a more assertive manner than a passive way as taught in some other countries.

Department of Education Graduate Student Club Only one student, Flynn, commented on the Department of Education Graduate Student Club, indicating they would like more

opportunities to participate. With so little mention of the club in any aspect of the interviews or surveys, it is hard to determine how the club plays a role in the overall aspect of the DSS program. The lack of acknowledgment of the club may have been due to the absence of funding or faculty leadership, the timing of events offered, or the lack of traction from its inception to capture enough interest. COVID-19 may have also played a role in the club's last few years as the doctoral programs shifted to online study, affecting the efforts initiated initially in the club's development. Garcia and Yao (2019) touched on how the online learning format can negatively affect student engagement and lead to a lower sense of belonging and community connections. They also referred to methods to encourage more connections and socialization opportunities, such as “Creating live sessions as well as opportunities for asynchronous connections” and sessions that include strategies such as working with self-doubt and IP (Garcia & Yao, 2019, p. 46).

One in-person event I attended served to be helpful as a guide for newer students. The event comprised a panel discussion on preparing for comprehensive exams; doctoral and master's students were invited to consider the doctoral journey. A few of us had passed comprehensive exams and shared how we prepared, from mapping out the time to write to figuring out work and school balance (for those of us who work full time). The conversation that ensued was lively, and all participants who were starting their journeys commented about the session's helpfulness. Connections like this are precisely what Garcia and Yao (2019) mentioned as helpful for students, as an “opportunity to engage with their peers” (p. 44), especially since socialization opportunities can be more difficult for those in the humanities. The differences between those in STEM fields working in labs may have more organic connections than those in



humanities who are more in isolation, spending time in libraries (Golde, 1998). For these reasons, Hanson et al. (2022) and others suggest formalized and even required meetings and gatherings.

In mentioning the gender differences, I am not saying that graduate clubs should segregate into groups (e.g., race, culture, etc.) but simply that being aware of cultural, gender, and non-traditional influences and how they can have an effect even within a social setting (Hanson et al., 2022). In recognizing how non-traditional students may experience their surroundings and the variety of needs each student can bring into the doctoral journey, academia can be better set with improving overall retention at the graduate level (Hanson et al., 2022).

For example, there are predominately female students in my doctoral program, so the DEGS event I attended was representative of the student population, with about 80% female. This attendance appeared to be very warm and welcoming for everyone, so possibly, as Bostwick and Weinberg (2022) stated, it influenced the meeting. This same event may not have been as effective for other degree-granting programs or with a different population makeup, as Bostwick and Weinberg mentioned that gender influences could affect retention or delay educational journeys.

With that said, Girard and Musielak (2012), Hanson et al. (2022), and Lanesskog et al. (2015) dive into why students engaging with other students are crucial to their success; interactions where students can support each other through discussing everything from academic journeys to personal struggles can aid in the student journey. Hanson et al. (2022) suggested that creating required communities can help those less likely to join independently due to personal, psychological, or cultural reasons. Lorenzetti et al. (2019) reviewed peer mentoring in academia,

finding that peer mentoring groups and opportunities for connections aided student learning in “four domains: academic, psychological, social, and career” (p. 550). They suggested that graduate students were more connected with these relationships, decreased feelings of isolation and anxiety, and improved degree outcomes; that these connections could supplement faculty advising, providing another layer of necessary knowledge sharing (Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

Hanson et al. (2022) and Holley and Caldwell (2012) researched how supportive programming developed at a department level could be scaled more significantly to be implemented for an entire campus. Holley and Caldwell mentioned that “in general, regardless of disciplinary affiliation, participants desired mentors who were available to meet and open to questions,” those who could provide “professional guidance” and who “could relate to what I was going through” (p. 248). They further suggested that relatability was crucial for these connections, opportunities to develop camaraderie with fellow students and create an “inclusive community” (p. 250).

More programming like this could help foster a community and support students interested in and currently starting their journeys. Thus, despite very few comments directed to the doctoral club, based on research, I emphasize encouraging further efforts to create socialization opportunities included within department programming.

### Career and Beyond

As much as some students commented on their ineffective experiences when asked how well prepared they feel for the next stage of their career (Question 12), the response from both cohorts was overwhelmingly positive. Even when students had yet to complete their degrees, they felt that the education they received from the Department of Education’s doctoral degree

programs would help them in the future. Whether it was for academia or a career outside, the department did play a role in preparing students, an aspect necessary as indicated by scholars such as Brill et al. (2014), Hoffmann-Longtin et al. (2021), and Weidman and Stein (2003). I can say that the responses given during the interviews were exciting and enthusiastic, as indicated in the following word cloud, Figure 18.

Figure 18: Word Cloud Indicating Preparedness for a Future Career.



Students mentioned that the overall doctoral experience was positive, with good engagement opportunities. Jordan, Jacinth, Zoe, and Adley felt that they secured and succeeded in their current careers with the education they received. From this, the Department of Education has created a program providing guidance, mentorship, engagement, and a sense of community for student success. Grey mentioned that the experiences in particular classes helped them to better “understand my role as a researcher on reservations and other indigenous communities.” Along this thread, others like Rowan, Grey, and Flynn mentioned their new abilities to perform research but also alluded to soft skills, such as listening to others, asking better, and clarifying

questions - all came from the courses in the program. This point can indicate the advancement that the Department of Education has undergone in the area of preparing students, as Hoffmann-Longtin et al. (2021) indicated that for many degree-granting programs, “teaching and research assistantships often do not socialize graduate students for careers outside the professoriate” (p. 121).

Students felt that the skills they received were transferable to any future career; the knowledge is valuable. Deven indicated that their learned skills can move with them and will “complement my daily professional experiences. I have the opportunity to complete relevant and authentic research related to specific issues we are tackling in our district.” Finally, students who have not completed yet, such as Basile, Rowan, Stacy, Flynn, and Adley, felt prepared for the next steps in their careers, whatever they may be.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a summary of the results from the interviews and surveys of 25 doctoral students in the Department of Education at Montana State University while using Astin’s (1984) Student Involvement Theory and Rendón’s (1994) Validation Theory, as well as Weidman’s (1989; 2001) Socialization Framework, as a basis of understanding methods to mitigate retention. This research aimed to explore the following questions: What experiences did students recognize as contributions to their academic, social, and personal well-being, and what aspects of the DSS did they identify as helping them complete their doctoral degree? In addition, the research also answered the following sub-research questions: How did the DSS prepare students for the academic expectations and rigor of the doctorate, how did it provide socialization, and how did the DSS affect students’ well-being?

After culling the data, four main themes appeared: Programming for Doctoral Success; Misaligned Opportunities; Faculty and Chairing: The Divergent Student Experience; The Doctoral Community: A Necessity; Doctoral Journey: Perceptions, Suggestions, and Overall Feelings. Overall, the doctoral students participating in this research mainly conveyed positive doctoral experiences within the Department of Education and with the DSS program. When comparing the cohorts, there are many similarities in needs and experiences, yet there are clear areas of improvement with current practices. The participants' responses and themes supported previous research on doctoral students' success, as presented in Chapter Two.

Chapter Five will discuss these findings and how they support answering the research questions through the literature, theories, and framework. Finally, this next chapter will also provide the implications of this study, recommendations for amending current practices, and implications for future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

## DISCUSSION

What ripens passion is the conviction that your work matters.

— Duckworth, 2016, p. 91

This study surrounded the Doctoral System of Support (DSS) implemented by the Department of Education at Montana State University (MSU) in Fall 2017 and drove to uncover the system's efficacy from the students' perspectives. The research followed qualitative research methods focusing on doctoral students attending the MSU Department of Education between 2014 and 2021. The length of years selected identified a group of postgraduate students who had taken some newly implemented courses or programming (Cohort Two, beginning in Fall 2017) and those who may not have (Cohort One, starting in Fall 2014) to compare and evaluate the value of the DSS program.

The research questions focused on student perceptions, such as understanding what experiences students recognized as contributing to their academic, social, and personal well-being. This instrumental case study was based on a transformative framework using a phenomenological approach, intending to consider new information to improve current practices and help others on campus and outside the university implement similar practices (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). By creating a research study that mirrored other researchers who utilized case studies, such as Craddock et al. (2011), Garcia and Yao (2019), Hanson et al. (2022), and Holley and Caldwell (2012), I was able to express in detail, the narrative experiences of the doctoral students within the Department of Education. The case study uncovered questions about the department's processes and gaps in the methods used.

This research utilized two overarching questions with three sub-questions to explore how doctoral students perceived their educational journey. The research questions answered in the following section were as follows:

Research question 1: What experiences did students recognize as contributions to their academic, social, and personal well-being?

Research question 2: What aspects of the DSS did they identify as helping them complete their doctoral degree?

Sub-question A: How did the DSS prepare students for the academic expectations and rigor of the doctorate?

Sub-question B: How did it provide socialization?

Sub-question C: How did the DSS affect students' well-being?

This new knowledge can clarify current practices and provide improvements as the Department of Education moves forward. This information also imparts ideas for including similar retention-type programming across the Montana State University campus, particularly in what students find essential to their doctoral success. This research could help other universities consider implementing similar supportive programming focusing on retention.

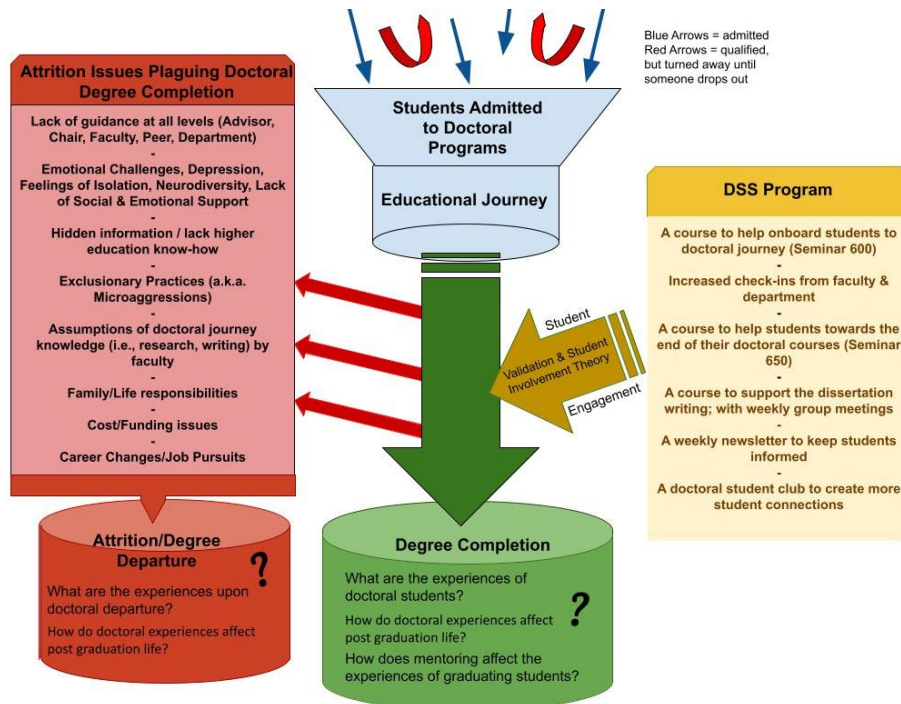
### Summary of the Results

This case study aligned with the current literature surrounding dissertation supportive programming, noting that support and validation in an encouraging environment can aid in student success (Brill et al., 2014; Ewbank, 2016; Gardner, 2013; Lanesskog et al., 2015; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Patel, 2017; Sandoval, 2018). This research aimed to identify whether the

DSS program initiated by the Department of Education effectively provided an environment that encouraged greater student retention and completion and provided thoughtful insight from the student perspective to understand the doctoral journey in today's climate at MSU.

As recognized, programming such as the DSS can solve some attrition at the doctoral level, leading to diminished student departures. The journey of a doctoral student can be impacted by their encounters and experiences along the way, as shown in the DSS Conceptual Framework introduced and discussed in Chapter One, noting why validation, student involvement, and engagement can be necessary for their success (See Repetition of Figure 2). By uncovering the student experience, other departments and programs can learn what could be added or amended in their current practices for increased student retention. The findings in this research are organized by research question while utilizing the themes uncovered.

Repetition of Figure 2: DSS Conceptual Framework





Research Question 1 The first research question asked what experiences students recognized as contributing to their academic, social, and personal well-being. This question encompassed the themes of the overall doctoral journey and those surrounding faculty and chairing, which were also answered through the effects of the DSS programming. Overall, students in the doctoral program in the Department of Education had positive feelings surrounding the education and training they received. Their perceptions and suggestions align with the research on student retention, wellness, guidance, validation, student support, and other measures. Nevertheless, despite the overwhelming positivity, there were suggestions for program improvements.

As research by Craddock et al. (2011) and Rendon (1994) have indicated, the effects of imposter syndrome can affect doctoral students at various times; therefore, this study indicated that the DSS met many of the requirements of providing clear communication from faculty and advising chairs, as well as support and validation to ameliorate student confusion. Additionally, Gardner (2010) indicated, many students expressed that their socialization and community begin at the start of their journey and continue through to the dissertation phase. Researchers have suggested that students who receive clear academic guidance can experience more robust social engagements; knowing there is a supportive faculty ultimately leads to higher completion rates (Hanson et al., 2022; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Gardner & Holley, 2011).

As the Department of Education is a unique program comprising many people who work full-time, flexibility in programming, meeting times, course offerings, and more appeared to be mentioned by many students. Individualized support, opportunities for personalized engagements, and encouragement are aspects of doctoral student success, as mentioned by Rigler

et al. (2017), Lovitts (2001), and Kumar and Johnson (2017). Students valued the guidance faculty provided and the unique and personalized engagements they received and indicated as necessary for their doctoral journey. These sentiments are also supported by research on doctoral student success (Pfund et al., 2016; Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

However, doctoral students sought certain elements and were equally frustrated and disappointed when those specific needs were not received or experienced (Gardner, 2010, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Lovitts, 2001). They expressed discontent if there were unclear expectations, an incompatibility between the student and the advisory chair, or a lack of mentoring (Barnes & Randall, 2012). Students who did not have these engagements felt they missed out and did not receive the guidance and connection they felt they should have had, and even faltered in their journey, also supported by literature from Gardner (2009, 2010), Hanson et al. (2022), Rigler et al. (2017), Barnes and Randall (2012), Pfund et al. (2016), Lovitts (2001) and others. There is also a disconnect with the student experience; some had stellar relationships and connections with their advising chairs, and others experienced their journeys more rote. Dissertation chairs play a crucial role during students' doctoral journey (Brill et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017); therefore, students were distraught when there was a disruption in this relationship.

Understanding the needs of students should not be assumed, as their needs vary by experience, “cultural capital” (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 79), and personal journeys and well-being (Gardner, 2010, 2013; Lovitts, 2001; Mehta et al., 2011; Pfund et al., 2016). This lack of connection could emphasize that faculty have insufficient knowledge of how to support students, leading to the potential need for further training and development when onboarding faculty, mainly due to the importance of this relationship for student success (Crede & Borrego, 2014;

Evans et al., 2018; Rigler et al., 2017). Typically, when surveyed, faculty indicated that students leave due to being ill-prepared and suffering from personal problems (Gardner, 2009).

Additionally, Gardner (2009) and Lovitts (2001) show that some faculty feel that the student needs to be more focused, motivated, and driven. However, recall that these are the same aspects associated with stress, anxiety, and imposter syndrome. Rather than addressing student departures and needs more knowledgeably, students leave their programs. The current methods are archaic ways to address this attrition issue.

This research aligns with the literature and helps to narrow the understanding that proper and timely guidance and connection with faculty and advising chairs are critical to doctoral student success, academically and personally. This study showed that students appreciated the faculty and their teaching methods that could meet their personal, family, work, and life needs. The students expressed that their academic, social, and personal well-being appeared to be considered throughout their journey.

Research Question 2 This research question was directed at understanding what aspects of the DSS they identify as helping them complete their doctoral degree. This question was answered by reviewing the central themes directed to the DSS programming. Research has suggested that confusion at the doctoral level may begin at the inception of a doctoral program, leading to potentially unnecessary departures (Davis, 2012; Brill et al., 2014; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Hanson et al., 2022).

The courses the Department of Education developed intended to decrease confusion by developing environments that may generate validating and supporting experiences (Astin, 1984; Rendon, 1994, 2006). As Gardner (2010), Lovitts (2001), Kumar and Coe (2017), Gardner and

Holley (2011), and others have indicated, when doctoral students are prepared and have supportive environments that promote community and connection, they can thrive. Even when it came to the dissertation writing phase, some students embraced the opportunity for a community of writers who could support and help hold them accountable for their writing, finding they struggled with their writing without the course. Research by Lovitts (2001, 2021), Brill and colleagues (2014), Gardner (2009), and others have pointed out that many doctoral students struggle at the point of dissertation writing due to confusion on how to write it, the isolation of working so solo on their projects, and the lack of guidance many need. Additionally, graduate students can lack the “ability, drive, focus, motivation, or initiative” to complete their dissertation; the root causes underlying these issues are “imposter syndrome, stress, and anxiety” (Gardner, 2009, p. 100). Courses such as a group writing experience can bring a student back into a fold of support, address anxiety and self-doubt, and provide guidance at a fragile time of their doctoral journey.

The findings overwhelmingly indicated and aligned with current literature that students expressed that the courses were valuable, created the community they sought, and provided the guidance they needed as part of their doctoral journey. Research by Barnes and Randall (2012), Cornwall et al. (2019), Craddock et al. (2011), Garcia and Yao (2019), and others have emphasized the importance of initial and ongoing support for doctoral students, even with small, confusing experiences, they can spiral out of control and lead to departing their degree simply through self-doubt they may experience.

Research Sub-Question A This first sub-question asked how the DSS prepared students for the academic expectations and rigor of the doctorate. As mentioned in response to research

questions one and two, the research aligned with the literature on the needs of particular programming to foster community, provide academic training and guidance, and create an environment to support well-being. The DSS programming, specifically the seminar courses and the group dissertation writing course, were designed to guide students through their doctoral journey rather than assuming students came into the program fully formed and knew how to be doctoral students.

This study appreciated that students arrive at the doctorate with varied backgrounds. With this knowledge, it is prudent to recognize that some students lack the academic backgrounds or cultural upbringing and, therefore, can work harder to understand the system and processes (Gardner, 2013). With this understanding, it was apparent that the Department of Education at MSU did not make assumptions about their incoming students. This research showed that the department aligned with the literature on how best to prepare students for the expectations and rigor of a doctoral journey.

The initial Seminar 600 course was foundational to uncover what was needed to be a doctoral student within the Department of Education, from securing a committee and advisory chair to performing research to writing the literature review (a significant aspect of the dissertations within doctorates in the department). In this, by providing a course to dispel the myth of securing committee members and advisor chairs, Seminar 600 reflected the importance of the literature on doctoral retention. In 2022, Hanson et al. stated that the “second most common reason for dropout was a mismatch between the dissertation chair and candidate” (p. 255). Furthering this, Barry et al. (2018), Pfund et al. (2016), and others have suggested that faculty relationships and, mainly, advising chairs are crucial to student success, and the stress in

these relationships can be substantial. As mentioned, students' success and progress are affected when chairs are disconnected, unhelpful, and do not provide the guidance students need.

In addition to nurturing the connections between faculty and students, Seminar 600 provided foundational programming, such as writing a literature review. Literature reviews encompass great detail in uncovering past information and research surrounding the dissertation topic. For the dissertations in the Department of Education, the literature review is a summary in chapter one, followed by a comprehensive, stand-alone chapter (Chapter Two of this dissertation). Guidance in uncovering the most relevant research and tracking this research can be messy. Streamlined methods to find current research and record the details of this information are vital. For example, this document was used throughout this dissertation and will guide future research in similar contexts and by other individuals researching a similar subject.

Additionally, Seminar 600 also allowed for the humanity of the journey through conversations on expectations, past doctoral students, doctoral candidates, and other recently graduated doctoral students to share their journeys. These experiences underscored the messy nature of data gathering; they shared their highs and lows, and these sharing times started the process for students' sense of belonging.

Further, Seminar 650 provided guidance on preparing for comprehensive exams and the dissertation writing phase. This research showed that students found this coursework helped them in what could be the second phase of a doctoral journey, a time when, typically, students are more isolated and working solo. As mentioned by Lovitts (2001; 2008), Barnes and Randall (2012), Lorenzetti et al. (2019), and others, this is a crucial time for student success, as confusion, self-doubt, and anxiety increase when students are not engaging as frequently with

their peers. The social support that the DSS and programming implemented at critical times in their doctoral students' journey provided the guidance, community, and support students needed.

Finally, the group dissertation writing course (690) was implemented to be almost a continuation of Seminar 650 in bridging community and dispelling any myths or confusion on the next 'phase' of the doctoral journey. The course allowed students to continue to foster community and engagements and provide continued faculty-led guidance (particularly for some populations who need more support) rather than have the students work in isolation (Cornwall et al., 2019; Hanson, 2022). Dissertation writing typically occurs when students work independently, meeting with their advisory chair. The dissertation writing phase can take one semester or several years, as in the case of many students in the Department of Education. Viewing the doctoral journey from an aerial perspective, you can see the first half of the student's education as a time of taking courses and engaging with various faculty and fellow students. Then, the second half, almost equally as long, is a solitary experience. As iterated, these isolating experiences wreak havoc on doctoral students' minds and can lead to departures (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Brill et al., 2014; Hanson, 2022; Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

Lukianoff and Haidt (2019) mentioned new issues surrounding depression and anxiety within higher education that have come about over the last decade. They postulate that students' sense of belonging may be affected by how they interact with the world, in that a student who has more depressive experiences spends significantly more time on mobile devices or computers and less time having personal or social interactions. Even though this research focused on undergraduate students, the correlation could also be made for the doctoral experience since these same students may enter the graduate world. Doctoral students are caught between the

isolation of their work and their time on electronic devices; neither may provide enough to counter their insecurities, which grow during their studies.

Therefore, in answering the question of preparation for the academic expectations and rigor of the doctorate, the courses implemented in the DSS provided the aspects needed for doctoral success. When taken at the most opportunistic time in the students' journey, the courses effectively created community and provided the support and training students needed for success. As will be mentioned in the response to the research question, Sub-question C, there were aspects of DSS that were counter to their underlying focus.

Research Sub Question B This sub-question surrounded how the DSS program provided socialization. Overwhelmingly, the participants expressed how the community was essential to them from the beginning of their journey, underscoring the importance of the onboarding course of Seminar 600. Holley and Gardner (2012), Crede and Borrego (2014), and others discussed the importance of socialization encounters and community connections, especially for first-year students. In their 2011 research on imposter syndrome and doctoral students, Craddock et al. mentioned that “many doctoral students experience intense feelings of intellectual inadequacy and subsequently worry that their professors or peers will expose them as academic frauds” (p. 430). Therefore, a sense of community can directly decrease confusion surrounding expectations, foster encouraging, validating, and supportive environments, and diminish unhelpful competitiveness.

Connecting students at the initial phase of a student's doctoral journey through a cohort is essential. The student encounters encourage socialization and support peer-to-peer interactions, which are instrumental in student success (Girard & Musielak, 2012; Holley & Caldwell, 2012).



However, participants mentioned that although they experienced organic connections, which are encouraged and effective in the graduate education process, they could have benefitted from a structured or organized cohort-type connection.

Another area to foster student engagement and connections was the formation of the Department of Education Graduate Student (DEGS) club. A club is an ideal source for socialization and a space to develop peer connections and foster supportive networks, aspects that can substantially affect student persistence in doctoral education (Bostwick & Weinberg, 2022; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Girard & Musielak, 2012; Lanesskog et al., 2015). The club was created to be run by graduate students without involvement by the department, outside of the club's inclusion within the department-based newsletter to student emails. This means that the graduate students would be required to build a community. Therefore, even though a club could be an excellent source of community, most of the study participants did not mention the club.

Again, this may be due to the reliance on student involvement. Regardless, and interpreting from my lens, I only noticed mention of the club in the last year of my doctoral journey. I can also allude to other reasons that could have impacted the direction and programming of DEGS, such as a need for more information on the club - including the website, a faculty aligned with continuing leadership and guidance, ramifications associated with COVID-19 and the shift from in-person to online learning, or the lack of events to entice participation.

Social communities were also an aspect of Bostwick and Weinberg's (2022) and Hanson and colleagues (2022) research centered on minority groups, focusing on female doctoral students and persistence. Bostwick and Weinber (2022) mentioned that women could persist

longer when they have more female peers, stating “that women are less competitive, especially when competing against men, so that women in cohorts with more women may exert more effort studying and on assignments and exams” (p. 417). This unique research by Bostwick and Weinberg (2022) could encourage more social connections within the Department of Education, particularly as the student makeup is predominantly female.

Doctoral students are in a unique phase in their educational and career journeys; they are at a point where they are expected to be independent learners, yet they still need support from others (Gardner, 2010; Hanson et al., 2022). As Gardner (2010) mentioned, “the inherent ambiguity of the graduate school experience makes the necessary transitions even more difficult to comprehend and master. Compounded with these contradictions are the difficulties experienced by individual students who may have specific needs” (Gardner, 2010, p. 76).

Previous literature examined the impact of socialization, validation, and other engagements as being vital for students’ success, and this research contributes to the current body of knowledge in this understanding (Davis, 2012; Brill et al., 2014; Garcia & Yao, 2019; Hanson et al., 2022; Sandoval, 2018). Therefore, this research identified, aligned with current research, and underscored the need to create more socialization opportunities, which should have an increased focus when considering retention initiatives.

Research Sub-Question C This final research question sought to discover how the DSS affected students’ well-being. As mentioned in the previous sections, this study uncovered the best opportunities to encourage and foster student connections and support students’ well-being by programmatically incorporating connections within a student's journey. Nevertheless, as positive as many of the student experiences were, the section will mention the converse of these

experiences. This research uncovered specific areas that worked against students, almost as a disservice to their experience.

Although literature pointed to the benefits of supportive course-based programming, it lacked clarity on the student experience, especially if particular programming was out of sync with when students needed it. For Seminar 600, some students missed the best opportunity to take the course, such as in their first term of doctoral study. Instead, some took the seminar classes a term or years after they should have. This out-of-sync programming led to frustration, missed opportunities for connections and community building, and stimulated academic confusion, precisely the opposite of the intention of the course. Students who missed or took the courses out of sync expressed needing more fundamental training, structure, and specific foundational skills to succeed. Underscoring the need for socialization and guidance at the most opportune time, Weidman et al. (2001), Garcia and Yao (2019), and others mention how creating community, helping overcome imposter syndrome, and fostering a sense of belonging at the onset of a graduate program, allow for more robust connections with peers and faculty; students with Seminar 650 also expressed similar experiences. Golde (1998), Hanson et al. (2022), and Lovitts (2001) mentioned that these connections and feelings of being integrated are vital for student retention, showing that they can lead to decreased attrition. Interestingly, though, no matter which cohort experienced the course, even when the students' perceptions were of frustration that they missed out, they also indicated that they could see that the course would be valuable if taken at the correct time.

Finally, as much as a dissertation group writing course could benefit some students, this research highlights that it should remain an option for students. Requiring attendance may

benefit some students but may be ineffective for others. Students could express their needs in a more comprehensive advising relationship and meetings, and advisors could create a better-aligned program. For example, regular and ongoing advising could uncover which writing credits a student would better perform under, based on their unique needs, rather than assuming one-size-fits-all programming.

Research by Crede and Borrego (2014), Bañuelos and Flores (2021), Rendón (1994, 2006, 2021), and others underscore the need for a university to note student differences and serve to remind academia of the persistent inequality that permeates social and academic structures within the university. With this, we can understand that even at the doctoral level, students must be treated as individuals in their learning environment. Rendón (2021) reiterated this when they discussed a “false narrative that permeates higher education” (p.8), suggesting that academia still feels students need to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps and succeed on their own with minimal or no support” (p. 8); yet research shows the contrary.

### Limitations and Delimitations of Findings

Limitations and delimitations were provided earlier in Chapter One and Chapter Three. The limitations focused on potential gaps within the research, whereas the delimitations discussed the transferability of the research. After conducting the research, several amendments to the limitations were noted, and confirmations in the delimitations are mentioned below.

### Amended Limitations

This research highlighted initial limitations, such as participant perceptions too early in the program, responses diluted due to time, and the potential of imprecise or vague responses due

to fear of some penalty. As much as I initially felt that students may not have been honest due to fear of retribution, I did not feel that was an issue in the student's responses. Students appeared not to embellish or hold back either negative or positive experiences; it was my impression that the students truly understood that this research could serve to help others and responded accordingly. It may be that they provided content to avoid some type of retaliation, but based on the responses received, I do not feel that was the case. Additionally, the concern of students sharing their experiences and potentially swaying their views was unwarranted; I believe that the commingling of the students in the department did not bias their responses.

Nevertheless, I did not anticipate the lack of response by some students when asked about the three particular courses. Upon further exploration, these students indicated N/A in the survey or did not expand on their answers for several reasons. The primary reason for the lack of explanation for the dissertation writing was that the student had yet to reach that stage in their degree. Other reasons for the lack of response or limited comments were that they may have taken the 690 Dissertation but worked solely with their advisor, and even the question prompt did not facilitate an opinion or view. Another area uncovered was that the student changed to a program that did not require a dissertation (the Educational Specialist degree). Finally, some students needed clarification on the rubric number, particularly with the Seminar 650 course, as it appears the course ran through several rubric changes over the past 10+ years. This reminds us that internal to the academic system, we use many acronyms unknown by the outside community or incoming students, so brief but clear course content descriptions are ideal.

### Delimitations

Delimitations of this study surrounded the population of doctoral students in the Department of Education (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The students came from a particular period prior to the implementation of the DSS to the time after (Fall 2014 through Fall 2021). This method initially questioned whether a robust response would be obtained, yet it provided a large sample of twenty-five respondents. The participants provided compelling and vital responses through the surveys and interviews. This research method yielded significant insight into the DSS, and, as much as the Department of Education differs from other campus units, the sample does allow for some transferability to other units on campus, even while noting cultural and teaching differences within academic departments (Mills & Gay, 2019; Saldaña, 2021).

### Recommendation for Future Research

This research shows the effects of DSS programming, both in those successful elements and areas for improvement. The study underscores the need for additional campus-focused research to identify departments' needs surrounding their unique attrition issues. This process can build into a campus-wide initiative to understand all students' needs, not only the current focus on the undergraduate student experience.

1. Further research could surround the students' experiences in comparing students' participation in programming, such as the DSS, with students who did not. More can be learned about how students navigated their graduate experience. This same group could also be studied for post-graduation life and how these individuals shifted into careers. This research could uncover doctoral student needs, how they differ based on the

discipline they are attracted to or pursue, and how those needs affect their educational journey and career choices/outcomes. There could be similarities in the students' needs and experiences and vast differences in mindset and needs.

2. Continued research could focus on faculty culture in academia, their views on students, their leadership styles, how they work with students, and more. This study uncovered that the experiences students had differed, even when engaged with the same faculty (an insight only I knew). In acknowledging research suggested by those like Smith and Fredricks-Lowman (2020) and Keashly and Neuman (2010), we can better understand how faculty affect those around them and work with the students they serve. As Rendón (2006) suggests, “we must push for the transformation of societal structures, and we must interrogate institutional structures, including how they privilege some while excluding others” (p. 19).
3. As we know, attrition in post-graduate education is a regular occurrence. Nevertheless, it is curious that I received surprising responses when I spoke about this research to those at MSU and even in off-campus environments. I have heard everything from faculty expressing surprise that there is an attrition issue to others re-iterating the sink-or-swim or deficient funding scenarios. Therefore, further research could be conducted at MSU, focusing on faculty views regarding doctoral student attrition. Are they aware of the student departures in their academic units? How are they approaching advising their students? Are they using the same methods they were given, or are they utilizing new knowledge in advising approaches? Do their advising methods match their students' needs? What are their impressions of those who depart? Are they continuing to mirror

those of researchers such as Gardener (2009, 2010), Holley and Caldwell (2012), Lovitts, 2001; 2008), and Rigler et al. (2017)? Are faculty aware of the more effective ways to work with students to be more successful, such as the research by Lovitts (2008), Yusuf et al. (2022), and Tenenbaum et al. (2001) has indicated? How do our faculty view the doctoral student experience: sink, swim, or supportive? Any initiative needs buy-in from all parties for an idea to move forward; understanding all people's perspectives, not just the students, will be imperative if a retention initiative is implemented.

4. If mentoring, advising, and community creation are so effective in retention initiatives, as studied by countless researchers for the past several decades, why is it not implemented more in higher education? This question could pair with understanding the faculty, but it can also lead to understanding more about the academic culture on university campuses. As Lovitts (2008) mentioned, advising can be the make and break between those who complete their degrees and those who drop out. They mentioned that the student may not know how to ask for help, but the “advisor does not mentor them properly and push them through” (p. 321) at the level they need. What are the differences between universities with higher retention of their doctoral students? What are those universities doing to impact their retention?
5. Future research can focus on uncovering student potential more organically rather than only relying on typical methods of entrance criteria, such as grades or testing. Recommendations of research focusing on the effectiveness of the use of resilience scales, such as those presented in 2018 by Sandoval, or further research on the use of evaluation systems, such as the Educational Testing Services Personal Potential Index to



aid in uncovering student potential for graduate work and also for increasing diversity in doctoral education (Lovitts, 2008; Klieger, Bochenek, Ezzo, Holtzman, Cline, & Olivera-Aguilar, 2022). In understanding students' needs, universities could continuously flex and adapt to the changing society. These are ideas also presented in Duckworth's (2016) work on grit. What traits do people have that tend to be more successful in higher education? How could this be cultivated and addressed for those interested in post-graduate work? What if more attention was given to encouraging these resilient, tenacious traits, as was given to learning academic pursuits?

### Recommendations for Future Practice

This research underscores and aligns with the literature that there is value in courses such as Seminar 600, Seminar 650, and Group Dissertation Writing. However, the study uncovered areas that could be improved if further implementation of this programming type should occur. The following are recommendations for future practices surrounding improvements to current DSS programming, additional focus on creating a sense of community, and implementation across campus.

#### Improving the Current Programming

The research indicated some areas that could be improved in the current DSS programming. The areas of recommendation surround the timing and requirements of the courses, considering alternative dissertation writing to meet students' needs, improving course descriptions for better clarity, and further attention to creating a sense of community. These recommendations focus on key findings in this research, supported by the literature, such as the

need to address student imposter phenomenon, self-doubt and differences (emotional support and validation), and increased focus on creating community (sense of community).

### Course Timing and Requirements

This research indicated that taking the course a year or more later than the intended timing created more frustration and anxiety for students, which was the opposite of the purpose of the onboarding course. By better planning and advising, the student would take the course in the intended term and experience less anxiety and frustration. There could be a case of auto-enrolling students into Seminar 600; however, what happens with students who started courses before being admitted into the doctoral program? Should allowing students to take one to three courses before being admitted to a program be ceased? Should there be rote courses that students can take to ‘try out’ the doctoral waters so they do not miss the most opportunistic time to take Seminar 600? Additionally, a recommendation could be that an alternative class, or programming, is developed for students who missed taking Seminar 600 in the first term of their doctoral program.

### Alternative Dissertation Writing to Meet Student Needs

The group doctoral dissertation course was also valuable for many students, yet some recommendations were noted for future practice. It was apparent that the group writing times were only conducive for some students; therefore, developing alternative times could be effective, including options for both online and in-person to meet the needs of the ever-changing student demographics. Additionally, for some, the group course created more anxiety and frustration due to the timing of the course (i.e., the time of day offered), students comparing their journey with others, or a mismatch to the students' most productive time to write. Others became

frustrated when they were further along in their writing than newer doctoral students, feeling that the course needed to provide them with what they needed for their particular spot in their journey. Then, some were simply unaware that there was a group meeting. Therefore, a recommendation would be to continue offering the group format as an alternative to the solo-advisor-led writing experiences but not make it required. Keeping the dual offering would be a flexible solution to meet the needs of the students. Finally, a suggestion for solo, advisor-led dissertation writing should align with student needs, with regularly scheduled meetings and projections to keep students progressing and ensure that they use practical and effective writing approaches that continue their progression (Hanson, 2022).

#### Improving Course Descriptions for Better Clarity

This research also showed that as much as the seminar classes and group dissertation writing courses were valuable, implementing a more comprehensive outline or course description could improve clarity over the course's purpose. By having more transparency on courses, the students understand the need to take a course, such as Seminar 600, at the beginning of their journey; for example, explaining the nature of the course and how it helps foster a cohort connection. However, some students also needed clarification on the purpose of Seminar 650 or the group writing courses, the purpose of peer-sharing papers, and how the programming scaffolds with each course and writing assignments to slowly build toward the dissertation.

Further, doctoral courses can better explain the nature of the courses and how to tackle the work needed for each course. As found through this research, some students could not complete the coursework and reading assignments. Some faculty appeared to address and teach how to manage the workload or provide context to study techniques, yet others did not. Faculty

may assume that by the doctoral level, students should anticipate or know how to ‘be’ a doctoral student. It is with these assumptions that some students are lost. Regardless of whether students have a master's degree or have a background in research, their foundational training may have been different than needed in this new journey. Therefore, it is recommended that all doctoral students receive structured guidance. This guidance can come from the advising chair, faculty in courses, or possibly further context built into the initial seminar course. It may be that some faculty in the department will need more formal direction and training on this process, utilizing sound mentoring tips from fellow faculty in the department or through research by many others focused on methods for student success, such as Brill et al. (2014), DeJong (2016), and Ewbank (2016).

#### Emotional Support, Guidance, and Validation

Research has indicated that students' needs differ based on their backgrounds, social and personal experiences, and many other factors. The research shows that fostering successful relationships is associated with positive outcomes, as indicated in research on undergraduate and graduate students (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001, 2008; Tenenbaum et al., 2001; Tinto, 1993). However, the process of enacting the change at the graduate level has yet to be adopted. The lack of adoption may be due to the differing natures of academic fields and how students secure advising chairs. Whichever way students secure advisors, what happens when there is a disconnect between the guidance they need and what they receive? The ongoing practice of misaligned guidance sees students leaving programs, with faculty citing the reasons for departures as not having to do with misaligned or disconnected relationships (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001, 2008). As mentioned by Tenenbaum et al. (2001), “the more psychosocial help

received, the more satisfaction students expressed with their advisors and with their graduate experience” (p. 338). Students who experienced a lack of chair connection have me wondering about faculty onboarding into their roles as advisors and chairing. I also wonder how students can be guided to seek chairs they connect with and foster those relationships or how they may be directed to seek alternative advising chairs. Another question concerns best practices for the chair-student relationships and other methods (in addition to the DSS) for students to experience connections and a sense of belonging in their chairs from the onset of their doctoral journey.

In these differences, viewing students through their needs is essential for student retention. Recommendations for future practices within the Department of Education include appreciating and respecting student differences to address their unique needs. Going further on this, to ensure that the seminar courses and dissertation writing courses build in conversations surrounding the student's doubts and anxieties, addressing the realities of the spectrum of emotions and feelings students have when they embark on a doctoral journey. Through identifying past doctoral student experiences, teaching the newer group of entering students the highs and lows of the experience can better prepare them to acknowledge that they may need help while also providing the tools to seek it when and if the need arises.

The research shows how students seek support and encouragement through validating experience, both within a department and potentially through mentors and advisors; yet, they may be unable to work through varied emotions during their journey if they do not receive that support (Hansen et al., 2022). When students indicated they were more anxious, stressed, and felt doubt or other imposter-related symptoms, the acknowledgment of their feelings as being real subsided the feelings. In considering research surrounding help-seeking behaviors in doctoral

students, do Amaral (2022) correlates that the connections mentors have with their students are foundational in student success.

A further recommendation can be to identify those students who struggle and may not reach out to faculty or a student support office for assistance. Identifying students in need could be handled through regular advising meetings or an onboarding interview to learn more about the students entering the program. This brings me back to my previous career as a wellness educator and a coach; consistent check-ins based on my client's needs resulted in effectiveness for their personal needs. These students could also be provided specific training to build resiliency, attend more required advisor meetings, or participate in socialization programming (more on this in the next section), elements that may provide the structure and support students need from the onset of their academic careers.

#### Additional Focus on Creating a Sense of Community

This study underscored the students' need and desire for community. As mentioned, the Department of Education created organic opportunities for community building by typically admitting students into their doctoral program in the fall term. However, some students may have started before the fall term as non-degrees or missed the fall onboarding course, so the opportunity to connect organically with their 'cohorts' was missed. The recommendation is for the department to amend its processes one step further and create an actual cohort with each new group of doctoral students.

Whether students are online or in person, a cohort meeting could be implemented to ensure they connect and collaborate if desired. The idea of the cohort is to connect students, but

it is up to the students to foster these connections. Whether students continue to meet or not, the department can ensure the students know who their cohort is to foster a sense of community.

Also, the student club, the Department of Education Graduate Student (DEGS) group, could use the formation of cohorts to instill further community connections. Through utilizing the list of cohorts, additional club activities could address questions surrounding the stages within a doctoral journey, highlighting confusion points, acknowledging the realities of self-doubt and imposter-related symptoms, and sticking points and processes to aid students on their journey through peer-to-peer connections. As mentioned, one training I participated in appeared beneficial to future students preparing for comprehensive exams. I could have used the same training myself at that time during my doctoral journey.

Additionally, there could be an opportunity to incorporate the DEGS group into the curriculum from the start of a doctoral student's journey. The DEGS could be pre-set with more explicit guidance of what will happen in the club, from subjects to meeting times to peer mentoring built within the program. An example of a required program for socialization and support is at the University of South Carolina within the Department of Physical Education. The program contained a contract between the department and entering students, elected positions, faculty advisors, and detailed meetings of frequency and topics; it had students participating throughout their entire doctoral journey.

It could be argued that a club or socialization created as a requirement deters from the idea of organic socialization opportunities; however, as research by Hanson et al. (2022) indicates, more formal programming connects students who may be more challenged with creating or attending non-required meetings, such as those who already suffer from elements of

IP, are non-traditional, minorities, first-generation. Department involvement may be needed for this engagement, even though the initial idea was for more organic, student-led programming. Hanson et al. (2022) went on to explain the development of “formal systems” that can guide and train students through appreciating their “roles and responsibilities in completing their degree” (p. 241), which can then encourage organic socialization as it primarily creates opportunities for students to connect that are not within the context of the classroom.

Finally, there could be more acceptance for faculty to show the realities of the doctoral journey through their lens. By sharing their personal experiences when they embarked on their doctoral journey, talking about their highs and lows and possible confusion, they show the humanity behind their experience. This recommendation comes from the stresses students feel when they may feel they do not belong, that they are outsiders. By showing the human behind the faculty, the students can better see themselves in the faculty and that they do belong in academia if they choose.

### Recommendations for Implementation Across Campus

This research focused on the doctoral program in the Department of Education, yet the recommendations can be made for implementation across MSU or other institutions. The suggestions in this next section can surround the utilization of current practices; however, it would be to better understand those units without simply assuming what was needed or missing.

#### Identifying Attrition Through Awareness

The first recommendation would be to identify the level of awareness of attrition within the department or program. As discussed throughout this research, there will always be attrition



within any degree program, but the first step is to recognize whether there is a retention issue. Then, there is a focus on change by identifying some key areas that could be mitigated by programming and services. This initial phase is also essential to address the feelings faculty may have or hold onto based on their experiences within academia, personal, cultural, or social stance, or journeys into academia. Acknowledging these can impact and affect student outcomes.

It would also be essential to note the differences in the degree types on the campus and that a one-size-fits-all support model may not be the answer. The programming that occurred at the Department of Education could be used as a base framework for other departments; however, knowing how each program is structured, how they proceed with advising, program planning, and more would be necessary for more departments to implement programming to meet theirs and their students' needs. To move a campus into a healthier community of support, we must address how we all arrived in academia. A healthier and more supportive, validating, and inclusive community involves focusing on the positive and supportive journeys our faculty experienced and removing the legacy of the sink-or-swim narrative.

#### Utilization of Current Systems

Departments are stretched thin, so implementing future programming or additional courses like the DSS would need strategic planning. It may be that the Department of Education can lead the training or provide the course outlines for other departments to create similar programming within their units. The Department of Education has the background and education surrounding doctoral support initiatives, and they may be best suited to assist with the course development. Another idea for implementation could be a recommendation that students in other

departments, those identified as needing more support, are encouraged to take the Department of Education courses before departments implement their courses directed to their student needs.

Additionally, MSU has a Center for Faculty Excellence (CFE), which provides training to new and current faculty and students embarking on an academic career. The training CFE conducts covers topics from teaching tools to advising at the undergraduate level, as well as training on mentoring for graduate students and undergraduates who are doing research. It appears that the CFE has some curriculum with a focus on research mentoring directed to Ph.D. students, but the marketing of this program is not clear. As supported by Hanson et al. (2022), various trainings can incorporate “relationship building” and other methods to collaborate and connect with students for socialization, academic and psychological needs (p. 242).

In underscoring the need for a successful academic relationship, it is also relevant to reiterate how faculty may not be willing to change a long-standing practice of the sink-or-swim mentality. Faculty may dismiss working further with students by claiming students should already arrive at postgraduate work adequately prepared or suited for postgraduate work (Astin, 1984; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Rigler et al., 2017). Hanson et al. (2022) indicated that students “expected faculty to prepare them with the academic foundation to conduct independent research, while faculty reported they expected students to be responsible to develop these skills themselves or to come prepared from prior institutional education” (p. 241).

Therefore, a recommendation would be to amend the current CFE marketing so that not only do new faculty entering the university know their services but with a renewed focus on existing faculty. Then, the university could utilize the CFE for more focused department training geared to the unique needs surrounding doctoral students, from socialization and isolation

challenges to the imposter phenomenon that can plague many students. In addition, a specific curriculum could be developed to teach faculty how to onboard their first-year doctoral students and other workshops on engaging regularly with the needs of postgraduate students (Hanson et al., 2022).

To engage faculty, the CFE and the department (and future departments) could work together by approaching faculty with an opt-in approach to take particular courses focusing on advising and mentoring. Further, through student course evaluations, a department can identify faculty who could benefit from the CFE training and provide individualized or in-service training. This last suggestion is sensitive, as addressing existing faculties' potential shortcomings in student mentoring or engagement may be seen as a punitive move by the academic department or university rather than looking forward to developing a more just culture for student retention. An additional step would be to identify any faculty who has yet to participate in the training offered through CFE by offering one-on-one or small-group training provided within a department as in-service.

### Reflections

This research has been very enlightening; given my role as a doctoral student within the Department of Education and as the Director for Graduate Recruitment and Admissions at Montana State University, I brought my perspectives into this research and have thought extensively over the issues presented in this study. My student journey encompassed a time in history that will probably always be referred to as the 'lockdown' (during COVID), forcing education to run entirely online for many. I have also experienced educational time delays in my studies due to family and friends' deaths, life and work challenges, committee changes, and

more. My non-traditional student age, a past career in wellness, athletic pursuits in endurance racing and coaching, and life experiences supported my journey as I have lived a life that helped me be more focused and determined. Even so, it also led to increased incidences of imposter-type feelings. These experiences helped me understand the student perspective even more, as I did not just read about doctoral student challenges in literature but experienced it myself.

This research has had an immense impact on me as a person, especially in my professional position. I see students through an entirely new lens and can provide more support and encouragement as I understand what they may be experiencing more deeply. This knowledge has also helped me support potential new students in stepping into the doctoral journey, as I can share my experiences and encourage them in a way I could not have done before.

### Conclusions

This chapter brought together this entire research project, providing how the research aligned with the literature and highlighting areas for clarification and improvement in doctoral retention methods. This study focused on the demographic changes within the postgraduate world of higher education and the changing times influencing the future of individuals pursuing higher education. The chapter also touched upon the changes in academia, including the potential decline of individuals entering higher education for undergraduate degrees, that may impact postgraduate education through the trickle-down effect (Lazerson, 1998; Smith, 2023; Tough, 2019).

We can better amend academic practices by understanding a potential decline in student enrollment, the student body's current demographics, and their differing needs. By knowing the students, we can present an opportunity to change long-standing educational practices of lack of

concern with attrition to focus on retention and support of doctoral students. This research identified the reasons for past practices and provided direction to implementing change in higher education through the lens of the student experience.

From this study, I hope the university will consider implementing more programming, as the Department of Education has done, to assist in doctoral retention on the MSU campus. The focus on securing new doctoral students each year at this and any doctoral-granting university should also encompass programming to provide a framework for success. Investments in students are equivalent to investment in continuing higher education; their onboarding, research, and journey are the future of higher education.

These investments focus attention on the value of the student and how those students move into society and various careers, including the educational systems across the state and the nation. The investment should also encompass programmatic changes to bridge the gaps in knowledge they may enter a program with and provide an environment to develop a supportive and validating community of fellow scholars.

As this research has indicated, these changes can only ensure the retention of some students. Nevertheless, retention initiatives such as the Department of Education have proven that simple programmatic changes can profoundly impact the student journey, leading to increased retention for some students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

DISSERTATION CONTENT AND STRUCTURE CHECKLIST EXAMPLE

	DEFINITIONS/HOW TO OPERATIONALIZE	QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE
Title Page			
Abstract			
Dedication			
Acknowledgements			
Table of Contents			
List of Tables			
List of Figures			

### CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY



INTRODUCTION	Overview of the Study, 2 – 3 pages. Presents problems, describes research strategy, develops context of the study. Create a hook to motivate the reader. Give the reader an advanced organizer in narrative format. Use first person active voice, present tense.		
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM	Setting the stage, body of context, identify gaps. Explain your rationale.		
PURPOSE OF STUDY	Explaining the approach to solve the problem. Describe what the study is going to deliver and what gaps will be filled.		
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	Specifics of what you want to find out or what is being tested. Narrow focus of the study.		
SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY	Who cares and why? Application, implications and does the study have a practical value?		
THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	Using a base that has been developed that the study fits into. Sensitizing the constructs and variables to your study by using beliefs, prior research, literature findings to form your conceptual framework.		

APPENDIX B

EMAIL REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

[Student in Dept. of Education],

My name is Melis Edwards, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education at MSU. I am working on a study to complete the requirements of my doctorate.

You are invited to participate in a study to assess the impact of MSU's Department of Education doctoral student support initiatives. This study will help me better understand how doctoral students are supported in their academic pursuits, part of my doctoral project.

Rationale:

This study will help us obtain a better understanding of how doctoral students are supported through their doctoral journey, which includes:

- EDU 600 Doctoral Seminar
- EDU 650 Dissertation Seminar
- EDU 690 Dissertation Writing, led by a faculty member who facilitates a writing support group for students working on a dissertation or proposal.
- Graduate Student Handbook
- Graduate-level courses on a three-year rotation

How you were selected:

You are a [current doctoral student/former doctoral student] in the Department of Education. Participation in the interview/survey is voluntary; you can choose not to answer questions and/or stop at any time. This research has no unforeseen risks.

Benefits of participating:

Benefits to participating include improving supportive measures for current/future doctoral students and the fact that you will be contributing to the potential advancement of future doctoral students' educational journeys. However, this research study is of no benefit to you. There is no cost to participate. This research does not have a source of funding. You will be participating in an interview/survey with questions that have been verified and approved by the Institutional Review Board before proceeding with this research.

Time commitment and confidentiality:

The Interview may take up to one hour; the survey may take up to 20 minutes or longer to complete. Please know that you can also add to the questions by providing information not asked (doing so is not a requirement). Your responses in the interview/survey are confidential and maintained in a password-protected file, which is restricted to the researchers. An anonymous identifier/pseudonym

will be used in any reports or discussions. As the results of this study may be publicly presented or published, a pseudonym will be used at all times.

Contact Information:

As a participant, if you have questions about the research, you can contact Melis Edwards at melisedwards@gmail.com. If you have additional questions about the rights of human subjects, they can contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Mark Quinn, (406) 994-4707 [mquinn@montana.edu]. This survey is confidential; all information will be restricted to the researchers.

Affirmation of participation:

Please reply by the last day of [date given] if you are interested in pursuing a WebEx interview. I would be happy to set up a time that works best for you in the next few months. If you choose not to be interviewed, let me know if you would be interested in a Qualtrics survey. In proceeding with either the interview or the survey, you agree to participate in this research. You also understand that you can later decline to participate and that you can withdraw from the study at any time. There is no set limit to the length of your responses; know that, at minimum, a few sentences for each question will provide rich content for this research.

Thank you for considering participating in my research!

Melis

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Education, Adult & Higher Education  
Best Regards,  
Melis Edwards  
[contact information]

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW AND SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS



<b>General Experiences</b>
Question 1: Why did you pursue a doctoral degree?
Question 2: How have you navigated your doctoral journey? Was it smooth or bumpy?
Question 3: What part(s) of the doctoral program did you find beneficial? Campus, course, or other experience. Be descriptive.
Question 4: What part(s) of the doctoral program was least beneficial/harmful? Campus, course, or other experience. Be descriptive.
Question 5: Describe a stand-out experience in your first year of doctoral study. This experience can be positive or negative.
Question 6: Do you feel that the education you are receiving will prepare you for your future career desires? Describe what experiences or processes have either prepared you or not.
<b>Doctoral Support System Specific</b>
Question 7: Did you take the Seminar 600 course? (Y/N) If yes, describe your experience in the course.
Question 8: Did you take the Seminar 650 course? (Y/N) If yes, describe your experience in the course.
Question 9: Did you take the Dissertation 690 writing course, where you met with others weekly for check-in times? If yes, describe your experience in the course. If not, can you explain your experience while taking dissertation 690 credits?
<b>Faculty &amp; Staff Connections</b>
Question 10: What faculty or staff member proved to be instrumental during your doctoral program? Describe the experience
Question 11: Can you describe your relationship with your chair? What role did they play in your doctoral journey?
Question 12: What assistance did you receive during your degree which helped you gain the most out of your education? Explain (even if you feel you did not receive assistance).
Other: If there are other aspects relating to your doctoral journey that you have not already expressed, please do so here. (Open ended text box - 250 limit words)

APPENDIX D

EXAMPLE FIRST CODING ANALYSIS AND CODING CONCEPTS AND IDEAS

FIRST CODING	QUOTES	CODING CONCEPTS/ IDEAS
<p style="text-align: center;">INVIVO (PARTICIPANT VOICES)</p>	<p>“Faculty helping me advocate for myself.”</p> <p>“because of the way they presented things...I got a new perspective on how I could utilize all of this stuff”.</p> <p>“Like it's such a waste...such a disappointment. It's not contentious... I don't know if it's a personality conflict or an expectation that I thought I was going to have this mentor... I don't know exactly what that is. Or if it's just that this person has not been coached and how to be a good advisor. I don't see this...it just wasn't a substantial partnership”.</p> <p>“I felt like I did not belong”.</p> <p>“Capable of success”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">TENACITY.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PERSEVERANCE.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">WASTED OPPORTUNITY.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">CONCEPT (MORE SIGNIFICANT IDEAS)</p>	<p>“I treasure, you know, some of those interactions, so that's been nice.”</p> <p>“As somebody who wants to be a really good student and good scholar, I was listening to the hardest things everybody was doing and then basically feeling like I had to do all of those myself. It got hard... and that's my garbage, so not putting that on anybody else”.</p> <p>“Disjointed experiences”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">BUILDING CAMARADERIE,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">COHORT CONNECTIONS,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">COMPETITION.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">VALUE (PARTICIPANT VIEWS, FEELINGS, PERSPECTIVES)</p>	<p>[Previous program] “It wasn't a good fit” or “I mean, like we have like a personal connection”;</p> <p>“I was floundering. And they took the time to provide me a little guidance and encouragement, and that's what they needed.”</p> <p>“I feel like feedback... [is] constructive positive useful.... you can do something actionable”.</p> <p>“Like it is such a waste...such a disappointment [on advisor relationship].</p> <p>“Felt like an outsider.”</p> <p>“Supportive environment.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PROPER GUIDANCE,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">LACK OF COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PERSONALIZED EDUCATION.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ADVISOR RELATIONSHIP.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">LACK OF BELONGING.</p>

APPENDIX E

EXAMPLE OF SECOND CYCLE CODING AND CLUSTERING PROCESS

Seminar Courses

- Better scheduling of courses.
- Course Offerings.
- Courses are not timed correctly and taken too late, albeit beneficial.
- Family and scheduling conflicts.
- Guidance.
- Meaningful Experiences.
- Misaligned direction.
- Not helpful when they took the course.
- Scheduling issues.
- Self-Discipline.
- Support.

Faculty Engagement

- Approachable.
- Coaching/Mentoring.
- Engaging.
- Encouraging, supportive.
- Knowledge seeking.
- Knowledgeable instructors.
- Guidance.
- Lack of faculty engagement.
- Lacking guidance in securing a mentor.
- Lacking opportunities to co-mingle with faculty like "back in the day".
- No exit interviews.
- Not caring.
- Poor connection.
- Poor advising.
- Un-Substantive advising.

Chair and Committee

- Better guidance.
- Beneficial; proactive, encouraging - "my biggest advocate."
- Better, more constructive feedback on writing.
- Connections: colleagues and faculty.
- Collegial.
- Establishes non-professional relationships.
- First generation struggles.
- Good communication.
- Helpful; provides guidance when needed.
- Mixed feelings on faculty and committee support.
- Personal goals.
- Problems with connecting with a chair.
- Teaching steps of being a doctoral student.
- Unhelpful chair; lacking guidance.

APPENDIX F

EXAMPLES OF SUB-THEMES AND CENTRAL THEMES

Sub-themes	Central themes
<p>MISALIGNED COURSE OFFERINGS.</p> <p>BENEFICIAL WHEN TAKEN AT THE RIGHT TIME; OUT OF SYNC PER STUDENTS POS; INEFFECTIVE.</p> <p>CHECKING IN IS GOOD.</p> <p>EVENINGS CHALLENGING/DIFFICULT FOR PEOPLE WITH FAMILY/LIFE COMMITMENTS.</p> <p>BETTER ADVISING. BETTER HELP WITH MSU OUTSIDE AGENCIES.</p>	<p>Programming for Doctoral Success: Misaligned Opportunities</p>
<p>CONFIDENCE AND PREPARED.</p> <p>DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES.</p> <p>DISCONNECTED EXPERIENCES; COURSE OBJECTIVES NOT UNDERSTOOD</p> <p>MISALIGNED COURSE ADVISING; DIFFERING EXPERIENCES.</p> <p>FLEXIBLE INSTRUCTORS; PERSONALIZED EDUCATION.</p> <p>MISSES FACULTY WHO LEFT.</p>	<p>Faculty and Chairing: Diverging Experiences</p>
<p>SUPPORTIVE: COHORT CONNECTION; HEALTHY ENGAGEMENTS.</p> <p>UNNECESSARY COMPETITION.</p> <p>HELPFUL FOR DOCTORAL JOURNEY.</p> <p>ENJOYED; PEER AND FACULTY.</p> <p>SHARING IS EFFECTIVE.</p>	<p>The Doctoral Community: A Necessity</p>
<p>PREPARED FOR CAREER; FOUNDATIONAL EXPERIENCES.</p> <p>IMPROVED LISTENING SKILLS; IMPROVED CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS.</p> <p>EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE.</p> <p>DEGREE OPENS DOORS; BENEFICIAL DEGREE; A BETTER ADMINISTRATOR.</p> <p>HELPS WITH RELATING TO FACULTY STUDENTS.</p>	<p>Doctoral journey: perceptions, suggestions, and overall feelings</p>