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## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

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Date: April 6, 2021

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Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

Perceptions of Social Support Impacting Persistence of Online Doctoral Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Eliza H. Gorham

April 2021

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, especially my father, who instilled in me the importance and value of hard work. This dissertation is also dedicated to my sister, who encouraged me to pursue my dream and goal of obtaining a doctoral degree. I want to thank her for the continued support and encouragement during my doctoral journey.

## **Acknowledgments**

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Lastly, I want to thank God for answering my prayers and guiding me through the challenges that I encountered along the way. I feel so blessed that my prayers have been answered and my goals have been achieved. “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart” (Psalms 9:1).

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## **Abstract**

Attrition in doctoral programs has been a problem of practice for countless years. With the surge of online degree programs and the high attrition rates in online doctoral programs, factors that could reduce attrition and increase retention are rising in importance. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine social support factors that influence persistence to completion rates in online doctoral studies. Furthermore, this study was focused on obtaining student perceptions of family, the academic community, and peer support influencing persistence during the dissertation stage. Data were collected from participants using survey questionnaires and semistructured interviews. The sample population consisted of 12 former students from a small private university who had completed their dissertation and online doctoral degree between 2018 and 2020. The findings revealed that these three social support groups, family, the academic community, and peer, provided important motivational support in the form of knowledgeable guidance, relationships/connections, and emotional and time support. Families primarily provided needed emotional and time support. The academic community, especially dissertation chairs, provided desired knowledgeable guidance during the dissertation process. Peers, in the form of cohorts, provided critical encouragement and emotional support. Existing relationships from which participants relied on for support included family members, coworkers, and friends, while new connections and bonds with cohorts and dissertation chairs played a vital role in influencing completion. In addition, the findings also revealed that internal motivation and self-determination played a significant role in persistence to completion.

*Keywords:* social support, attrition, persistence, academic community, dissertation, online doctorate degree, student integration

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Internet-based degree programs are on the rise, including online doctorate programs (Berry, 2017; Lee et al., 2020). For 14 consecutive years, there has been documented growth in online enrollments (Friedman, 2018). Overall, the number of students enrolled in postsecondary programs in the United States is on the decline, yet the number of students enrolling in online education programs continues to increase each year (Nelson, 2018). In 2016, more than 6.3 million students in higher education in the United States were enrolled in at least one online class (Friedman, 2018). Online degree-granting programs at the graduate level are growing significantly; in 2017, there were 239 online doctoral programs offered in the United States (Lee et al., 2020). It is predicted that the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which is pushing students towards virtual classrooms, will boost online enrollment to even higher levels (Koksal, 2020).

### **Attrition in Higher Education**

Attrition has long been a concern of institutions of higher learning (Council of Graduate Schools, 2019). Postsecondary students enrolled in online education have lower graduation rates compared to those enrolled in in-person or blended learning models (Lederman, 2018). The attrition rate is significantly higher in internet-based doctoral programs compared to traditional brick-and-mortar programs (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Van der Haert et al., 2014). While attrition rates in doctoral programs have been considered high for many years, the attrition rates in online doctoral programs are 10% to 25% higher, on average, compared to traditional programs offered at physical universities (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2015). Attrition rates in traditional doctoral programs generally range between 40% and 60%, while attrition rates in online doctoral programs average between 50% and 70% (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Golde, 2005; Lee et al., 2020; Rigler et al., 2017;

Santicola, 2013; Stock & Siegfried, 2014; Terrell et al., 2012). Growth in online doctoral programs continues to be on the increase, yet statistics suggest attrition rates continue at a higher rate in online doctoral programs compared to residential programs (Berry, 2017; Lee et al., 2020; Maul et al., 2018; Rigler et al., 2017).

### ***Online Doctoral Programs***

Online doctoral programs often appeal to busy, working adults who are returning to school to obtain an advanced degree due to their convenience and flexibility (Lee et al., 2020). While many students can sustain and complete the structured coursework in a doctoral program, attrition percentages significantly increase during the dissertation or doctoral candidacy phase (Ames et al., 2018; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Maul et al., 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Online doctoral students often face many challenges during their program, especially during the unstructured dissertation phase (Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Maul et al., 2018). As such, doctoral students must draw upon factors to persist and complete their degree during this part of a doctoral program.

The majority of the research on doctoral students has centered on characteristics of students who persist or withdraw with limited attention to the educational environment in which the students operate (Golde, 2005). Surveys and evaluations conducted in Ed.D. programs are often used by administrators, but interviews that capture student perceptions could provide more insight into their thoughts and feelings (Fuller et al., 2014). It has been posited that there is a strong correlation between social support and persistence (Bancroft, 2018; Berry, 2017; Lott et al., 2010; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). This study was designed to look at the potential influence and connection between several types of social support and persistence among online doctoral students during the doctoral candidacy stage.

### ***Social Support***

Over the years, the types of social support thought to influence persistence among students have varied and are not fully understood (McGaskey et al., 2016). Terrell (2005b) felt that only intrinsic factors played a role in persistence, while Ivankova and Stick (2007) suggested there could be up to seven types of social support that affect student persistence. Gardner (2008a) acknowledged that several types of social support groups could impact student persistence, yet he felt that certain groups had more influence on students than others. This study examined the three primary types of social support in connection with the persistence that has been deemed significant from previous studies: family, academic, and peer support from other students (Lee et al., 2020, Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Sweitzer, 2009).

Understanding social support factors associated with attrition and persistence may lead to the increased effectiveness of online doctoral programs, which in turn, may lead to higher completion rates among students enrolled in these programs as research has suggested student integration is a critical component (Berry, 2017; Gittings et al., 2018; Tinto, 1993). When doctoral students leave a program, potential future innovations and progressive research also depart (Lee et al., 2020). This potential loss of doctoral candidates could impact jobs and positions in the future that mandate individuals hold a terminal degree.

Not only does an unsuccessful doctoral experience and subsequent withdrawal waste valuable resources for a student and institution alike, but high attrition rates reflect negatively on a school's program (Gardner, 2008a; Gittings et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Institutions of higher learning have long considered these high attrition rates unacceptable and desire to lower attrition rates among their doctoral programs (Levitch & Shaw, 2014). Understanding the experiences of online doctoral students could increase the enrollment and persistence of students who may

remain in programs and contribute back to society (Berry, 2017; Rigler et al., 2017). My research was intended to assist in strategies that could be used to help alleviate attrition at the doctoral level.

While studies have indicated that the attrition rate is higher in internet-based doctoral programs compared to traditional doctoral programs and the largest attrition occurs during the dissertation stage, understanding the social support factors needed by students in these programs is critical to affecting success rates (Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Terrell et al., 2009; Terrell et al., 2012). Kiley (2011) suggested that student satisfaction significantly impacts attrition, and student support is a critical factor in influencing student satisfaction. Byers et al. (2014) suggested that social support groups may provide coping mechanisms as well as realistic expectations for online doctoral students needed during the stressful dissertation period. Golde (2005) and Berry (2017) found that student and academic communities were an integral part of the educational process for students. Studies have suggested an important link exists between social support, student integration, and persistence. This connection was explored in greater detail in this study.

### ***Student Development and Integration***

This study was guided by theories that focused on the topics of student and identity development, theories of persistence, and integration process theories. Some specific theories that were addressed in this study included Sanford's and Astin's theories on student development, Erickson's theory of student identity, Tinto's theories on student integration, Knowles' theory of andragogy, and Bean and Metzner's theory of student attrition. Theories of student development and the process of identity development suggest that students grow and learn to mitigate new challenges with the appropriate support (Gardner, 2009b; Pfund et al.,

2020). A student's environment and supportive relationships play a significant role in student development, which is closely linked to identity development (Gardner, 2009b). Knowles' theory of andragogy and ideas of persistence impact the study based on the concept that goal-driven students are motivated by intrinsic motivation (Knowles et al., 2005). Vincent Tinto's student integration theory suggests that student persistence is related to academic and social integration and social support (Rovai, 2003).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem of the study was that there appeared to be a lack of understanding of social support factors which positively affected online doctoral students' persistence during the dissertation stage of their program. Exploring the perceptions of graduated doctoral students on social support factors that influenced their persistence during the completion of their dissertation stage was aimed to lead to the increased effectiveness of online doctoral programs, which in turn could lead to higher completion rates among students enrolled in these programs. There are many reasons a student may elect to leave a doctoral program. Unrealistic expectations, a perceived lack of social support, feelings of isolation, and feelings of becoming overcome with stress have played a large role in attrition rates (Rigler et al., 2017). Prior studies suggested there may be a connection between social support and persistence, but Kiley (2011) indicated a need for improvement in social support systems to positively impact attrition. While many universities offer some type of doctoral student support, the needs of students are not being met (Anderson et al., 2013; Berry, 2017; Gardner, 2010). Additional research is warranted on exactly how social support and student integration in academic environments can positively affect attrition (Golde, 2005). It is posited that an increased understanding of doctoral student socialization with university-supported networks, the role of student-cohort relationships, and the role of faculty

and administration in the support process may lead to improved programs and, subsequently, reduced attrition in online doctoral programs (Anderson et al., 2013; Berry, 2017; Gardner, 2010). Understanding the perceptions of students related to social support systems and how these systems impact persistence was the fundamental basis for this study.

There has been a rise in online doctoral programs in the last 15 years, with a large amount of growth in the professional doctorate area and Ed.D. programs (Burns & Gillespie, 2018). Statistics demonstrate there are high attrition rates in these online doctoral programs (Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Rigler et al., 2017; Terrell et al., 2012). While the attrition rate from residential doctoral programs is around 40% to 50%, the rate increases by 10% to 20% for online or distance doctoral education programs (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Gittings et al., 2018; Rigler et al., 2017; Terrell et al., 2009). The highest attrition rates occur in online doctoral educational programs, with the largest percentage of attrition occurring during the dissertation or doctoral candidacy stage (Ames et al., 2018; Gittings et al., 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). These types of programs are known for having a large enrollment of adult, nontraditional students (Berry, 2017). A large percentage of students who complete their structured coursework do not successfully make the transition from being a dependent student to an independent researcher (Ames et al., 2018; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The withdrawal of students who complete basic coursework but fail to complete the dissertation and stop short of completing the requirements to achieve a doctoral degree is costly to institutions of higher learning (Gardner, 2008a; Gittings et al., 2018). This action reflects negatively on the design of doctoral programs, which can affect future enrollment, along with other harmful impacts.

Since the attrition rate among online doctoral students hovers above 50%, this high rate suggests the appropriate support factors have not been implemented to adequately encourage



persistence in online doctoral programs (Berry, 2017; Gittings et al., 2018). Malone et al. (2001) indicated that programs are not adequately preparing students for the research component of a doctoral program. Student support systems may need improvements to positively affect student satisfaction and subsequent attrition rates (Kiley, 2011). Student satisfaction is a critical factor in success rates for completion. Students who were satisfied with the learning environment and support received during their doctoral journey were more likely to complete their doctoral program (Levitch & Shaw, 2014). Gittings et al. (2018) and Terrell (2005a) suggested that a better understanding of factors that affect persistence could help higher education institutions implement higher-quality programs that will benefit associated students and faculty members.

While educational “success” is a broad term that some researchers have used to encompass engagement, satisfaction in a program, acquisition of knowledge, and others, for this study, success is defined as the completion of a dissertation and the attainment of a doctoral degree (Lee et al., 2020). In my study, I examined students who completed an Ed.D. degree within the past two years to explore social support groups and their influence on candidates’ persistence to complete their degree. It was postulated that social support communities could positively impact the persistence of doctoral students in an online program, but there was a lack of evidence and understanding of the degree of impact from the different types of support systems and how students perceived the support received from various groups. I looked at student perceptions of different types of social support and how they played a role in persistence.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an understanding of how social support groups impacted the persistence of online doctoral students during the dissertation stage by exploring perceptions from students who completed their dissertation and subsequently

graduated from a doctoral education program. More specifically, the goal of the study was to gather perspectives from students to describe and analyze the role of social support in the transition phase from classes to the doctoral candidacy phase of an online doctoral program. This qualitative case study was designed to explore the experiences of online doctoral students to gain a better understanding of why some education doctoral candidate students persist in their respective programs during the dissertation stage. It looked at the role that various types of social support groups and communities play in students' lives. Additionally, I intended to gain insight into student perceptions of the relationship between the social support they felt they received or did not receive and persistence.

It is postulated that the reasons for the higher attrition or lower persistence in online programs may differ compared to students enrolled in traditional doctoral programs. A large amount of research that exists to understand the reasons for doctoral attrition and persistence is more focused on residential doctoral programs (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Many colleges and universities have implemented an academic support community and social support system for doctoral students, but there is uncertainty if the same types of social support system that exists for traditional doctoral students provide the assistance needed for students who are enrolled in internet-based programs. It is theorized that social support systems implemented based on residential doctoral students are not reaching the needs of the students enrolled in online or internet-based programs. It is posited that a social support system designed specifically for students in internet-based doctoral programs, especially during the doctoral candidacy stage, may positively influence persistence and completion rates.

The significance of the study is that it would equip and inform educators with information obtained from doctoral learners on perceptions of persistence and support in the

online environment as social services departments continually develop and improve programs to assist students in succeeding in their educational goals. Research in the area of doctoral attrition has been primarily focused on demographics and psychosocial characteristics of students rather than characteristics of the educational environment (Golde, 2005). It was important to gain information from student stakeholders who have primary knowledge for implementation ideas that would benefit online programs in the future. It has been suggested the presence of an integrated academic community can offer students social support, but how to build this type of community and the exact characteristics have not yet been defined.

In summary, attrition continues to be a challenge for online doctoral programs, especially as the number of students electing online programs continues to grow. Neither students nor programs prosper when attrition occurs. This research was meant to build on previous research related to attrition and persistence. Yet, it planned to narrow down the focus to a specific area, social support in online doctoral programs during the dissertation stage. A qualitative case study was used to gain perceptions of social support affecting persistence from graduates of an online doctoral program.

### **Research Questions**

The design of this study was to engage and question students who had completed an online doctoral degree in education within the last two years. The overarching research question for this qualitative case study was as follows: “How does social support influence academic degree persistence and completion according to the perspective of online degree graduates?” The subresearch questions were as follows:

1. How does family support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?

2. How does academic support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?
3. How does peer support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral degree graduates?

Each of these sub-research questions supported the purpose of the research study related to the content of exploring students' perception of social support in more detail to decrease attrition among online doctoral programs by improving social support programs. For the content questions of the study, students were asked about persistence and perceptions of derived means of social support.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Academic support community.** An academic support community is a sense of belonging and support by a student from those involved in the academic environment, such as faculty, administrators, and peers (Erichsen et al., 2014).

**Cohorts.** Cohorts are members of a program that often have the same series of classes and progress through their studies as a collective group (Santicola, 2013).

**Doctoral candidacy phase.** The doctoral candidacy phase is the portion of the doctorate program in which a student focuses on research and writing the dissertation (Ames et al., 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

**Internet-based doctoral programs.** Internet-based doctoral programs are programs that are offered online or virtually for students (Berry, 2017).

**Persistence.** Persistence is a student's internal progressive movement and drives to complete a program until completion (Lovitts, 2005).

**Social integration.** Dwyer (2017) stated that social integration is “the congruence between the individual and the social system of the educational institution” (p. 326).

**Social support system.** The social support system is the perceived support by a student from sources within and outside of the academic environment (Rovai, 2003).

**Student success.** Student success is the completion of a dissertation and the attainment of a doctoral degree (Lee et al., 2020).

**Traditional doctoral programs.** Traditional doctoral programs are offered by a college university in which students attend classes and work on research in physical buildings (Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Van der Haert et al., 2014).

## **Summary**

There has been significant growth in internet or online-based programs, which includes higher education institutions that offer doctoral programs. Each year, the number of students who elect to enroll in doctoral degree programs increases (Offerman, 2011). While the percentage of students who enroll in traditional doctorate programs elect to leave the program prior to completion is high, the percentage of attrition in online doctorate programs is alarmingly higher. This qualitative study was designed to gain more insight into how social support played a role in the persistence of online doctoral students, especially during the dissertation stage of a doctoral program. The study was designed to focus on the relationship and perception between social support and persistence from a student’s point of view. The type of social support needed most by online students to persist in their respective programs remains unclear, as evidenced by the high attrition rates. One of the goals of the study was to gain a better understanding of student persistence so social support services at institutions of higher learning could implement programs that positively impacted the high attrition rates among online doctoral students. This study was

needed to help reduce attrition rates and increase retention rates at universities that offer or plan to offer online doctorate programs in the future.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

According to Porter et al., (2020), “Doctoral program non-completion rates have been an area of concern within higher education for many years with overall completion rates of less than 50%” (p. 1). Completing the dissertation is a major hurdle for doctoral success, and this part of a program influences attrition (Gittings et al., 2018; Young et al., 2019). High attrition is a challenge that university leaders face in their doctoral programs (Gardner, 2009a). It is an even larger concern for online doctoral programs, especially as enrollment in online programs continues to increase (Ali & Smith, 2015; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Van der Haert et al., 2014).

Research indicates there is a link between attrition and social support, both in traditional as well as online doctoral programs (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). Academic advising and student support services is an area of growth and opportunity since the early establishment of colleges that included Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, William and Mary, and several others (Rudolph, 1990). While research has been conducted on the role social support plays about student social integration and attrition, there are many unknowns involving the meaning students give to social support networks (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). For social support services to be adequately equipped to positively impact perseverance among students enrolled in online doctoral programs, especially during the critical dissertation stage, it is important to gain more insight into student perceptions and the meanings they give to social support communities that influence persistence.

There are essentially two main aspects to a doctoral program, the structured and the unstructured component (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Young et al., 2019). The structured phase consists of the coursework leading up to being accepted by the respective

university as a doctoral candidate (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The unstructured phase, which primarily consists of the dissertation component, is where the highest attrition occurs (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Young et al., 2019). Some students are not able to make the transition from the coursework phase to the doctoral candidacy stage, where the student is required to be an independent researcher (Bancroft, 2018; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Gardner, 2009b; Young et al., 2019). Students have reported they felt unprepared to make the transition from taking courses to being an independent researcher (Fiore et al., 2019). Students struggle during this doctoral candidacy or dissertation stage with feelings of loneliness, frustration, isolation, and disengagement (Bancroft, 2018; Gardner, 2008b; Lott et al., 2010; Rovai, 2003; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Young et al., 2019).

It has been suggested that social isolation is one of the primary factors attributing to high attrition rates in doctoral studies (Ali & Smith, 2015; Gardner, 2009a). While most students that enter into a doctoral program are capable of completing it, studies have indicated that persistence and motivation play a role in completion rates (Lovitts, 2005). It is alarming that these high achievers, who have high success in earlier studies, drop out at the doctoral level (Ali & Smith, 2015). Van der Haert et al. (2014) indicated that students who take over four years to complete a doctoral degree have a higher risk of attrition. The longer a student stays in the doctoral candidacy stage, the higher the risk of leaving the program (Van der Haert et al., 2014). Online students struggle with academic and social integration, but students who develop supportive interactions with faculty and peer groups feel more encouraged to persist (Berry, 2017). As such, it is critical to determine social support factors that influence student integration, which may help motivate students and influence persistence in their academic environment when they enter the dissertation stage.



The characteristics of students who enter online programs are different from students who enter traditional doctoral programs, though this line has become more blurred in recent years (Gardner, 2008b; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Online students often have gaps in their education between degrees, while more traditional students often complete their undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees in sequence (Locke & Boyle, 2016). The age of an online doctoral student varies greatly and is a debated topic.

Online doctoral students are often called nontraditional students, and these students have statistically reported lower persistence rates compared to traditional doctoral students (Ellis, 2019; Locke & Boyle, 2016). The role of a nontraditional student is significant in higher education because they constitute close to 40% of the postsecondary population in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). A nontraditional student is defined as a student over the age of 25 and works part or full-time (Chen, 2017; Rovai, 2003). Many nontraditional students are individuals who have elected to return to school after a break (Chen, 2017; Locke & Boyle, 2016). These students have other responsibilities and demands on their time besides schoolwork (Gardner, 2009b; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Students who elect to enroll in online doctoral programs statistically are often characterized as mature, yet they struggle to maintain a work/life/school balance (Chen, 2017; Locke & Boyle, 2016). Students in the field of education often work in addition to attending school and desire either a fully online or a blended delivery class for convenience (Erichsen et al., 2014).

Challenges faced by online doctoral students include communication issues with faculty members and advisors, lack of personal contact, lack of motivation, personal procrastination, and weak peer-to-peer interaction opportunities with other students in the program (Berry, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). These students often perceive a low amount or lack of social

support from key academic community members (Erichsen et al., 2014). The social integrations into academics and peer-related groups are important as these professional relationships often continue to develop into a network and become valuable resources during the doctorate process and afterward (Golde, 2005). While it is suggested that successful online doctoral students are those who become immersed in a virtual learning community, few studies have explored how this is accomplished (Berry, 2017).

Several models and theories guide this study, including examining the connection between social support and persistence and the role these factors play in the lives of online doctoral students during the dissertation stage of a doctoral program. This literature review focuses on theories of student and identity development, integration, and attrition. The principles under which social support systems operate in universities are rooted in these theories.

### **Trends in Online Enrollment**

Enrollment in online programs has been growing incrementally (Lambrinidis, 2014; Nelson, 2018; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008). Nontraditional students have shown a preference for enrolling in online courses due to the flexibility, convenience, and accessibility of programs (Kelly, 2015; Lambrinidis, 2014). This flexibility allows students who would otherwise not be able to continue their studies due to work, family, and other demands the ability to pursue advanced degrees (Ellis, 2019; Stone et al., 2016). The availability of a variety of online programs has helped guide the growth upward, especially to those that are aged 30 and older (Stone et al., 2016). Many nontraditional students have unique needs, and they are finding online classes that can accommodate their needs (Stone et al., 2016).

The estimates are that nontraditional adult learners in higher education are projected to continue to grow at a faster rate compared to traditional adolescent students (National Center of

Education Statistics, 2009). The nontraditional adult learner is developmentally and socially different than the traditional learner (Chen, 2017). Due to the growth of nontraditional learners and their preferred delivery method of courses, the online environment, colleges, and universities are reexamining their curriculum and programs (Chen, 2017). Technology and distance learning have expanded access for a diverse group of students interesting in achieving an additional degree in higher education (Offerman, 2011).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The process of completing a doctorate for a student is complex and involves not only intellectual growth but also personal development related to personality, character, and disciplinary action (Gardner, 2009b). This study is based on the theoretical frameworks of student and identity development, student integration, and the student attrition theory. These theories encompass the establishment of social support that is needed to persist in the completion of a doctoral degree.

### ***Student and Identity Development Theories***

The majority of student development theory research has been conducted in the undergraduate and graduate areas, while less research has been conducted on doctoral students (Gardner, 2009b; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). According to Sanford (1966), student development occurs when there is an appropriate balance of challenge and support (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Development is based on students being presented with new challenging situations and experiences and, in return, successfully mitigating these encounters with support (Yorke & Longden, 2004). During a person's early years in school, K-12, a student's family, community, teachers, and other factors play a significant role in the development process (Morgan, 2019). It

is often during the postsecondary stage that a student takes on more personal development that leads to identity development (Morgan, 2019).

One of the desired outcomes of a doctoral program is to produce high-quality human capital that readily engages in industry. Some universities take a sociocultural approach to learning in that they want students to develop self-awareness and understand the connection between their actions and the context in which actions take place. Astin (1984) indicated that student development resulted from student involvement, which was directly correlated to the amount of mental and physical energy and time a student devoted to the academic experience. The more involved a student became in the entire academic process, which included participation in classes, developing relationships with peers, and connecting with administrators and faculty members, the more likely the student was to achieve the desired development level sufficient to succeed in a program (Berry, 2017). Astin (1984) further emphasized that the behavioral, rather than internal motivation aspects of involvement, played a more prominent role in the process. A developed student will become mastery of reflection practices (Griffiths et al., 2018). Astin's (1984) theory of involvement has been studied for many years and is often used as a baseline for studies involving student integration.

Researchers often consider different variables when studying and researching human development (Astin, 1984). Diversity in schools offering undergraduate programs, graduate degrees, and doctoral programs is now considered conventional. There was also a point in the history of student development that all students were considered "one-of-a-kind." It is recognized that student development not only impacted by one's age and background, but many other factors may be intertwined as part of the development process (Astin, 1984).

For students completing doctoral work, their development is affected by the process of enrollment, coursework, and independent research. Additionally, the environment of a program can make a significant impact on a student's development. Supportive relationships, among other students, faculty members, advisors, and staff members can play a significant role in the development process (Berry, 2017; Gardner, 2009b). Student development is linked to personal identity development, which is a life-long process. According to Gardner (2009b), the completion of a dissertation and doctoral degree can significantly boost an individual's identity development. Baker and Pifer (2014) suggested that conquering key milestones during the latter phase of the dissertation process in the quest to obtain a doctorate promoted a higher level of identity development. This later stage is comprised of successfully defending a dissertation and utilizing the degree in a meaningful career. People who complete a doctoral program believe in their own ability to conduct research, analyze empirical studies, and write about research findings in an academically acceptable means (Lee et al., 2020).

Erik Erikson was an early guru in the area of identity development. His early research indicated that identity formation was related to persistence or the ability to continue in a program or endeavor. When individuals, particularly students, have a strong sense of identity and belonging, they have a higher probability of persevering (Berry, 2017). It has been suggested that identity development and peer relationships are connected (Rageliene, 2016). Steinberg and Morris (2001) suggested that peer groups can have a significant impact on the behavior of adolescents. Peer groups can provide critical social and emotional support that can significantly influence one's identity development. This type of peer support affects individuals during their maturing years, as well as during their adulthood stage (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

The process of identity development in a doctoral student plays a large role in the second stage of the doctoral process, which is the period of time when an individual enacts their role as a student and begins the transition towards being a scholar. Identity development shifts occur during this period of the process and educational experiences can play a role in the outcome (Baker & Pifer, 2014). The scholar-in-training mode requires students to reflect on a new identity as they move towards membership in a scholarly community. Engagement in community practices and interaction with the community helps support the evolving student (Berry, 2017). Students who have been socially and cognitively engaged in their learning community gain a higher perception of their scholarship obtainment, which positively impacted their success (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). The identity development process occurs when individuals emerge into the role of an independent scholar and connect with an integrated learning community (Baker & Pifer, 2014). Identity development, the expansion of networks, and the acceptance into a learning community are interrelated. As doctoral students navigate and adapt to their new role as researchers, acquire behavioral strategies, and conquer the challenges of cultivating relationships, milestones in identity development transpire.

### ***Student Integration and Attrition Theories***

Vincent Tinto (1993) is considered one of the founding researchers in the area of retention and student persistence relating to academic and social integration. Tinto's research and development of the student integration theory in the 1970s focused on traditional undergraduate and graduate students. His theory was derived from research that indicated the connection between student integration and social experiences that contributed to a student's academic success in college (Bancroft, 2018; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) suggested the key to student success was engagement. Social integration was a function of positive relationships with peers

and faculty, and success in this area led to persistence in studies and a stronger commitment to an institution (Berry, 2017; Rovai, 2003). Even though Tinto's retention and persistence research studies were primarily conducted in the undergraduate field, his framework and findings are still used as the foundation for many studies today, including graduate programs (Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Additional research needs to be completed at the doctoral level to fully understand the application of Tinto's studies at a higher level (Bancroft, 2018).

Early models built on Tinto's theory also suggested continuance in a program was based on an integrated process. Academic integration, social integration, economic integration, and personal attributes were elements that factored into persistence (Berry, 2017; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Rovai's (2003) research in the area of persistence looked at nontraditional students enrolled in online programs and continued to build on some of Tinto's concepts related to persistence. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016) focused their studies and research in the online environment and suggested the two integrations that have affected persistence the greatest in this environment were academic and social.

There are different factors associated with academic integration and social integration that may play a role. Academic integration can include faculty intervention, administration functions, and curriculum satisfaction (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Social interaction can be further influenced by a variety of personal factors, such as age, background, race, family, and ethnicity. The various academic and social communities, as well as the interactions between students, peers, and faculty, impact persistence (Berry, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). While some studies have leaned towards the idea that the combined integration of peer and faculty interactions play the heaviest influence on persistence, insufficient studies have been

completed on the behavior influenced by the collective effort (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). While research has indicated that student integration is a key component in a student's determination to persist or leave a doctoral program, all of the factors that impact integration have not yet been understood by universities (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). Tinto's research posited that student retention was based on student integration, but his research has limited applicability to nontraditional, older working students who elect to continue their higher education in the online environment as external factors affecting online students were not taken into consideration in his studies (Bancroft, 2018; Cochran et al., 2014).

Bean and Metzner (1985) continued to build on concepts introduced by Tinto. They were forerunners in research on nontraditional students in the area of persistence (Cochran et al., 2014; Rovai, 2003). Their development of the student attrition model theorized that in addition to academic integration being favorable, persistence was also dependent on other factors outside the academic community (Rovai, 2003). They proposed a model that linked persistence to four factors: academics, student background factors, environmental variables, and the combination of academic and psychological factors associated with the student (Cochran et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Rovai, 2003).

Bean and Metzner (1985) supported Pascarella et al. (1983), who posited that some students entered college with some "at-risk factors," and these attributes affected a student's risk of withdrawal. When institutional academic and social systems are weak, this will further exacerbate vulnerable underlying conditions and negatively affect persistence (Rovai, 2003). Additionally, Bean and Metzner found that when students started withdrawing from a class, this was a precursor for withdrawal from the university (Cochran et al., 2014). While their research is



relevant, their studies of nontraditional students were primarily focused on commuter or off-campus students rather than online students.

### ***Summary of Theories***

A doctoral candidate is a student who has proven themselves capable of achieving goals and ambitions in the past. However, the transition from taking classes to effectively functioning as an independent researcher in the doctoral candidacy stage of a program requires self-efficacy, acquired through student development and identity development (Lambie et al., 2014). The attrition theory has relevance to Tinto's research in that it suggests there are factors beyond a student's inner being that affect one's education journey. Students go through three stages in higher education: separation, transition, and incorporation (Bancroft, 2018). Student persistence is related to successfully mitigating each of these stages through student development and social support from external influences.

Transitions can be a period of time where students experience loneliness, a feeling of isolation, and difficult challenges. Students enrolled in online doctoral programs need to have confidence, assertiveness, and self-motivation, which are all components of student development and identity development theories. The student attrition model posits that students persist due to a combination of factors (Rovai, 2003). While student characteristics play a role in the potential attrition of a student, many external factors exist that may influence whether a student persists in a program or becomes part of an attrition statistic (Cochran et al., 2014; Rovai, 2003). The student integration and student attrition theories relate to this study as they suggest social interactions and networks positively contribute to an individual successfully adjusting during the transition stage of a doctoral student migrating from an individual course taker to an accomplished researcher. Students who do not become integrated with the social networks

consisting of peers and faculty at their higher education institution are the ones not likely to persist (Bancroft, 2018; Berry, 2017).

### **Growth of Online Programs**

There has been significant growth in online higher education programs since the 1990s. Between 1995 and 1998, the number of higher education institutions and universities offering online courses tripled (Herbert, 2006). In the 1999-2000 academic year, it was reported that students enrolled in higher education institutions that took at least one online course increased by 57% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002).

In 2018, approximately 30% of students completing a postbaccalaureate were enrolled in an exclusively online-only program (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019a). Of those students enrolled in an exclusively online only distance learning program, approximately 62% were enrolled at a private for-profit higher education institution, 20% were enrolled at a private nonprofit institution, and 12% were enrolled at a public institution (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019a). It is projected that by 2029, the number of students enrolled in postbaccalaureate programs will increase to 3.1 million, a 3% increase from the 2018 statistics (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019b).

The rise of online courses and programs has led to an increase of nontraditional students enrolling in these postsecondary options (Herbert, 2006). Both nonprofit and for-profit institutions have attempted to capitalize on the potential revenue stream from online postbaccalaureate students (Craig, 2015). The University of Phoenix was one of the leaders in the for-profit market in the 1990s that marketed to postbaccalaureate students desiring an online option (Craig, 2015). Along with the increased enrollment of nontraditional students in online platforms, attrition problems also rose as institutions began to realize that traditional pedagogy

was not transferring over to online platforms successfully (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Herbert, 2006).

### **Nontraditional Doctoral Students**

In the past, traditional residential doctoral students were individuals who were often in their twenties and elected to complete their undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees in a sequence (Ellis, 2019). In the 1800s and early 1900s, the majority of students enrolled in doctorate programs were white males (Offerman, 2011). Typically, traditional students were not married, childless, worked as assistants at universities, and could focus the bulk of their time on their degree program (Offerman, 2011). These demographics have been changing over the years; the line between what was once considered a traditional and a nontraditional student has now become blurred (Offerman, 2011).

Online programs are designed to cater to working individuals who desire to return to school on a quest for an advanced degree, either for career reasons or personal choice (Rigler et al., 2017). Online students vary in age, experiences, and when they last attended school as part of their master's program. A nontraditional student has been defined as a student who has reached a minimum age of their late twenties and works part or full-time (Rovai, 2003). Many nontraditional students are individuals who have elected to return to school after a break. These students also have other responsibilities and demands on their time (Gardner, 2009a; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Santicola, 2013). Many nontraditional doctorate students are married with children in terms of their personal life, but also maintain a professional career (Offerman, 2011). Students in the field of education often work full-time in addition to attending school and desire either a fully online or a blended delivery class for convenience (Erichsen et al., 2014; Santicola, 2013).

### ***School Balance***

Nontraditional students often struggle to maintain a work, personal, and school-life balance. The challenge of managing work, domestic duties, children, aging parents, and completing classes can feel like an endurance race to affected individuals (Offerman, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Santicola, 2013). Female students often shouldered more external responsibilities compared to male students (Offerman, 2011). Students who elect to enroll in online doctoral programs statistically are frequently characterized as being heterogeneous and mature (Erichsen et al., 2014; Offerman, 2011). The external environment often affects nontraditional students to a greater degree compared to traditional students (Offerman, 2011).

Nontraditional students often enroll in online programs due to high demands and sometimes unrealistic goal setting in their professional life (Chen, 2017; Ellis, 2019; Lambrinidis, 2014). A fundamental component of a program for nontraditional student enrollment involves flexibility (Ellis, 2019; Stone et al., 2016). While traditional doctorate students may work as teaching or research assistants, nontraditional students often work full-time jobs for income and career opportunities (Stone et al., 2016). In a study conducted at Capella University in 2010, the findings indicated their average online doctoral student was approximately 43 years old, with over 50% being women, 52% of enrollees were students of color, and often, the primary financial provider for the family (Offerman, 2011).

Differing from traditional students who attend physical campuses for a combination of academics and social reasons, academics are the focal point for nontraditional students (Offerman, 2011). Many doctoral online programs today emphasize a professional practice problem compared to more traditional programs that focus on discovering new learning

(Offerman, 2011). Nontraditional students often prefer a nontheoretical program that applies and links in their experience with a problem of practice (Offerman, 2011). Student interest and a passion for the subject matter of the degree program selected to play a role in willingness to complete a program (Santicola, 2013).

Other challenges faced by online doctoral students include communication issues with faculty members and advisors, lack of personal contact, lack of motivation, personal procrastination, and weak peer-to-peer interaction opportunities with other students in the program (Erichsen et al., 2014). These nontraditional students have statistically been reported as having lower engagement and persistence rates; the combination of the aforementioned characteristics of nontraditional doctorate students may contribute to the lower persistence and engagement rates in programs (Berry, 2017).

Before approximately 15 years ago, the majority of research related to student attrition had been focused on undergraduate and graduate programs (Gardner, 2009b). Research related to doctoral programs, attrition, and persistence had been primarily based on residential programs (Gardner, 2009b). There is now recognition and awareness that suggests the needs of students enrolled in online programs students may differ compared to students enrolled in residential programs (Berry, 2017). Many of the foundation student attrition theories are based on research conducted in the traditional classroom environment before the rise in popularity of online programs (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

### ***Social Isolation***

Feelings of social isolation have been identified as a contributor to attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Fiore et al., 2019; Solem et al., 2009). As students are progressing in their programs, the more involved they become in academic activities, the more likely they are to

complete their degree (Lovitts, 2001). The informal aspects of academic activities and integration or involvement play a role in attrition (Lovitts, 2001). Students enrolled in distant or online programs are particularly susceptible to social isolation or a feeling of lack of engagement in the academic community (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). These students generally have lower levels of interactions in academic communities (Ali & Smith, 2015). Online students have fewer face-to-face interactions with peers and academic community members, such as faculty advisors, which causes these students to feel less engaged (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). When students feel disengaged, they are considered at-risk students (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Ellis (2019) suggested that higher levels of learning and engagement may positively affect attrition rates.

While nontraditional students have been flooding into online programs due to flexibility and convenience, their idea of engagement in a course may differ from the engagement needed to socially connect in an academic community (Arjomandi et al., 2018; Kelly, 2015; Lambrinidis, 2014). Nontraditional students who had high perceptions of social presence in their online programs had a greater perceived learning experience (Lambrinidis, 2014). When nontraditional students felt connected to each other and faculty, they had increased perceptions of social presence (Lambrinidis, 2014).

Compared to men, women are more likely to experience personal issues and withdraw from doctoral programs (Lovitts, 2001; Solem et al., 2009). Women often struggle to balance academic life with work, raising children, and taking care of domestic affairs (Maher et al., 2004; Crumb et al., 2019). When support is not received from an academic advisor, women often retreat into social isolation, which leads to degree delays and/or potential withdrawal (Lovitts, 2001).

## **Doctoral Stages**

Doctoral programs often consist of three phases: admission, coursework, and candidacy or dissertation work (Gardner, 2009b). The first phase of a doctoral program is considered the admission or decision phase (Gardner, 2009b). This is the period when students make decisions about their specific field of study, and they begin to prepare for a changed lifestyle over the next few years. During this period, the transition process begins for students, and they are introduced to social connections with peers and faculty (Gardner, 2009b). It is also during this time that they begin to grasp the new demands in their life.

The second phase of a program is comprised of coursework, yet this academic phase also marks the onset of related academic relationships (Gardner, 2009b). The establishment of these relationships will set the tone for the dissertation phase. During the second phase, students move from being a coursework student towards embarking on independent research, which occurs during the candidacy period in a quest to complete a dissertation (Gardner, 2009b).

The third phase is the last or final phase of the doctoral program (Gardner, 2009b). The transitions from the second phase to the third phase and from the third phase and beyond are life-altering periods in a student's life (Bancroft, 2018). It is during this last, self-regulating phase that students can deviate from a desired doctoral path, partly due to the perceived lack of institutional and social support received (Gardner, 2009b). During this changing period in the doctoral process, Baker and Pifer (2014) found that relationships played a critical role. Students moving from basic coursework into a research-oriented stage must leave their comfort zone and their known identity (Gardner, 2009b).

The dissertation is considered the most challenging part of earning a doctoral degree (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Students who develop support relationships during the

second phase, the transition stage, often set into motion the collaboration needed to succeed in the third and final stage of the doctoral program, which enables them to move into a scholarly career (Bancroft, 2018; Gardner, 2009b). Personal student identity and development occur through the challenges encountered and the support received during three doctoral phases. The environment, as well as the personal characteristics of a student, shape the process (Gardner, 2009b).

### **Obstacles and Barriers in the Academic Setting**

“It might be assumed that an individual who is applying to a doctoral program knows what lies ahead; however, for many of the participants, this was not the case” (Porter et al., 2020, p.13). It has been discovered that many individuals who elect to enroll in a doctoral program are not fully aware of the process, the time commitments, the importance of developing relationships, and the amount of stress to come (Porter et al., 2020). In past studies, students have indicated a variety of reasons, rather than a single reason, for opting out of a program (Gardner, 2009a; Locke & Boyle, 2016). These reasons include student preparedness, time management, lack of relationship with an advisor, adjustments to the program, financial commitment challenges, and low self-confidence (Hunter, 2015; Locke & Boyle, 2016; Regis, 2015). Nontraditional students are often under a large amount of stress because of the pressures associated with adult life combined with school (Devos et al., 2017; Locke & Boyle, 2016).

### ***Student Preparedness***

Luna (2012) stated that students who had realistic expectations of the demands of a doctoral program were more likely to reach their goal of completing a degree. Additional studies affirmed that student preparedness, in terms of skills and realistic expectations, impacted completion rates in doctoral programs (Brill et al., 2014; Stock & Siegfried, 2014). Golde (2005)



found that students who started a doctoral program with deficiencies struggled to keep the pace of other students and falsely believed they would receive the necessary support to remain on track with peers. Preparedness encompasses different aspects of a student enrolling in a doctoral program. Motivation, prior academic experiences, and preparedness for the details of the program are essential factors that contribute to success (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Students must be willing to accept the challenge of separating or moving away from their comfort zone to transition to new norms and behaviors associated with the academic environment (Bancroft, 2018; Golde, 2005). Students who were prepared in these areas were more likely to persist (Bancroft, 2018; Brill et al., 2014).

### ***Time Management***

Wao and Onwuegbuzie (2011) found that doctoral students often underestimated the amount of time needed to complete a doctoral degree and were unprepared for the massive toll on their time. Institutions of higher learning that understand the external demands placed on nontraditional students enrolled in online classes often design classes that make sense from a time management perspective (Offerman, 2011). The design of some online classes allows students a degree of flexibility related to completion times. Santicola (2013) found from his studies that students needed to emphasize the use of planning, at the onset of the program, as well as during the entire program. While universities design classes to be flexible, students must figure out how to successfully utilize time management, planning, and organization skills to navigate programs.

### ***Mismatch Between Student and Advisor***

Studies have demonstrated that a student and advisor relationship can play a significant role in a student's feelings towards a doctoral program and persistence (Anderson et al., 2013;

Berry, 2017; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Students perceive their advisor as their primary contact and source of information; their opinion and relationship with their faculty advisor influence their overall attitude and progress in the dissertation process (Fiore et al., 2019). An advisor not only functions as a mentor, but they can also introduce students to avenues of opportunities to be included in academic communities by connecting them with other faculty members, fostering students into a professional network, and persuading them to engage in other academic networks (Gardner, 2008a). While studies have suggested that a positive student advisor relationship greatly assists a student, it is unknown if an incompatible advising relationship, by itself, can cause a student to withdraw from a program.

There are many reasons for an incompatible student advisor relationship to exist. Expectations regarding the pace of completed work, frequency of contact, and perception of low-quality communication may exist (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). An advisor and student may experience a disconnect in personalities. If it is a limited or a low amount of interaction between a student and an advisor, there may also be a trust issue or a question about intellectual contributions (Golde, 2005). Not only can a mismatched student advisor relationship potentially harm a student's motivation and persistence, but it can also affect a student's perceived support to engage in academic communities (Berry, 2017).

### ***Adjustment to a Doctoral Program***

Not all doctoral students fit a specific mold (Gardner, 2008a). Depending on a student's background, education, experiences, jobs, support groups, and other factors, some students will have more of an adjustment to a doctoral program compared to others. Many students entering an online doctoral program are challenged to figure out how to develop academic relationships at a distance (Berry, 2017). Adult students who enter online programs often suffer stress derived

from overcoming fears of understanding the online course, failure to achieve desired grades, managing due dates, managing domestic responsibilities while being enrolled, and justifying the cost of another degree (Anderson et al., 2013; Offerman, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019).

Students that continued a feeling of isolation from one phase to the next were likely to downgrade the importance of relationships that could potentially help provide academic support and relieve some stress caused by academic pressure and self-imposed anxiety (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Anderson et al., 2013; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). Students that did not build academic relationships experienced a weak sense of community and reduced productivity (Anderson et al., 2013).

### ***Low Self-Efficacy***

Students that elect to enroll in an online doctoral program have diverse backgrounds. Some students have more advanced skills than others (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Self-confidence in one's skills plays a critical role, as does self-confidence in oneself in the development process of establishing one's identity (Anderson et al., 2013; Heggins & Jackson, 2003). A sufficient amount of self-confidence propels students to seek help in areas or skills where they are weak and develop strategies that enable them to be successful (Heggins & Jackson, 2003). When academic demands are too high, students often isolate, which further perpetuates the situation (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). When students felt valued as individuals within their learning environment, they were more likely to collaborate with others (Anderson et al., 2013; Heggins & Jackson, 2003). Positive self-evaluation leads to increased problem-solving skills, attitudes, and perceptions (Anderson et al., 2013). Self-efficacy has been described as one's belief in their ability to succeed (Anderson et al., 2013). Self-efficacy helps students adapt and adjust to their environment and establish obtainable goals, which in turn leads

to persistence (Poyrazli et al., 2002). While self-efficacy and competence in one's skills and abilities may influence a student's academic success, it is unknown if self-efficacy steers students to seek social support.

### ***Finances***

Stock and Siegfried (2014) found that while financial aid can impact doctoral attrition, it generally only impacted retention levels during year one. After this period, financial aid did not appear to have an independent impact on the likelihood of degree completion (Stock & Siegfried, 2014). Rather, it was a factor that often only affected students during the first year or two of classes (Stock & Siegfried, 2014). Santicola (2013) indicated adults who had financial limitations that were not able to secure financial aid often reconsidered their enrollment in a program early in the process before embarking on a long degree journey.

### **Factors Contributing to Success**

Individuals elect to pursue a doctoral degree for many reasons (Gardner, 2009a). The goal for some may be monetary advancement, while others desire professional advancement (Locke & Boyle, 2016). Still, some students that enroll in doctoral programs for personal achievement or a spiritual calling (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Past studies have indicated students succeed in their quest for a degree due to internal and external motivating factors, as well as factors that influence persistence (Bowman et al., 2019; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Zhou, 2015).

### ***Motivation***

Motivation is a key characteristic that can drive persistence (Bitzer, 2011; Grover, 2007; Lovitts, 2008; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Internal motivation, along with external motivators, can play a role in a student achieving their personal and academic goals (Lovitts,

2008; Zhou, 2015). Unlike many traditional students, a nontraditional student enrolled in a doctoral program wants to either advance their career, prepare to transition to a different career, or may be considering teaching options during retirement years (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). These students are often motivated by applied research topics related to their current career or desired career (Offerman, 2011). Based on studies of doctoral students, Lovitts (2008) and Santicola (2013) concluded that above other factors, an enrolled doctorate student needed to have the ability, determination, discipline, and internal motivation or desire to successfully a program. Other factors strongly affecting motivation were found to be doctoral candidates' satisfaction, the length of time to complete the degree, the importance of the degree to the student, and the ability to transition to an independent researcher (Litalien & Guay, 2015; Mason, 2012; O'Meara et al., 2013; Santicola, 2013; Stock & Siegfried, 2014). It is unclear exactly how social support groups and communities can influence the factors associated with student motivation.

### ***Persistence***

Studies have identified some important characteristics of students and doctoral programs that relate to students completing their dissertation and, subsequently, their doctoral degree. When students perceived a positive value associated with the dissertation process, they were more likely to persist (Zhou, 2015). Persistence is comprised of an individual student's characteristics, aspects of the program, and features of the supervisory and student support process (Van der Linden et al., 2018). Lee et al. (2020) noted the study of persistence is important for educational institutions because it is often used as a measure to determine a program's effectiveness. They further suggested that the completion of a degree, fueled by persistence, is a measure of institutional success (Lee et al., 2020). While school-age children

attend school due to mandatory or truancy requirements, adults have the option to enroll in higher education programs. Persistence indicates a program's ability to satisfy and meet the needs of enrolled adults (Rovai, 2003). Factors affecting a positive perceived dissertation value include self-discipline, enjoyment of research on selected topics, the applicability of the chosen topic (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Young et al., 2019; Zhou, 2015). Online students often desire additional communication and networking opportunities outside of the virtual classroom as a means of feeling part of the institutional community (Erichsen et al., 2014). The suggestion exists that the approach to support online doctoral students needs to be more social (Erichsen et al., 2014).

Many influences affect student achievement and persistence in higher education. Over the last few decades, several persistence models have developed. Early models, such as Knowles' (1975) theory of andragogy and ideas on persistence, focused on the self-directed learner. The concept of persistence was based on the premise that certain students were goal-oriented and driven by internal or intrinsic motivation. Psychological factors, such as norms that drive behavior, prior behavior, willpower, and individual attitudes, were the core of these models. Persistence is related to the ability to effectively manage stress (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Students that have strong coping skills as well as the ability to maintain their psychological well-being were likely to be resilient and persist (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Stubb et al., 2011). The reason behind why a doctoral student elected to enroll in a degree program was a meaningful factor in persistence (Offerman, 2011). Additionally, students that had realistic expectations of the doctoral program were more likely to persist (Luna, 2012).

The more modern persistence models are still centered on psychological factors, but they also take into account other influences beyond the individual. These recent models consider the institution, the environment of the student, and student integration or how students fit into institutional variables that affect persistence (Rovai, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Newer models indicate that a combination of factors can influence or impact persistence among students. These factors play a significant role in whether a nontraditional adult student enrolled in an online program elects to continue or persist with their studies. While students who elect to pursue studies via an online-line environment are generally self-directed, decisions to continue in a program or leave are often impacted by other circumstances in their life and their feelings about the school environment (Shaw et al., 2015). Students that felt a sense of connectedness, belonging, and support in an online classroom were more motivated to overcome hardships and challenges to persist in their program (Lee et al., 2020).

### **Social Support Networks and Mechanisms**

Stress, burn-out, feelings of doubt, and exhaustion are all part of the dissertation stage that students generally experience (Rigler et al., 2017). Many students feel a sense of student isolation or lack of socialization during this stage of the process (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Bancroft, 2018; Fiore et al., 2019). This is especially true for students who live in more sparsely populated communities (Lott et al., 2010). Throughout the coursework portion of a doctoral program, students often interact with cohorts and faculty every week. These social and intellectual interactions can diminish during the dissertation phase. It has been suggested that these stresses can be mitigated with positive social support (Rigler et al., 2017).

Rovai et al. (2004) suggested that students desire a sense of community in a doctoral program. McMillan and Chavis (1986) ascertained that an academic community occurs when members feel a sense of belonging to a group. Social integration or a doctoral community relates

to student-to-student relations, as well as student-to-faculty connectedness in an academic setting. Beck and Milligan (2013) posited that institutional commitment is determined by both a school's academic and social environment. Flowers (2015) supported Lehman and Conceicao's (2013) research and findings in their book, *Motivating and Retaining Online Students*, which postulated an online learning community is one that is built on institutional instruction, as well as trust and a sense of community among students.

It has been suggested that persistence level may increase when there is a high institutional commitment among online students, but how this is attained is still a question. The proposal exists that the approach to support online doctoral students needs to be more social (Erichsen et al., 2014). Not everyone has an in-person social support group to help them persist, so there is a need to look beyond traditional means. When students do not feel a sense of belonging or connectedness, it is postulated that persistence levels may decrease (Bancroft, 2018). Byers et al. (2014) indicated that social support systems include groups such as family and friends, as well as academic support factions such as cohorts and other doctoral students. Bancroft (2018) suggested there are four types of social networking groups related to student persistence: family, friends, peers, and faculty.

Kiley (2011) considered student support systems as an area for improvement in universities that can impact student attrition. Students can benefit from support groups that help provide coping strategies and mechanisms during challenging periods of a program, such as the dissertation stage. Lott et al. (2010) indicated doctoral students often elect to leave a program due to a feeling of lack of socialization and support. During the coursework stage, students often feel socialization exists due to interaction with cohorts and feedback from instructors, but this interaction disappears during the dissertation stage.



A student's connection and interaction in a scholarly community play a role in the socio-psychological well-being of a student, both during a program as well as after the completion of a program (Stubb et al., 2011). This connection can help students moderate the stress and pressures they may experience at different periods along the journey. Levitch and Shaw (2014) indicated there is a link between student satisfaction and completion rates; when doctoral students were satisfied with their learning environment, they were more likely to persist, complete their program, and accomplish their personal and academic goals.

### ***Family Support***

It has long been suggested that doctoral students draw on family members for emotional support and to validate self-identity. Support from family members, especially a student's spouse, can play a considerable role in influencing the motivation and persistence of a student (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). Family members can help students mitigate and cope with the academic and potential financial stress of a degree obtainment (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). Unfortunately, the lack of support from a student's family, especially a spouse, can play a role in discouraging the doctoral process. Santicola (2013) found that for many doctoral students, family and friends were against a student enrolling and completing a degree because of the time commitment and missed involvement in family activities. According to Rockinson-Szapkiw (2019), the time commitment for a doctoral degree can place strains on marital relationships. While family support can have a positive or a negative effect on a student, research has not demonstrated if it is the primary reason students either persist or withdraw from a program. The struggle of students to find the balance between family life, work, and school life is a concern for universities that offer doctoral programs (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019).

### *Academic Support*

Academic support has been described as the integration and student connectedness to the entire academic process, including faculty relationships, rapport with their chair, contact with administration, academic environment, and satisfaction with the curriculum. Academic support, or the lack thereof, is a factor that plays a role in attrition as it affects the student's academic experience (Cochran et al., 2014). Faculty play a significant role in student persistence (Santicola, 2013). Students look towards faculty members to provide guidance, direction, and support via a quality academic support relationship (Cochran et al., 2014). While family members and cohorts often provide a type of needed informal social support to students, faculty and academic relationships provide a more formal type of social support.

It has long been assumed that a dissertation chair plays a central and integral role in the dissertation process. The relationship between a student and the dissertation chair has been identified as a critical factor impacting student success (Holmes et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017). Conversely, research has shown that a problematic relationship between a doctoral candidate and a chair can be a barrier to success (Holmes et al., 2014; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Research has demonstrated that a positive relationship has been shown to increase the probability of a doctoral student's completion (De Clercq et al., 2019). Dissertation chairs or supervisors of the doctoral journey who are approachable, helpful, and offer guidance played a role in the completion process (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Yet, it has not been proven that supervisor support alone can predict doctoral persistence (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). There has been limited research on the role of supervisor support and the impact on the emotional needs of a student during the dissertation journey (De Clercq et al., 2019). The role of a chair and faculty support has slowly been changing in the online environment. As the typical nontraditional doctorate

student that enters these programs is more mature with real-world and career experiences, university faculty members must find the balance between being a colleague and a supervisor (Offerman, 2011). The role and support that a supervisor may play in an online Ed.D. program compared to a traditional Ph.D. program have not been fully explored.

### ***Peer Support From Other Students***

There has been an increased interest in research on peer support by other students in the online environment. Research has shown that doctoral students who completed their degrees were more involved with peers compared to doctoral students who failed to complete their degrees (Bair & Haworth, 1999). The result of a study conducted by Oseguera and Rhee (2009) implied institutions with a peer climate can influence student persistence; however, additional research was needed to understand exactly how peer attitudes help support and shape a student's persistence behavior.

The concept of a cohort model for doctoral programs has gained interest. The thought behind this model is that students will progressively move forward in the program as a collective group so they can provide support to each other through the series of classes. Ideally, students who take classes together will subsequently form relationships with one another to create an academic community outside of the immediate classroom (Santicola, 2013). Erichsen et al. (2004) argued that changing the delivery method, such as moving to a cohort model, does not necessarily address individual student's needs. Santicola (2013) found that as a result of his study, the majority of students enrolled in doctoral programs preferred to work independently, though they elected to enroll in a program that utilized a cohort model. The participants indicated they desired the cohort model for the support and encouragement of the other members of the group could provide (Holmes et al., 2014; Santicola, 2013). These doctoral participants liked

having a sounding board for which to bounce ideas, and the cohort model served as a type of safety net (Holmes et al., 2014; Santicola, 2013).

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement supports the idea that students need and desire interaction with other students. His research indicated that student persistence and retention increased when students were involved in university-related activities (Heggins & Jackson, 2003). When students do not feel connected or part of the academic community, the risk of withdrawal increases (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Tinto, 1993). The lack of student integration is a factor in attrition (Tinto, 1993). While Astin's (1984) research was primarily conducted and focused on traditional campus involvement, some of his concepts transfer to the online environment as he postulated that student involvement translated to positive mental development and energy during a program.

While social media and other online spaces where people discuss challenges in life are often construed as negative, these sites may prove to be beneficial to students in online programs who do not have in-person support groups, such as family and close friends (Cole et al., 2017). For high school students and traditional college students, there is an overlap between in-person friends and online friends. This is not always the case for nontraditional students enrolled in online programs. Beck and Milligan (2013) found that social integration is lower in an online environment compared to a traditional or brick-and-mortar school. It has been speculated that an online social support group can provide social opportunities for people who do not otherwise have a strong in-person support group (Cole et al., 2017).

### ***Quality of Communication and Relationships***

An important ingredient to support success was frequent and meaningful communication (Ali & Kohun, 2007). This was especially true of the communication process between doctoral

candidates and their assigned chair (Holmes et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017). Chairs involved in their research or saddled with too many candidates to oversee witnessed a high number of students leaving during the dissertation stage (Rigler et al., 2017). Chairs that initiated frequent communication and were available for interaction saw a higher number of candidates achieve completion goals (Holmes et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017). In addition to frequent and interactive communication from dissertation chairs, students needed them to impart their pedagogical and research skills throughout the journey (Rigler et al., 2017). This same concept was applicable to dissertation committees; advising and mentorship obtained from committee members impacted students' time to completion. The more integrated a student and supporting members were in the process, the higher the probability of completion on time (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

Clear program expectations, including timelines and requirements, played a role in student success by eliminating excessive delays. According to Wao and Onwuegbuzie (2011), institutional communication of factual expectations played a role in a student's time to completion, which subsequently impacted student success. Fiore et al. (2019) found that students became frustrated upon receipt of inconsistent responses from different advisors and university personnel.

Masika and Jones (2016) suggested that frequent and group activities in the early stages of learning at a higher education institution were critical to building a sense of community and involvement among students. Perceptions of students at an early stage set the tone for sustained engagement during the remainder of the program (Dwyer, 2017). Students who formed interactive academic groups outside the classroom were more likely to persist beyond the first year of a program (Masika & Jones, 2016). When students developed a sense of belonging and

identity as a student through frequent interactions with other students and members of the institution, they were more likely to achieve their learning outcomes (Ali & Kohun, 2007).

### ***Mentoring***

Mentoring (or advising) in a doctoral program is a one-on-one relationship between an experienced professional who holds a doctorate and a student who aspires to obtain a similar degree. In the online environment, mentors and faculty supporters have been shown to help students persist during the independent research stage (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Erichsen et al., 2014). Along with chairs needing to initiate and undertake frequent communication to doctoral candidates whom they were supervising, (Rigler et al., 2017) suggested chairs go beyond these supervisory duties to provide individualized learning through mentoring. Anderson et al. (2013) found that students' perceptions of faculty mentorship, along with support from an intellectual community, were an important part of their doctoral educational experience. Gardner (2008a) suggested peer-mentoring programs are an area to consider where students could be paired with other students who have similar experiences. Fiore et al. (2019) found that students often turned to peers during the dissertation stage when they did not feel they received adequate support or advisement from university employees.

### ***Technology Support***

Technology is becoming an increasing part of the education experience. Online learning is becoming the preferred method of obtaining a graduate or doctoral degree (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019a). The use of technology in an online classroom is increasingly going beyond the basic written discussion posting, written online lesson, and eBook textbook (Koranteng et al., 2018). Not only are recorded and live video lectures part of the classroom, but many have chat rooms and other means for students to collaborate. Nontraditional students who

have elected an online classroom environment are often more tech-savvy compared to traditional students; these students often have advanced technology skills due to experiences and training received in their professional life (Offerman, 2011). Online students who used web-based technologies for communication over and above the basic classroom or email usage showed more connectedness (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). Universities need to be looking at the combination of technology and relationships to encourage connectedness in their programs (Koranteng et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Through the artful use of technology, administrators, faculty, staff, etc., have an opportunity to support students and respond timely to student needs during all stages of the doctoral process, including the dissertation phase, and to provide an environment of connectedness and social integration.

### **Summary**

The goal of this study was to explore how elements and perceptions of social support, which includes peer groups, academic-related individuals, and family members, influenced persistence among online doctoral students during the seemingly isolated dissertation stage of a doctoral program. The interview questions in which participants were asked to address centered on elements of social support, perceptions of support, and persistence. While some persistence factors are individual to a student and cannot be controlled by an institution of higher learning (Lo et al., 2016), research has suggested that social support groups may increase student institutional commitment in the online environment, which in turn, may have a positive impact on individual persistence. Motivation has been found to play a significant role in affecting persistence, and it is posited that social support is critical in influencing student motivation and subsequent persistence (Bitzer, 2011; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Accelerated online programs are on the rise, which gives more cause for concern of high attrition rates among adult learners, who are the marketing targets for these online programs that allow learners to achieve their higher education goals (Lo et al., 2016). These accelerated programs require significant motivation and persistence among enrolled learners operating in a virtual world. While higher education institutions that offer online doctoral programs cannot control external support groups and other individual factors outside a program, they do have an opportunity to assist students in the creation of online academic, social support communities, which may affect persistence. As universities are aware that many online students are busy working individuals focused on a career path, they must share in the responsibility of providing some structured networks for students to support their learning endeavors (Terrell et al., 2012). Some doctoral programs have implemented selected support features such as tools to create student study groups and writing camps; however, it is unknown how students truly perceive these support features and whether they find them useful (Offerman, 2011).

DeClercq et al. (2019) suggested additional studies are needed to gain more insight into perceptions of how social support is received by doctoral students and how they may influence student persistence during different stages in their programs. Student expectations and needs are different than what is thought and provided by online doctoral programs. Emerging trends lend towards more qualitative studies to understand student perceptions during the transition an individual undertakes in the doctoral candidacy stage of a program. Descriptive interviews are needed to analyze the meaning students give to their social support networks and social. It is important to explore in more detail student perceptions and how they feel social support groups influence their persistence during the challenging dissertation stage of an online doctoral program.



### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

This qualitative case study was designed to explore the relationship between peer, academic, and family support and the influence on persistence for online doctoral college students during the dissertation stage of a program. To positively affect attrition rates in online doctoral programs, obtaining insight into student perceptions of social support factors that influence academic persistence during this challenging doctoral phase in a virtual environment was needed. In this chapter, I discuss the research design and method as well as the research question, data collection process, sample population, analysis procedures, coding, and role of the researcher. Additionally, Chapter 3 includes a discussion on the topics of reliability, trustworthiness, limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations.

#### **Research Design and Method**

While research suggests that a relationship between perceived social support and academic persistence may have a positive influence on retention in college students, this relationship is understudied in doctoral programs that utilize an online platform (Ali & Smith, 2015; Berry, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiwet al., 2014). A qualitative case study methodology is effective at capturing an individual's interpretation of their experiences and gaining an understanding of how students may construct their world (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is used to understand the relationships between variables (Watson, 2018). A case study allows researchers the ability to explore an individual's relationships, communities, and programs and the meaning they give (Yin, 2003).

A qualitative case study is relevant when information is sought from those who have directly experienced a situation – the people themselves (Yin, 2003). A case study was used in this study to gain a perspective of the influence social support may have on persistence in an

online doctoral program from a student's point of view. Case studies are designed to provide interpretation and meaning to people's experiences and interactions with others (Watson, 2018). Through stories told by participants during case study interviews, researchers can better understand their views of reality and the decisions and actions they took (Lather, 1992). Qualitative research inquiries and studies are backed by the theoretical framework of the study and they are useful because they can provide thick, rich descriptions associated with concepts (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Grenier, 2018).

To address the overarching research question of this study, a single case study design was selected to capture the perceptions of social support impacting persistence to completion from former doctoral students. A single study was selected as only former doctoral students who persisted to completion from one university were invited to participate in the study. According to Yin (2003), a single case study is the best choice when examining a single group of people. A multiple case study was not appropriate in my study as it was not designed to compare and contrast or understand the similarities and differences of participants from different cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A multiple case study would have been appropriate if individuals from other universities as well as the withdrawn student would have been invited to participate in this study. An advantage of using a single case study is that it gives the researcher a chance to gain a deeper understanding of the subject or group to be studied related to an existing theory (Dyer et al., 1991). A single case study allowed me the opportunity to explore in detail the perceptions of former students who were the focal point of this study.

While most universities conduct end-of-course evaluations, these are used to gain feedback on student satisfaction related to course design, faculty preparedness, and whether a student would recommend the overall program to a potential enrollee (Fuller et al., 2014). These

evaluations are not designed to gain insight into perceptions of social support variables or factors related to persistence. My study was designed to seek student voices to gain insight into their view of social support variables that played a role in their persistence during the dissertation stage of their doctoral program.

When studying persistence, it is important to obtain students' opinions and their perspectives on the reasons they felt compelled or motivated to continue in a program (Yin, 2003; Zullig et al., 2009). A qualitative study is equipped to gather participant opinions, experiences, and perceptions (Merriam, 2009). In looking at how online students become a member of a social support group, interview questions are needed to determine if there is a link between persistence and a support community (Berry, 2017). Interviews are often used in a qualitative study to gather data related to individual experiences to make sense of an experience and assign a meaning (Saldana, 2011). In my study, I interviewed students to gain an understanding of persistence based on their perceptions of social support as these are nontangible elements that are best measured from personal interviews.

Researchers utilizing a qualitative approach are interested in exploring lived experiences and gaining an understanding of the meaning people attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). While a researcher provides direction in the interview process based on the questions asked, the researcher analyzes the responses and data collected as a result of the interviews (Merriam, 2009). Once data were collected, an analysis occurred which provided a richer meaning to the topics discussed by participants concerning the proposed research question associated with this study.

The research question for this study was as follows, “How does social support influence academic degree persistence and completion according to the perspective of online degree graduates?” The sub-research questions were as follows:

1. How does family support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?
2. How does academic support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?
3. How does peer support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral degree graduates?

A qualitative study is often used to uncover strategies and practices that could potentially help make educators and institutions more effective (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). In education fields, qualitative studies are commonly used to determine the effectiveness of a program, as well as obtain information for program improvements (Saldana, 2011). While there are studies in existence that document the high attrition rates during the dissertation or doctoral candidacy stage of online doctoral students, higher education institutions have not been able to understand the relationship between persistence, social support, and retention as high attrition rates continue to exist in online doctoral programs (Berry, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). It is difficult for social support services to be effective at decreasing attrition when factors impacting persistence have not fully been identified (Berry, 2017).

## **Population**

This study was designed to interview participants who had completed the dissertation stage of an online doctoral program and finished their degree within the last two years. The participants from this program were selected from a small, private university that offers an online

Ed.D. degree. The population of the study consisted of approximately 100 students who had graduated with their doctoral degrees within the years of 2018 to 2020. The online doctoral student retention rate at this particular university is 95% (D. McMichael, personal communication, April 6, 2021). Participants for a qualitative study are often prerecruited based on the research specs (Keegan, 2009). A two-year span of students is often typical in research studies of this nature to collect sufficient data to address the research question (Stake, 2010). The demographics of participants were expected to be variable, which is similar to the actual demographics of online doctoral students. There were no age, geographic, gender, or ethnic boundaries in the criterion for participant selection.

### **Study Sample**

The purposeful sampling intended to include information obtained from 10 participants for the data collection and results of this study. The only criterion for the selection to participate in the study is that all participants had graduated from the study's setting with an online doctoral degree. A generalized random sampling of participants was not appropriate for this study as the purpose was to obtain responses from participants who had experienced an online doctoral program after the completion of the basic coursework. The goal of the study was to question and interview students who had encountered and persisted during the dissertation stage of a doctoral program.

The purposeful sampling of participants was strategic in that after students were sought, they were identified based on their connection to the purpose of the study (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). Sample size is often not specified in purposeful sampling; rather, student selection in qualitative studies is selected purposely based on those that can provide the most information on the topic of the study (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). Guest et al. (2020) and Young and Casey

(2019) suggested a sample size of six to 20 for a qualitative study as 92% saturation is often achieved within the first 10 to 12 interviews. Dworkin (2012) and Guest et al. (2020) recommended a small sample size for a qualitative study so that it can be designed to explore at an in-depth level the experiences of a group to understand perspectives, roles, and interpretations of events.

A small sample of students participating in a case study allows a researcher to take a more in-depth look at personal factors associated with a student, as well as institutional factors that may influence a student's motivation and persistence (Shaw et al., 2015). A small sampling size often means the researchers will have more time to spend with each interviewee or participant in the study (Leavy, 2017). While large studies are designed to gather a broad representation of perspectives on a topic, in-depth studies intend to provide more insight into a topic (Saldana, 2011). A study with a small number of participants can be appropriate when the participants are involved in the same programs and have similar interests. The selected participants will represent a portion of a larger population base involved in the program (Shaw et al., 2015). Even in large studies, it is difficult to obtain every perspective on a topic. As such, data were collected from participants until a point of saturation was reached.

## **Instruments**

Data collection for this study came from two sources: a preliminary questionnaire and an in-depth phone interview with each participant. The preliminary questionnaire was sent to preselected participants using SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was used to collect basic information from participants before the interview. This information added depth to the actual interviews by providing preliminary data related to the interview questions. The use of an interview in a qualitative study helps a researcher gain insight into an individual's perspective as

participants can share their thoughts, opinions, and encounters (Merriam, 2009). Both instruments were validated using a field study. The purpose of a field study is to prevent the occurrence of errors in a study that may cause the results of the study to be inaccurate (Polit & Beck, 2017). I chose two participants who were not in the study. They reviewed the documents to secure validity and reliability in the data collection instruments.

### ***Preliminary Questionnaire***

The preliminary questionnaire was designed to be short to incentivize the completion by participants. The purpose of the questionnaire was three-fold. The data collected from the questionnaire was used by me to gather baseline information from participants to prepare for the subsequent interviews. I was able to use the information collected from the questionnaires to modify and make any necessary changes to the interview questions I planned to ask participants during the next data collection process. Lastly, the questionnaires helped the participants prepare for the phone interviews by giving them insight into the subject matter of the questions I planned to ask.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 open-ended questions administered through SurveyMonkey. The first question collected the participant's name and preferred email address. The second question asked participants when they initially entered their online doctoral program. The third question asked participants about their original expected length of time to complete their degree at the time of enrollment. The fourth question asked participants if their original enrollment anticipated graduation date changed upon entering the dissertation stage of the program. The fifth and sixth questions asked participants if they remained on track with the original cohorts that they started the program with and if they felt they were in front of or behind other cohorts in their graduation date. The seventh question asked participants if they were

satisfied with their progress and track from the beginning to the end of their program. The eighth, ninth, and tenth questions sought scaled responses regarding the family, academic, and peer support they felt they received during the dissertation process.

### ***Interview Protocol***

For the second part of the data collection process, semistructured interviews were used. These interviews were conducted virtually by GoToMeeting. A qualitative interview involves a philosophical approach, as well as the skill for a researcher to provide flexibility in reacting to responses provided by participants (Brinkmann, 2013). While there have been some changes occurring in qualitative research methodology leading researchers to explore other options to collect data, interviews are still used in approximately 85% of qualitative research studies (Keegan, 2009). Open-ended questions and semistructured interviews with participants of the study allow researchers to ask investigative questions, reflect on the responses provided, ask follow-up questions, and then shape responses into a meaning (Watson, 2018). As a researcher, my goal in conducting a qualitative case study is to capture the essence of the experience as it is (Saldana, 2011). Interviews often take place as a conversation between a researcher and participant, allowing for an exchange and the sharing of information from a participant (Keegan, 2009).

I started the interviews with some simple questions to help establish a rapport and comfort level with the participants before asking more complex and detailed questions, as suggested by Saldana and Omesta (2018). At the start of the interview process, I confirmed and validated the information the participants shared in the initial questionnaires and asked if there was any information they wanted to add to their original answers. The first set of questions focused on family support received during the participants' doctoral journey. The second set of



questions asked participants about the academic support they received during their doctoral journey and, more specifically, about the support received during their dissertation program. The third set of questions asked participants about the support received from peers. The fourth question asked participants about their perceptions of support received that were the most important for them. The fifth question about participants about their satisfaction with the doctoral program. At the end of the structured questions, I invited the participants to ask any follow-up questions they had and/or other comments they desired to add to their previous responses.

The interviews continued until saturation had taken place. Saturation occurs when the data being collected for the study begins redundancy, which means that no new information or insight is being introduced by participants (Hennink et al., 2017). If saturation had not occurred, alternate participants would have been interviewed.

### **Data Collection**

After approval was given for the commencement of the study by my committee and the Institutional Review Board (IRB; Appendix A), a request was made to an administrator of the small university to issue a solicitation request to eligible participants to participate in this study. My contact information was included in this solicitation request. Former students were sent an email with an overview of the purpose of the study, along with an invitation to participate. If sufficient eligible participants did not contact me, indicating interest to participate in the study after the first email by the administrator, I would have asked for a second email to be sent to eligible participants. The invitational email may have been sent out up to three times if the response rate was low. Once responses were received, the list of agreeing participants was examined to ensure the preestablished criteria were met for the study. Per purposeful sampling, an appropriate number of participants, 12, was used which allowed for reasonable data

collection. The actual number of participants who completed interviews could have been less than the selected number of participants. The number of participants to be selected will be relevant to address the research question and objectives without reaching a point of redundancy (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). Once redundancy began to occur during the data collection process, questionnaires, and interviews from additional participants were not going to be collected and used.

After receiving an appropriate number of responses, 12, the purposeful sampling began. Participants were sent a consent form to sign and return electronically. An accompanying letter was sent with the consent form giving participants a more detailed description of what the study entailed. The letter outlined the participation process beginning with the questionnaire, the interview, and the required procedures for ethical considerations. The individuals who agreed to participate initially completed a questionnaire that was administered via SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire included six questions relevant to the study. The participants' responses helped me prepare for the interviews. The information collected from the SurveyMonkey questionnaire was part of the triangulation process to establish trustworthiness by collecting information from different sources from participants (Shenton, 2004).

After receiving the completed questionnaires from the eligible and selected participants, each participant was scheduled for an interview via GoToMeeting to last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted based on the participant's availability and schedule in coordination with my availability and schedule. I asked the participants to find a time where they were free from home and work distractions. This ensured they were focused on the questions asked and were able to give the interview process their full attention. At the onset of the interview, I asked participants again, verbally, for their consent to not only participate but also

for me to record the interview. The interviews were audio and visually recorded. Before I began the recording, I explained to participants the steps I was going to take to ensure confidentiality and protection of their identity.

I planned to follow an interview guide to ensure all interviews were administered in a similar format. The interview questions were designed to allow participants to share responses about the support they received from family members, academic personnel, and peers during the dissertation process of their doctoral journey. Participants were allowed to share in detail the support they received from each of these groups. Participants were also allowed to ask follow-up questions. After the interview, the interviews were transcribed using GoToMeeting. I shared a copy of the transcript provided by GoToMeeting with the participants to check for accuracy and intention. I also checked the transcripts with the notes I took during the interview as part of the accuracy and verification process. I have securely stored the data in a safe per IRB requirements and it will be maintained for a minimum of five years. All information collected on my computer was destroyed digitally to maintain confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, is not standardized when it comes to data analysis and reporting (Saldana, 2011). Researchers can apply deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning to analyzing the data collected to categorize and report the findings (Åsvoll, 2014). The Framework Method is not aligned with either a specific inductive or deductive thematic analysis (Gale et al., 2013). Rather, this method is an adaptable tool used with qualitative approaches to generating themes (Gale et al., 2013). I used the Framework Method to analyze the data collected from the questionnaires and interviews. As a researcher, I was interested in gaining an understanding of online doctoral students' perceptions of persistence and

the factors that affect it, especially related to social support groups. The Framework Method allows for inductive socially-located responses from interviewees that may link to their beliefs, habits, or other events in their lives (Gale et al., 2013).

There are seven stages in the Framework Method data analysis process (Gale et al., 2013). Stage 1 is transcription, which consists of obtaining a quality audiovisual recording of the interviews and a verbatim transcript of the content. It is not necessary to have a transcript that records, pauses, and other non-important forms of dialect (Gale et al., 2013). This transcript was later used to add notes and coding. Once the transcripts were received, I sent the applicable transcript to the respective participant via email to make sure it represented the participant's thoughts and intentions. A professional service, GoToMeeting, was used for both the audiovisual recordings and transcription, as recommended by Gale et al. (2013).

Stage 2 of the data analysis process is familiarization with the interview. Data from the interviews were analyzed by reading, re-reading, and examining the transcripts. As recommended by Gale et al. (2013), I listened to the audiovisual recordings again and made notes of any impressions or thoughts of the interview to assist with interpretations.

Stage 3 is coding. After I familiarized myself with the interview, I then read the transcript on a line-by-line basis and applied a label or code. The labels or codes assigned were used to classify and compare the data (Gale et al., 2013). I utilized the concept of open coding. Coding is the process of assigning labels to data collected to sort into categories; this allows the researcher to condense and organize data (Leavy, 2017).

Stage 4 was developing a working analytical framework. When coding, a pseudonym is used in place of the university's name. Additionally, a pseudonym and coding scheme was

assigned to each participant to protect their identity. When coding, the objective is to look for patterns (Merriam, 1998).

Stage 5 was applying the analytical framework. Codes are assigned numbers or abbreviations for ease of use in coding subsequent transcripts after the initial transcripts have been coded (Gale et al., 2013).

Stage 6 was charting data into the framework matrix. In this stage, I used a spreadsheet to set up a matrix and chart the data into the matrix (Gale et al., 2013). During this process, interesting quotes or words from interviewees were identified and noted.

Stage 7, the last stage of the Framework Method, was interpreting the data. During this stage, data were compared and contrasted to help make meaning of the participant's experiences. "Characteristics of and differences between the data are identified" as part of the interpretation process (Gale et al., 2013, p. 5).

The goal was to bring organization to the data obtained during the interviews for reporting purposes (Saldana, 2011). Categories were determined after patterns had been identified as they allowed the data to be interpreted and relationships to be established (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). Once data were recorded, analyzed, coded, and reported, connections and interrelationships were established.

### **Trustworthiness/Credibility**

To establish credibility as a researcher, I documented the rigor involved in the questionnaire, interview, analysis, and reporting process of the study. Both experienced, and novice researchers need to establish trustworthiness and rigor as part of their research process (Amankwaa, 2016). The value of a study is strengthened by trustworthiness which involves credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016; Morse, 2015).

Triangulation is used in qualitative research to promote trustworthiness and rigor (Tibben, 2015; Yin, 2003). The concept behind triangulation is that a researcher adopts more than one approach to the data collection and analysis process (Tibben, 2015). For my study, I implemented data triangulation, which consisted of collecting data from a variety of sources in a purposeful manner (Tibben, 2015). I planned to obtain data triangulation by administering prequestionnaires and conducting semistructured interviews.

To additionally substantiate the study, the concept of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability was established (Amankwaa, 2016). Triangulation plays a significant role in ascertaining credibility (Amankwaa, 2016). The key to proving transferability was to provide thick descriptions. When situations or phenomena are described in sufficient detail where conclusions can be drawn or transferred to other times, settings, or situations, transferability has occurred (Amankwaa, 2016). In reporting the results of the interviews of participants, I provided detailed descriptions that could be transferred to other participant situations. My detailed descriptions included quotes and examples from participants to help support transferability.

To establish confirmability, I will keep detailed records, otherwise referred to as an audit trail (Amankwaa, 2016). I will keep and maintain accurate records of questionnaires and interview responses from participants in both raw and coded forms. Dependability is authenticated when a researcher outside of the process evaluates and determines the accuracy of the findings and interpretations (Amankwaa, 2016). To further substantiate my research, after I completed my participant-based interviews, I asked for a peer review of my data collection methods, analysis, and report findings.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations and ethical decisions are critical to a study. I obtained the necessary IRB certifications and approvals to ensure the ethical treatment of participants in this study (Parker, 2016). I understand the ethical obligations and responsibilities of a researcher associated with the IRB training in protecting human research participants. Before embarking on my study, I received approval from my chair, my committee, and the IRB board. The dissemination of information to these respective parties included the purpose of the study, the type of participant to be interviewed, and the data collection process.

The participants were informed of any associated risks with the study before they signed the consent form. I made sure the candidates understood their participation in the questionnaire and interview process was voluntary. I also made sure the participants understood that they could elect to withdraw their participation from the study at any time. I informed the participants that their identities would remain private and confidential; their identities would not be revealed as part of the results of the study. As part of the data collection process, each participant was given a pseudonym, and the results are published based on the given name assigned to each participant.

## **Assumptions**

Assumptions are things we take for granted or assume are true, though they cannot be verified (Terrell, 2016). There were several assumptions for this study. It was assumed that participants would provide honest answers to all questions asked. Participants were told their answers would remain confidential, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity.

Furthermore, it was assumed that all participants engaged willingly in the study and answered questions to the best of their ability with no ulterior motives. No compensation or other incentives were offered to individuals who elected to participate. While participants were

informed that they could withdraw at any time, it was assumed that participants would continue to participate through the questionnaire and interview and share their experiences with detailed explanations. It was assumed that the participants selected for the study were appropriate as a list of qualified participants was obtained from the university.

### **Limitations**

A limitation is a potential weakness associated with the study that has been identified by the researcher (Creswell, 2015). One of the limitations of this study was time. Studies conducted over longer periods of time often offer more validity due to potential replication. A second limitation was that the study was conducted at a university in which the online doctoral program in education has only been in existence since the fall of 2016. Programs which have been in existence longer may be more structured. The third limitation was the potential concern of participants regarding the confidentiality of their answers. Fourth, this study was conducted via audiovisual interviews, rather than face-to-face interviews, which did not allow me to fully observe body language that could have influenced my interpretation of the information conveyed by participants. Fifth, this study was designed to capture perceptions that can change over time.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are additional limitations that may be implemented by the researcher that could affect the results (Terrell, 2016). The primary delimitation of this study was that it had a narrow focus. Only students from one university were interviewed. Additionally, only students who had completed the dissertation aspect of an online Ed.D. program in education from a private university and successfully achieved their doctorate between the years 2018 and 2020 were interviewed. This may not have obtained the perceptions and perspectives of all students.



## **Role of Researcher**

The researcher is the most important tool of a study (Keegan, 2009). During the interview with a participant, a researcher is an integral part of the discovery process. Not only does a researcher ask initial questions, but also understands how to ask additional questions based on the responses given (Keegan, 2009). Additionally, the researcher collects data, analyzes the data, and seeks meaning out of the data collected (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The researcher is in charge of the research and interpretation of the data (Keegan, 2009).

I am aware that my responses and subsequent questions could have shaped the collection of data obtained from each interview (Merriam, 2009). This was especially true in this study as I could personally relate to the participants of the study. A researcher's past experiences, training, and personality may influence the outcome (Keegan, 2009). At the onset of the interview process, I identified myself and provides some general personal background to each participant. Since I could personally identify with my study, I was aware that my own experiences could have impacted the study. A researcher to be aware of their behavior and potential bias (Keegan, 2009). I did not plan to intentionally influence participant responses or lead anyone towards programmed responses. As much as possible, I did not plan for my own experiences to misconstrue meaning or interpretation from their responses.

In this study, there was the potential for bias as I was a student myself in a similar situation as the participants. My primary goal was to collect data and analyze the data without being directly involved from a personal viewpoint. This type of objective approach to research is called bracketing (Rolls & Relf, 2006). While bracketing involves a type of objectivity to the data, at the same time, researchers often state their background to help give perspective on the findings and report by the researcher (Fischer, 2009). Bracketing is often used for sensitive

interviews; however, bracketing can be used when a study involves a topic that may involve an emotional or ethically challenging topic or one that affects the researcher in a personal way (Rolls & Relf, 2006). Bracketing involves having mindfulness to periodically reflect on assumptions and implications of the findings (Fischer, 2009).

To establish credibility as a researcher, I documented the rigor involved in the interview, analysis, and reporting process of the study. Both experienced, and novice researchers need to establish trustworthiness as part of their research process (Amankwaa, 2016). I informed participants that I have been involved in higher education for approximately 18 years as an adjunct instructor. In addition to being an adjunct online undergraduate instructor at a four-year university, I also teach high school classes in a traditional brick-and-mortar environment. As I have been involved in the education field for almost 20 years, I felt as though I had the necessary experience and academic exposure to understand and interpret responses received from participants after completion of the interviews. To further substantiate my research, after I completed my participant-based interviews, I asked for a peer review of my analysis and reported findings.

## **Summary**

The focal point of this study was the relationship between perceived types of social support and academic persistence during the dissertation phase of an online doctoral program. The study intended to gain more information about social support factors that contributed to student persistence in online doctoral programs. The research question addressed is as follows: “How does social support influence academic degree persistence and completion according to the perspective of online degree graduates?”

Direct information from student participants was sought to give more insight into their perceptions and thoughts on social support. A single case study research design was appropriate for the study as it employed open-ended interview questions that allowed me to capture perceptions of social support expressed by participants. Open-ended interview questions allowed participants to express their thoughts and perceptions freely, based on their experiences. The results of this study could help universities implement programs that increase retention and help guide students to navigate successfully the challenging dissertation phase of a doctoral program. As the growth in online programs continues, it is imperative to gain a perspective on students' needs and implement programs that are best suited to supporting their enrollment goals.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain in-depth insight on aspects of social support that influenced online doctoral student persistence during the dissertation stage of an online doctoral program. Persistence occurs in a doctoral journey when a student completes a dissertation and achieves a doctoral degree. This case study was designed to explore student perceptions of family, academic, and peer support and their influence on persistence. While prior studies have identified family, academic, and peer support as factors affecting student persistence, it is not known which factor more strongly encourages persistence and/or how the combination of these factors affects persistence among nontraditional online doctoral students. Data were collected that addressed the overarching research question, “How does social support influence academic degree persistence and completion according to the perspective of online degree graduates?”

This chapter was designed to report the findings and results of the analysis of data obtained from two different data collection instruments administered to participants. I used both questionnaires and interviews to collect data related to perceptions of persistence from a purposeful sampling of 12 online doctoral students who had completed their degree. The first source of data collection was the questionnaires which were designed to obtain preliminary information from participants before the interviews. The main source of data collection for this case study was from semistructured interviews. The interview questions were designed to solicit responses from participants related to their perceptions and experiences of persistence based on family, academic, and peer support. The collected data were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for categories, meaning, and themes. Participant responses were analyzed to explore a gap in the literature on descriptive insight received directly from participants related to

supporting factors that influence and guide persistence during the dissertation stage. Specific themes emerged from this process related to the subresearch questions of the primary research question.

1. How does family support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?
2. How does academic support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?
3. How does peer support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral degree graduates?

This chapter is organized as follows: introduction, a summary of the research process, participants, analysis of the questionnaire data, analysis of interview questions data, themes resulting from the semistructured interviews, and a summary of the chapter.

### **Summary of Research Process**

This study utilized a single qualitative case study for data collection. After receiving the IRB approval (Appendix A), a purposeful sampling of participants was obtained from a small private university that offered an online doctoral program. All of the participants were asked to sign a consent form, complete a questionnaire, and participate in a semistructured interview progress. The approach was appropriate because individual perceptions, personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings from these former online students who completed their dissertation and degree were needed to adequately respond to the research questions.

Once IRB approval was obtained, approximately 100 students who had completed an online doctoral degree between 2018 and 2020 at the private university were sent an invitation via email from an administrator at the university soliciting participation in the study. For

confidentiality purposes, a university administrator forwarded an invitation to eligible participants' emails. This invitation explained the purpose of the study, participant eligibility requirements, and the two components of the study, the questionnaire and the semistructured interview. All students that were sent the solicitation notice were eligible for the study as they were over the age of 18, and they were nontraditional students who had completed a dissertation and successfully finished the requirements to receive their degree.

In preparation for the study, a field test was conducted to ensure that the questionnaire and interview questions for participants were appropriate and adequately addressed the stated research questions. The two field test participants were eligible participants to the study as they met the criteria, yet they did not participate in the study. The technology used to implement the questionnaire was SurveyMonkey; the audiovisual interview, GoToMeeting; and the transcription service, GoToMeeting, were also part of the field test. The feedback on both instruments from the field test participants was used to strengthen the reliability and validity of the study.

A total of 12 participants completed both the questionnaire and interview. Initially, the participants were sent a follow-up note with a consent form by me explaining the minimal risks associated with the study. A signed consent form was then obtained from the participants before proceeding with the administration of the questionnaire and interview.

A questionnaire was sent to participants through SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions. The first question asked for the participant's name and verification of eligibility for the study. There were six structured questions and three scaled questions. I used the information gathered from this initial survey to gain preliminary information on the participants and help to guide the questions administered during the interview process.

Once data from the questionnaires and interviews were received, the analysis process began implementing the seven steps associated with the Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013). As part of the analysis process, categories and emerging themes were identified.

1. Questionnaires were sent to participants via SurveyMonkey. Once participants had completed the questionnaire, interviews were scheduled. The interviews were recorded and transcribed through the application, “GoToMeeting.” After the interviews had been transcribed, I reviewed the transcripts and compared them to the audio version of the interview, as well as the notes were taken during the interview to ensure transcription accuracy. Each participant was sent their transcribed interview via email to check for validity and intention.
2. After the participants verified the transcripts, I reread the transcripts several times to gain familiarity with them. My detailed notes were again reviewed for thoughts or impressions that arose during the interviews (Gale et al., 2013).
3. During the review process, I began to take notes of concepts and keywords that emerged from the participants’ responses. As I began to code the transcripts, I looked for patterns.
4. After becoming familiar with the participant responses to the interview questions, I began to code based on keywords and patterns of words that stood out. As I continued to review the transcripts and code the data, I asked the following questions.
  - What were the participants saying about each support group – family, academic, and peer groups?
  - What were the participants’ perceptions on how each of the support groups influenced persistence?
  - What were some of the same descriptions that resonated with each participant?

Thoroughly reviewing the transcripts in detail to gain familiarity allowed me the ability to identify key concepts and keywords, which was a critical component of the analysis process involving the establishment of categories, patterns, and themes.

5. The codes were grouped into five main categories. Five themes emerged from these categories.
6. I charted the data into a framework matrix (Appendix F). The matrix contained four columns that included the categories, themes, descriptions, and paraphrased or direct quotes from participants of their feelings and perceptions of support during their doctoral journey.
7. After the development of the matrix, the transcripts were reviewed again to ensure the interpretation of the data against the themes that had emerged.

### **Presentation of Findings**

Data were collected from 12 participants who completed their online doctoral degrees between the years 2018 and 2020. To protect the participant's privacy, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The findings of the study were generated from the questionnaires initially sent to participants after receiving their signed consent and the answers provided in the semistructured interviews. The first part of this findings section begins with an overview of the participants. The next part includes detailed information from the questionnaires and semistructured interviews administered to the participants.

### ***Participants***

The study took place at a small, private university that has offered an online doctoral program since 2016. Similar to other online postgraduate programs, the university targets nontraditional students. Approximately 100 participants were sent an invitation to participate via



an email from an administrator at the university. Those interested in participating were asked to contact me directly by email. There were 15 initial participants who expressed an interest in participating. A later participant was placed as an alternate as the goal was to have at least 10 participants in the study. As four of the original participants did not complete the entire process, the alternate was used. Of the participants who participated in the study, the start date and graduate date of the participants varied. The range of start dates of the participants ranged from 2015 to 2018. Eleven of the participants were female, and one was male. Per a review of the names on the list, the administrator of the university indicated that at least 10 different dissertation chairs were represented by the participants. All of the participants were at least 18 years of age who had completed an online Ed.D. in education as these components were part of the eligibility criteria.

### ***Questionnaire Findings***

The participants completed the questionnaire survey before the interview (Appendix C). The purpose of the 10-question survey administered via SurveyMonkey was to gain knowledge and insight that would help add depth to the semistructured interviews. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. The pseudonyms used were Dr. M, Dr. N, Dr. O, Dr. P, Dr. Q, Dr. R, Dr. S, Dr. T, Dr. U, Dr. V., Dr. W, and Dr. X.

The first question on the questionnaire asked participants to indicate their name and preferred email. Some participants expressed interest in the continued use of their university email, while others desired the use of their personal email since they had graduated and no longer checked their school email regularly. The second question asked participants if they had attended the university to complete their doctoral dissertation and degree online. This ensured they were eligible participants to the study. The second part of this question asked participants to

state when they started the online Ed.D. program with a specific semester and year. One participant indicated she had started in 2015 and was part of the second or third initial cohort after the online doctoral program began. Eight participants started the online program in 2016. Two participants indicated they started in January of 2016, two started in March of 2016, two started in the summer of 2016, and two started in the fall of 2016. Three participants indicated they started their program in 2017: two started in the spring of 2017, and one started in the summer of 2017. There was one participant who started in January of 2018. These results can be viewed in a table format in Appendix E.

The third question asked participants to indicate their anticipated graduation date upon enrollment in the online doctoral program. Most of the participants indicated an anticipated graduation date between three to three and one-half years from their enrollment date. Only Dr. P indicated she thought it would take her between three to five years. The fourth question asked participants if their expected graduation date changed after entering the dissertation stage of the program. All but two participants indicated their expected graduation date changed after entering the dissertation stage. Of the participants that answered yes, their expected graduation date had changed, five provided comments. Dr. P wrote, “I did a little bit each day to make sure I accomplished my goal of completing it in 3 years.” She further indicated she finished in front of her cohorts and earlier than she anticipated. Dr. Q stated that she did not have an opportunity to work on her dissertation while enrolled in classes. Furthermore, she stated, “When I started working with my chair, I was asked to start over a couple of times which slowed things down for me and extended the time that I would be in the program.” Dr. U indicated that she became pregnant in 2018 and gave birth in 2019. During this time, she experienced severe complications, plus she needed time to adjust to motherhood after giving birth. Dr. R wrote that they took on

additional training and classes so that meant May 2020, rather than the originally anticipated date of May 2019. Dr. X stated that her graduation date was only extended by four months, which meant September 2020.

The fifth question asked participants if they remained on the same track during their doctoral journey as their original cohorts upon entering the dissertation stage. Seven participants answered “yes”; they remained on the same track as their cohorts during the dissertation stage, while three answered “no”; they did not remain on the same track. Two participants elected to provide comments rather than a yes or no answer. Of the seven participants that answered yes, three elected to write additional comments. Dr. Q wrote, “I did not take any breaks.” She continued to comment that some cohorts finished earlier, some fell off track, and some were still working on their dissertation. Dr. U commented that the coursework was completed with cohorts, while the third “yes” participant, Dr. X, indicated she was not sure of the status of her cohorts as the names of students in her classes fluctuated. The participant, Dr. P, who answered “no,” commented that everyone was at a different point in their dissertation process. Of the two participants that elected to provide comments rather than a yes or no answer, Dr. R remained in the Ed.D. program but switched to a different specialty. Dr. S wrote, “In some instances, of course, some dropped out.”

The sixth question asked participants that if they remained on the same track as their cohorts during the dissertation stage and if they were in front of others or behind them. Two participants responded, “they were in front” and two replied, “they were behind their cohorts.” Three participants put N/A, and these were the same three participants who had answered previously that they remained on track with their cohorts. Four participants provided comments rather than indicating a yes or no answer, and one participant wrote yes and no but added

additional comments. Of the four participants who only elected to write comments rather than answering yes or no, Dr. Q stated that the dissertation process slowed her down, but she thought she was in the middle. Dr. R wrote that one person in the cohort graduated before her, but she was able to skip four courses as part of being on an advanced track. She further commented that no one else from her cohort had graduated. Dr. U stated she thought she was behind, and Dr. X wrote that she was not sure if her pace compared to others in her cohort. The participant that said both yes and no, Dr. S, remarked, “some are still working hard to finish; some finished with me.”

The seventh question asked participants if they were satisfied with their progress from the beginning to the end of their online doctoral program. Eight participants answered yes, while three participants elected to only write comments, and one participant wrote “mostly” with some additional comments. Only one of the participants that indicated yes also wrote a comment. Dr. X stated, “I was satisfied with my progress from beginning to end.” Of the three participants that did not answer the question directly but instead provided comments, Dr. M wrote, “During the program track, I was disappointed because a few more courses were added, but towards the end, I was satisfied.” Dr. O wrote, “Yes, with the qualification that it became necessary to change dissertation chairs.” A third participant, Dr. U, who only wrote a comment, stated, “After putting everything into perspective, such as getting married the same year that I started the program and giving birth towards the end of the program, I am satisfied with the progress I made.” Dr. Q, who replied to the question with “mostly,” also wrote, “I love my university. I love my instructors. I did not have the best experience with my chair. Otherwise, I can say that I enjoyed everything.”

Questions 8, 9, and 10 asked the participants to designate a scaled response from one to five. The eighth question asked participants about the importance of the family support they received during the dissertation process of their journey. They were asked to rate on a scale of

one to five how important support from their family was to them in the successful completion of their dissertation. Ten of the participants rated the importance of their family support as a five, while only two participants rated their family support as a three. Of the 10 participants that indicated five on the scale for family support, five elected to make additional comments. Dr. P wrote, “My family supported me and was fully aware of the study time, commitment, etc. They helped me out in so many different ways.” Dr. Q wrote, “I would have quit had it not been for the support of my family and loved ones. They made the difference.” Dr. R commented, “Yes, my rating is a five because of the support I received from my husband and kids.” Dr. U indicated that her family was the strongest source of support. The fifth participant, Dr. X, gave a rating of five and also provided commentary that evoked family support was essential in her doctoral journey. One of the participants, Dr. V, who gave a rating of three, wrote, “More support would’ve been good! I don’t think they understood how to support me, in all honestly.”

Question 9 asked participants about the importance of the support they received from the university during the dissertation process of their journey. The participants were asked to rate on a scale of one to five how important support from their university was to them in the successful completion of their dissertation. Four of the participants gave a rating of five; four participants gave a rating of four, one participant indicated a rating of three and one-half, one participant indicated a rating of three, and the eleventh participant indicated a rating of one. The twelfth participant did not give a ranking. Two of the participants that gave a rating of five for the importance of university support made comments. Dr. U indicated the rating of five was for the dissertation chair and further commented, “I needed a strong chair, and I got just that.” Dr. X indicated the university provided great support. Only one of the participants that gave university support a rating of four provided additional comments. Dr. P wrote, “My dissertation chair was

amazing, and his communication was exceptional. The monthly check-in process with the university advisors was also a huge help.” Dr. Q gave a rating of three and remarked, “My committee members supported me. The dissertation coordinator supported me. My favorite research librarian supported me. I did not hear from anyone else.” Dr. V gave a rating of one and wrote, “I’d say one because it was all on me, at my own pace, for better or worse.” Dr. S elected not to give a scaled rating but instead only commented, “Only the support of the chair was important.”

The tenth and final question on the questionnaire asked participants about the importance of the support they received from their peers during the dissertation process of their journey. The participants were asked to rate on a scale of one to five how important support from their peers was to them in the successful completion of their dissertation. Three participants gave peer support a five rating; four participants gave peer support a rating of four. Two participants indicated a rating between three and four, one participant gave a rating of three, and two participants gave a rating of two. Of the three participants that gave a five rating to the importance of peer support on their dissertation journey, only one made additional comments. Dr. Q indicated that there were many times she was half asleep at work, yet her boss pushed her to finish. When she needed time off to finish major projects, he was always in agreement. Furthermore, her team at work provided inspiration and encouragement. Two of the participants who gave a rating of four for peer support made comments. Dr. P indicated that peers were very supportive, and Dr. V noted that her peers were more empathetic and understanding. One of the two participants that gave a rating range of three to four indicated a three for friends but a four for other doctoral students, while the other participant, Dr. S, indicated that no one understood, though they meant well. Dr. S also wrote that the only friend who understood was in the same

boat as they started and finished the program together. Dr. U gave a rating of three and stated that peer support was not necessary because other support was received. One of the participants who gave a rating of two for peer support commented that peer support was important.

### ***Interview Findings***

The same 12 participants who responded to the questionnaires also participated in the semistructured interviews. The interviews were scheduled with participants upon completion of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to indicate three available times. The interviews were scheduled, and each lasted between 25 minutes to 50 minutes with participants.

There were six questions on the interview guide (Appendix D). The first three questions closely resembled the sub-research questions for this study as the questions asked participants about the three support groups at the focal point of this study: family, academic university committee, and peer support received by online doctoral students during their dissertation journey. The fourth question asked participants about the line of support that was the most critical for them in their doctoral journey. The fifth question asked participants about their satisfaction level associated with the dissertation portion of their online doctoral degree. The sixth question asked participants if they would like to add any additional information or details related to the support they received during the dissertation process. The results in this section are reported based on the participants' responses to each of the six interview questions.

**Family Support.** The first interview question asked participants about the family support they received. The first interview question was as follows: "Did your family give you support during this process? If so, what type of support did they give you? What support was the most helpful?" The majority of the participants expressed how supportive their family was, not only during the dissertation stage of their doctoral degree, but also during the entire process. The

responses received during the interview process supported the high family support by participants in the questionnaires. Participants discussed support by a variety of family members, including spouses, parents, siblings, children, and other relatives. The majority of the responses viewed their family support from a positive perspective, while a few indicated their family members did not fully understand their emotions and the academic process of obtaining a doctorate.

Several participants indicated their spouses played a significant role in supporting them, both from an emotional viewpoint as well as supporting them from a time perspective by helping with domestic chores. Dr. O stated, “My spouse gave me family support; he gave me encouragement and quiet time in which to work on my dissertation.” Dr. X said, “My husband was very supportive; he was always taking care of them (the kids). He took on a lot of the roles here at home.” Dr. P. indicated her spouse played a critical role in encouraging her through the process and commented, “He (husband) earned an honorary doctorate for leading me through it, encouraging me, and watching the times where I doubted myself or I had meltdowns.” Dr. W emphasized that it was important to have a confidant who would listen. She remarked, “I had somebody there to listen.” Dr. R elaborated on the domestic help at home which provided time to write and disclosed, “My husband was extremely important; he provided a lot of domestic support. He took over all the cooking and errand running. He took over the domestic duties for all four years.” Dr. X commented, “My husband has always been my number one fan.”

Some participants talked about the family support received by their family members other than a spouse. Several participants discussed how their entire family, including their children, played a role by helping with chores around the house. Dr. U said, “I really think the most helpful support came from my family providing time for me to solely focus on my dissertation



process.” Dr. T said, “They (family) gave me plenty of space and quiet time. They were very patient with me when I wasn’t at dinner due to finishing or wrapping something up.” A couple of participants talked about the support they received from their parents who lived in the same city.

Dr. S. said, “My parents would come over and fix meals.” Dr. Q, whose parents did not live in the same city, said she still received parental support in the form of phone calls. Dr. Q stated,

My father is not a telephone person, but he would always call me once a week and just give me a little pep talk. He would tell me how proud he is of me and it meant a lot to him for me to continue on this journey.

Dr. U commented that she received support from many different family members. She remarked, “I can go on and on about support, but anyway that you would define support, I received it from my family, my husband, my mother, my cousins.”

Some participants indicated that family members did not always fully understand their situation. Dr. R. commented, “For my extended family, I would say there was really no support. My husband and I are the first two in our families to even have a college degree.” Dr. S. mentioned, “My parents didn’t understand the process. For example, my mom would say, ‘are you done with that big paper that you’re doing?’” Dr. X said, “Even though you may have a supportive family, it doesn’t mean they know what you’re going through academically.”

**Academic University Community Support.** The second interview question looked at support from the academic university community. The second question was, “Did you receive support from your university’s academic community? If so, what type of support did they give you? What support was the most helpful?” As responses were received from participants, four distinct academic groups emerged. The distinct academic groups consisted of the dissertation chair, faculty and committee members, and advisors, which included enrollment advisors,

dissertation advisors, and financial advisors. The fourth academic group that participants commented about the support received was from the librarians and the writing center professionals. The majority of the comments from participants were about experiences, thoughts, and feelings associated with their dissertation chair. However, different participants talked about the other three groups in enough detail that it is important to discuss these other groups.

Seven participants were extremely satisfied with their original dissertation chair and felt highly supported during their dissertation journey. Two participants requested a dissertation chair change and the other three participants experienced a nonsupportive relationship with their chair. Of the participants that felt supported by the dissertation chairs during their doctoral candidacy journey, many expressed favorable comments. Dr. R said, “Number one was the dissertation chair. God, himself, I think, chose for me. She was perfect, and she provided all kinds of support.” Dr. P experienced a similar feeling and commented, “I think I lucked out. I hit a home run with having the best dissertation chair.” Another participant, Dr. U, also felt highly supported by the dissertation chair assigned and remarked, “The most support that I received from the university was my dissertation chair.” Dr. M expressed the importance of chair support during the dissertation stage with the comments, “My chair was very vital and critical.”

Dr. T felt support from the dissertation chair throughout the entire dissertation process and commented, “He (chair) said, you know what, we are going to do this together. I am with you till the end, and we will get it done.” In addition to feeling supported, Dr. U commented that her chair challenged her in a positive manner. She said, “I wanted to be challenged, and deep down inside, I knew he (chair) was the individual that would challenge me.” Dr. N remarked that she liked how her chair guided and supported her in the dissertation writing yet allowed her to develop. She commented, “He (my chair) guided me, but he let me make decisions so I still felt

like it was my paper.” Dr. X felt that her chair continually pushed her to improve. She said that she and her chair had a lot of one-on-one work time, yet her chair would remind her that she was there to help her.

The participants who did not feel fully supported by their dissertation chair during the dissertation stage of their program expressed their feelings. Dr. Q commented, “We just had a very adversarial, different, difficult relationship at times.” Dr. W commented, “My chair didn’t quite match me and didn’t quite understand what I was doing.” Dr. S, who had a chair change, expressed her feeling of a lack of support from her first chair. She said, “I fired the first one. She (my 1<sup>st</sup> chair) never took my phone calls or responded to texts, and she misspelled my name incorrectly.” Furthermore, Dr. S said that she angrily told the administration, “My chair is not being supportive. She’s not helping me. She’s doing nothing. I’m out on a limb out here, and I want her fired.”

Dr. S said that once she experienced a chair change, her thoughts and perceptions of support changed later in the dissertation stage with the comment, “None of them (my cohorts) came close to what I was blessed enough to have with her (my second chair).” Dr. V, who did not feel fully supported by the dissertation chair, did not make a chair change. She commented, “But during that period of time, I felt like I could have died or dropped off the face of the planet and my chair wouldn’t have reached out to me.” Dr. Q stated, “There were times when my chair was completely demoralizing to me.”

One aspect of support that participants enjoyed was the constant and timely communication from their respective dissertation chairs. Dr. V stated, “If I ever reached out to her (chair), she almost always gave me an instantaneous response, whether it was a text or an e-mail.” Dr. S experienced a similar feeling and expressed, “I could call her, text her, or e-mail her

anytime, and it didn't matter if she was on vacation." Dr. T felt supported by the constant communication with her dissertation chair and felt it made a difference in the graduation date. Dr. T remarked, "He communicated so well with me and it didn't matter the time, day or night. He would answer e-mails and call and check on me." Dr. U felt that the timely communication supported her writing progression and kept her on pace. She said,

I could expect to hear back from him, on average, within 48 hours, and it was crucial for me because that kept me working. If he was a chair that would have taken seven to 10 days to respond to me, that would have allowed me to have too much time.

Dr. X liked that her chair was in touch and helped her schedule writing reviews and revisions. She commented, "My chair would respond quickly, and if he was going to be out, he would let me know ahead of time so I could submit and have him review it."

The second type of academic community support that the participants talked about was from faculty, instructors, and committee members. Most of the comments from participants about faculty and committee member support were positive, but two participants experienced some negative support. Dr. O talked about the support received from university faculty members during the coursework part of the doctoral program with the comment, "All of the faculty in my classes were very supportive. Their feedback was very constructive." Dr. T offered similar comments about the continual support and availability of the university's faculty members with the commentary, "The professors and the teachers of the courses were always available to support and answer any questions." Dr. V felt strong academic support from all the instructors encountered at the university and noted, "I think the instructors are well-chosen to teach what they teach."

Some participants talked highly of a particular faculty member that significantly

impacted them during the program. Dr. Q noted, “He (faculty member) was really good; all of the instructors were very good.” Dr. Q commented about another specific faculty member with the remark, “The cards and letters he (faculty member) sent were little things, but they made a huge impact on me.” Dr. N mentioned some advice she received from a particular faculty member. She stated,

Some of the best advice I received was when I sent a faculty member my topic and I was told not to do it because the topic was saturated; that is some of the best advice I got because it saved me lots of time.

Dr. V remarked about the availability and accessibility of a specific faculty member with the comment, “I always felt like he was accessible and available to me if I needed direction that was outside of my committee.” Dr. V further felt strongly about the support received during the program from a faculty member and commented, “He’s a rarity. He’s a gem, truly; I think one of his greatest strengths is looking at someone and saying, hey, you’re doing a great job, but you could do this better and let me help you.”

The majority of the participants offered positive comments about the support received from their dissertation committee members. Dr. N commented, “They (committee) were quick and fast; they gave good feedback, which made a big difference.” Dr. Q, who experienced an adversarial relationship with her dissertation chair, discussed the overwhelmingly positive support received from a committee member that she said helped compensate for the negative support she perceived from her chair. She stated, “There were times that my chair portrayed me to be less than intelligent and this committee member would give me a nudge.” Dr. N spoke highly of all members of her dissertation committee and said, “My committee was the best committee I could have hoped for.” While Dr. X felt supported by all committee members, one

particular member stood out and she commented, “I spoke to my committee a lot, especially one committee member because he had been one of my previous research professors.”

Only two participants had negative comments about the support received from faculty or committee members at the university. Dr. V told a story about a situation where discouraging feedback was given by a committee member; however, the participant’s chair and other committee members were able to help provide the positive support needed by the participant to remain on track. Dr. V said,

I had gotten some really critical or what I perceived as negative feedback from one of my committee members. I questioned how this was supposed to build me up and make me better. This feedback was discouraging to me, and I just had a mental breakdown one night. My chair and the other committee member were there to counteract with positive feedback what this committee member had said. They helped re-emphasize that I was on the right path.

Dr. N expressed her disappointment in a faculty member when she asked for support in writing a recommendation for a scholarship application. She stated, “When I wanted to apply for a scholarship, I asked her (an instructor) to write my letter of recommendation, and she flat out said no.”

The third group of academic support that participants talked about was advising. Participants talked about the support they received from their enrollment advisors, student services, the manager of dissertations, and financial advisors. Some participants talked about the initial impressions and support they felt from advisors at the beginning of their online doctoral program. Dr. N said, “My first positive experience was with my enrollment advisor.”

Some students felt that they received continued support from the beginning of their

doctoral enrollment until they finished their degree. Dr. T commented, “The first person who provided that support for me was my student advisor. She held me by the hand throughout the entire process.” Dr. X pointed out, “When you have somebody speaking to you in the academic language, or in the academic world, I felt there was more of a connection there.”

Others talked about how specific advisors supported them during different phases of their program. Dr. T commented, “My financial advisor was also wonderful.” Dr. X also talked about the support she received from the financial aid group with the comment. She discussed that she had to use financial aid in the form of loans, and she found the financial aid office to be very supportive and helpful, especially when she had questions. Dr. R talked about how she spoke with her advisor throughout the program, and her advisor helped her feel like she was continually moving forward in the program by offering supportive words. Dr. R commented, “My advisor would periodically remind me how many classes I had left to go, and she was great about asking what I needed.”

Several of the participants talked about the support received from the dissertation manager. Dr. N mentioned, “The dissertation manager was awesome.” Dr. R made positive comments about the support she received from the dissertation manager, “I know I e-mailed her (dissertation manager) a lot; she provided a lot of answers to the questions I had about deadlines or how to do things.” Dr. Q mentioned the inspirational words she received from the dissertation manager. She commented, “The dissertation manager offered words of encouragement, and I found that to be very inspirational.”

While the majority of the comments received from the participants talked about the positive support they received from university advisors, some had hoped for a little more support than what they received. Dr. V discussed that her student services advisor did not always fully

understand her comments because the advisor had not been through the dissertation process. Dr. V commented, “I needed someone who was also in it, and what I had hoped for was not there. It’s not necessarily the university’s fault; her interpretation was different as she had not been through it.” Dr. P noted, “The once-a-month check-in from my advisor was helpful. In the beginning, I was not a fan of my advisor. My advisor changed four or five times. In the end, I found (the advisor) helpful.”

The fourth group of academic support discussed by participants was the library and writing center. The participants expressed how appreciative they were to have online librarians, writing center professionals, and live sessions offered by these valuable university sources. Dr. M remarked, “The writing center and the librarian provided a significant amount of academic support.” Dr. Q said the library professionals helped her immensely. She commented, “She (librarian) would always have words of encouragement for me.” Dr. O said, “The writing center was very important. I had a lot of interaction with them, and they were very, very helpful.” Dr. W mentioned, “I went to a lot of sessions with the writing lab and that was super helpful.” Dr. T responded, “I almost left out the writing center, but they were amazing and very helpful.” Dr. X mentioned that the online library was extremely valuable. She offered, “All the online scholarly work and databases that we have access to is amazing; I think that was very supportive.”

**Peer Support.** The third question asked the participants about the peer support they received during their online doctoral program. The third interview question was, “Did you receive support from your peers? If so, what type of support did they give you? What support was the most helpful?” Some participants elected to discuss the support they received from colleagues or cohorts. Some discussed support from friends, and others discussed support received from coworkers. Many of the participants identified with others who had or were



undergoing similar academic experiences. The majority of the participants experienced these connections through cohort groups. Some participants worked in education that connected with coworkers. One participant had a relative who worked in education, and yet, another participant had two neighbors on the same street that had achieved doctorates and offered support.

The majority of the participants talked about the connections and support they had received from their cohort groups. Dr. W talked about a social media cohort group which she was part of with other students in the doctoral program. She commented, “Our cohort made a Facebook group and we really kept up with each other on that Facebook group.” A few of the other participants also mentioned a strong bonding between cohorts. Some felt they made lasting friendships from the classes and situations they encountered together at the university. Dr. N stated,

I had a peer group of five cohorts - a diverse group: a Hispanic man, two white women, and two black women. We were with each other from the beginning. Even today, we still converse, talk and just offer each other moral and emotional support.

Dr. M stated, “Our cohort was like a family. I think you come together as a cohesive team and you’re able to just network. We are still friends to this day.” Dr. V said, “Our social group (of cohorts) has been consistent with each other since the beginning. It’s kind of been the thread, the common denominator for me. Without that, I would have felt even more isolated.”

Several of the participants connected with one or two cohorts at the beginning of the program and kept in touch for the duration of the program. Dr. S commented, “We were in the trenches together.” Dr. P remarked, “There were two colleagues that I really connected with” and Dr. T indicated similar notes with the comment, “We (cohorts) had developed a relationship.” Dr. U commented about a cohort in which a connection was made. She said, “It was one in

which we started the program together and it is a blessing that we graduated. We walked across the stage together in August when the university officially had the commencement ceremony (due to Covid).”

In addition to cohort relationships, some participants received support from coworkers. Dr. T commented, “One of my coworkers had finished her doctorate several years ago and she gave me cards.” Dr. X commented, “Two or three of my closest friends from work would tell me to just keep going.” Dr. Q shared that her boss or supervisor would periodically ask how her dissertation was going, and he gladly gave her time off during critical times during the dissertation process. Dr. Q commented, “My boss, I reported to the CFO at the time, would always say, look, come talk to me and tell me what’s going on with your dissertation.” Dr. U also had supporting supervisors or managers in the workplace. She remarked, “It is important to have managers, leaders, or supervisors that understand what you are going through, what the task is at hand, and support you in any way possible.” Dr. U made a profound statement about having understanding coworkers in which to discuss the dissertation process with the comment. She said, “My dissertation chair focused more on the content. Having someone outside in the workplace where you spend most of your time and having a colleague that you could rely on for support definitely helped me humanize the process in what it really entailed for me to complete.” However, not all coworkers were supportive of an advanced degree. Some felt threatened by a coworker receiving an advanced degree. Dr. O issued the statement, “I think there were one or two people (at work) who felt threatened by the fact that I was going on to complete my doctorate.”

Several participants expressed support received from friends outside of the academic community. Dr. S said, “I have a couple of friends, and they would congratulate me whenever I

finished a class or when I told them I'd reached the next milestone in the process." Dr. Q had a good friend that wrote inspirational cards throughout the time she was enrolled in school. She shared,

My twin is really just a very good and dear friend, but my twin wrote me a greeting card and put it in the mail to me every week. Every week, I received an inspirational greeting card from him with a hand-written message of encouragement.

One participant commented that her neighbors supported her return to school by periodically mowing the grass or bringing meals over periodically.

**Most Important Line of Support.** The fourth interview question asked participants which line of support they felt was the most important to them in the completion of their doctoral dissertation and program. The fourth interview question was, "Overall, what line of support was the most critical for you in the completion of your dissertation process? Explain why." There were two categories into which most of the participants' responses fell. Participants talked about their inner self and drive which motivated them to finish their degree, and they talked about the criticality of the support and guidance received from their dissertation chair.

When participants talked about their personal feelings and motivation, they discussed aspects of their intrinsic being from mindset to response to spiritual guidance. Dr. V made comments about her mindset during the dissertation process. She said, "You have to want it. You have to invest in it on a daily basis." Dr. S felt similar and remarked, "I think to go and earn your doctorate and make it through the doctoral portion, especially the dissertation portion, you have to have that drive in you." Dr. Q discussed the willpower and determination that pushed her to finish the dissertation and degree. She shared, "Self-determination is what carried me through." Some participants talked about how they held themselves accountable, and they felt it was their

responsibility to persevere. Dr. X mentioned, “I held myself accountable. It taught me how to be persistent and to find my own motivation to keep going.” Dr. V also talked about personal responsibility and shared, “I know this is my responsibility. It’s up to me to be motivated to finish, and yet, I felt totally alone in it.” Dr. S made a profound statement regarding her investment in herself and her degree when asking for a dissertation chair change. She shared, “I told them there’s nobody that’s going to care about this more than I am.”

A couple of participants talked about how they sought spiritual guidance from God through the process. Dr. M talked about a spiritual board that she had made with Bible verses and goals, which she hung in her bathroom. She designed this artifact so she could be reminded of her faith in herself and God daily. Dr. V talked about writing in a prayer journal which helped remind her of her faithfulness to a greater being. She said, “I journal a lot when I am praying.” A couple of participants talked about prayer before their dissertation chair assignment was made. These participants indicated they prayed for a strong chair and when assigned a strong chair, they felt blessed.

The other main category that participants’ remarks fell into for the fourth interview question was the importance of a strong dissertation chair. Participants talked about the connection and relationship they built with their chairs through the dissertation process. According to Dr. M, “We connected not only as a student/chair, but we also connected on a more spiritual level.” Dr. M went on to say that she felt if doctoral candidates were not paired with the right chair, it could prolong their journey. Dr. U also commented on the importance of working with a strong dissertation chair, and the impact it could have on the dissertation process. Dr. U remarked, “As far as the most crucial support received for my completion, I’m definitely going to have to lean more towards my dissertation chair and just how responsive he was; I’ve heard

some horror stories about other students.” Dr. R appreciated the support received from her dissertation chair. She noted,

My dissertation chair was so emotionally supportive and encouraging. She really believed in me and in the work that I was doing. She told me that my dissertation mattered, and she just kept telling me that it was necessary to complete it.

One of the participants whose dissertation experience necessitated a chair change expressed, “My new dissertation chair, without hesitation at all, was the most critical line of support. He was very supportive. His feedback was very helpful. It was quick. He really streamlined the process.”

**Satisfaction With Online Doctoral Program.** The fifth interview question asked participants about their satisfaction level with the dissertation portion of their doctoral journey. The fifth interview question was, “Overall, how would you describe your satisfaction level with the dissertation portion of your online doctoral program?” Most of the responses from participants to this question related to the design of the university’s online doctoral program. The participants discussed how they felt the program was solid and well-designed. Dr. R commented, “The program exceeded my expectation.” Dr. X shared, “I would say that it was a 10; it was a really, really great experience for me.” Dr. V further supported these participants’ statements with the remark, “I’m genuinely satisfied with the program.” Most of the participants were glad they selected the program in which they received their doctorate. Dr. M commented, “I’m glad that I stuck with (the university). I think with any university that you go to, they’re going to have their ups and downs, but I’m really glad that I stuck with (the university).” A couple of participants made some suggestions for improvement, which they said have already been taken into account by the university. Dr. U shared, “I did not like the old mid-program review process.

It was challenging, and it was not the most effective. It is my understanding that the university has changed this process. I am satisfied with the overall process.” Another participant who was satisfied with the program, yet suggested improvement was Dr. Q. She said, “After taking the required courses, I would have liked a session where we just focused on our own dissertation and learn how to review other dissertation recommendations.”

**Additional Information.** The sixth and final question on the interview guide asked participants if there was any additional information that they desired to share related to their doctoral journey. The sixth question, “Is there any other information you would like to add related to the support you received during your doctoral journey?” The responses ranged from participants indicating they were responsible for their actions to comments about being a role model for their children to statements about the support and encouragement received from others motivating them to complete their degree. Dr. T discussed the criticality of the support she received during the doctoral journey. She stated, “I really would not have been able to do this without support from those three groups that you’re asking about.” Dr. Q had similar thoughts and added, “For someone who has a loan, works full-time, and trying to get through this program on weekends and nights, encouragement played a significant role in helping me get through the dissertation journey.” Dr. R focused her comments on the support received from her dissertation chair. She noted, “She (my chair) would text me, call me, and e-mail me just to make sure I was doing ok. She sometimes ordered me to take a mental health break.” Dr. X talked about the combination of family support and personal motivation with the comment,

The dissertation process itself really takes a lot of self-regulation and self-determination to do it. I think it made me realize that I just had to keep on going because I could see that my family was doing other things to help me.

The only recommendation related to support that arose from the responses to this question was from Dr. R. She added, “I would have liked to have seen a support group that was structured and moderated.”

### **Emerging Themes**

After reviewing the participants’ responses to the questionnaires and interview questions, themes emerged related to the main research question and three sub-research questions on support groups influencing persistence during a student’s doctoral journey. The research questions were designed to gather data participant perceptions during the dissertation stage. Through the coding and data analysis process, five themes emerged: relationships/connections, knowledgeable guidance, emotional support, time, and internal motivation (Appendix F).

#### ***Theme 1: Relationships/Connections***

Building relationships and relying on these connections for support during the daunting dissertation stage was a common theme among participants. The participants discussed the importance of the relationships and connections related to family, academic, and peer support. The majority of the participants talked extensively about the support they received from existing family relationships which included spouses, children, parents, and extended family. At least half of the participants talked about the connection and relationship they built with their chair throughout the dissertation process. Some of the participants discussed the connections and bonds they felt with other members of the academic community, such as advisors and librarians. Quite a few participants connected and bonded with other students in their respective cohorts, while others relied on previous friend or coworker relationships to help them persist in finishing their degree. Words and phrases such as “connection,” “relationship,” “match me,” “perfect for me,” “still to this day, we keep in touch,” “still friends to this day,” “we are going to do this

together,” “held my hand,” “come together as a cohesive team,” and “like a family” repetitively reoccurred among participants. While the majority of the participants primarily spoke about the positive relationships and connections they made with their chair, faculty members, and support personnel at the university, a couple of participants offered remarks about a few disconnections that existed during their journey. Words and phrases such as “adversarial relationship,” “didn’t reach out to me,” “didn’t quite match me,” and “didn’t understand me” were offered.

Dr. U talked about how the relationships she had with her immediate and extended family played a significant role in inspiring her to persevere in achieving her personal goal. Dr. Q also discussed the impact of the tremendous support received from existing family and friend relationships during the dissertation stage. Dr. R elaborated on the connection she had with her daughters when she returned to school. One daughter was entering college while the other was in high school. According to Dr. R,

We (me and my daughters) tried to commiserate with each other about school. Whether it was about high school or college, there was more of a social support connection. They, of course, were really proud of me for going back to school.

Almost all of the participants talked about the family support they received from their immediate family during their entire doctoral journey. Dr. T stated, “My family supported me through my dissertation process as well as through the whole doctoral process.” Most participants felt their relationship with their supporting spouse played a critical role in their completion.

Several of the participants expressed appreciation for the relationship they built with their chairs during the dissertation stage of their doctoral journey. After Dr. T was assigned a dissertation chair, she knew she was destined to persist and finish the dissertation based on a comment her chair made at the beginning of their academic relationship. She said, “He (chair)



said, you know what, we are going to do this together. I am with you until the end, and we will get it done.” Dr. O and Dr. S discussed the connections they made with their dissertation chairs. They talked about the fact that they built a relationship with their chair during the dissertation process and the liaison that has continued to exist beyond their designated academic link. According to Dr. S, “We met up for coffee and for lunch a couple of times during the dissertation process. Even since I’ve been done, we’ve met for lunch and coffee.” Dr. O remarked, “I received a new dissertation chair who was very supportive and helpful; he remains so to this day.” Dr. M talked about her dissertation chair assignment and how she wanted to make sure she and her chair were a spiritual match. She mentioned that she had an in-depth conversation with the dissertation manager about assignments before an appointment of a dissertation chair. She expressed her desire to connect with a chair spiritually. Not only did Dr. M feel strongly connected to her chair from a spiritual viewpoint, but she also felt this same type of bond with her committee. During our interview, she disclosed about her chair, “We connected not only as a student/chair, but we also connected on a spiritual level.” She continued her conversation on spirituality and added, “My committee was a collection of women who were grounded in their spirituality.” Dr. U talked about her personal growth as a result of the academic relationship she had with her chair. She said, “I know that being in the relationship with my chair really helped me grow as an individual. It helped me become a better person and even better student.”

A couple of the participants revealed connections they made with support staff, such as advisors and librarians at the university. Dr. X pronounced, “When you have somebody that can speak to you in an academic language in an academic world, I felt this helped establish a connection.” Dr. T talked about the strong bond she made with her advisor. She commented, “The first person who provided support for me was my student advisor. She absolutely held me

by my hand throughout the entire process.” Dr. Q felt so strongly about the relationship she had with the library staff that she said in her interview, “God bless the university research librarian team.”

Peer support among cohorts was another important source of support for students as many participants connected with others undergoing the same doctoral classes and process. Dr. M mentioned that her cohort resembled a family connection. She commented, “A cohort is like a family; I think you come together as a cohesive team. You are able to network.” Dr. N, Dr. T, and Dr. V spoke of a consistent group of cohorts that bonded and connected during their doctoral journey. Even though there was diversity among the cohort members, they shared the connection of the online doctoral and dissertation experience. Dr. T exclaimed, “We (cohorts) had developed a relationship,” and Dr. V elaborated on the consistency of their cohort group with the words, “Our social group (of cohorts) has been consistent with each other since the beginning of the program. It has been the thread or common denominator for me. Without this cohort support, I would have felt even more isolated.”

Of the participants that I interviewed, only a few of the participants perceived negative connections or relationships associated with the university community. Dr. Q talked about the adverse relationship she had with her chair. She felt that her chair would portray her as “less than intelligent” to committee members. She also said the way her chair talked to her at times was “demoralizing.” Dr. Q summarized her relationship with her dissertation chair with the words, “We just had a very adversarial, different, difficult relationship at times.” Dr. V’s perception of her chair was that she was indifferent as to whether Dr. V continued in her dissertation journey or quit. According to Dr. V, “During that period of time, I felt that I could have died or dropped off the face of the planet and my chair wouldn’t have reached out to me.” In Dr. W’s interview,

she brought up that she did not feel a connection occurred between her and her chair during the dissertation journey. She remarked, “My chair didn’t quite match me and didn’t quite understand what I was doing.”

### ***Theme 2: Knowledgeable Guidance***

The second theme that emerged from the review and analysis of the data collected was knowledgeable guidance. The majority of the participants I interviewed were extremely appreciative they were paired with strong, knowledgeable, and experienced dissertation chairs, either on their initial assignment or on their second assignment after a chair change. The participants recognized that the insight and expertise of their dissertation chairs added a substantial amount of support to this arduous process. In addition to receiving knowledgeable guidance through their dissertation chairs, the participants spoke of direction and support received from faculty members at the university, financial advisors, dissertation advisors, librarians, and writing center professionals. Words and phrases such as “advice,” “academic support,” “experienced,” “answered questions,” “academic language,” “right path,” “helped me reach my goal,” “constant communication,” “knowledgeable,” and “guided me” were repeatedly stated by participants during the interviews. There were a few participants that did not feel the same as the majority at periods during the process. Some of the words and phrases they used during the interviews were “didn’t have guidance and support from my chair,” “no feedback from my chair,” “communication was not the best with my chair,” “would not respond to questions or texts,” and “struggled with understanding the components of the dissertation.”

Dr. P recognized the value of having an experienced chair guide her through the dissertation process. She remarked, “My chair was definitely my right-hand person when it came to the university academic portion.” Even a couple of participants that had an adversarial

relationship with their chair acknowledged their chair's expertise. Dr. W commented, "Even though the communication between me and my chair was maybe not the best, she did get me to my goal." Dr. V talked about the resourcefulness of her chair. If her chair did not immediately know the answer, she did not hesitate to tap into another qualified resource. Dr. V commented, "If we didn't know which way to go with my writing or my research, she (chair) knew someone who did; we would call them into the meeting." Dr. O discussed the effective and efficient support by the second chair assignment, which enabled successful navigation of the dissertation process until completion. According to Dr. O, "My new dissertation chair, without hesitation at all, was critical to my completion. He was very supportive. His feedback was very helpful, and it was quick. He really streamlined the process." Dr. N mentioned, "My chair guided me, but he let me make decisions so I still felt like it was my paper."

The theme of knowledgeable guidance appeared to affect aspects of a student's journey beyond the student/dissertation chair relationship. Some of the participants offered insight and stories about how specific faculty members positively impacted their persistence in the program. Dr. N talked about a situation where a faculty member guided her away from a dissertation topic towards another more desirable problem of practice. According to Dr. N, "Some of the best advice I received was when I sent a faculty member my topic and they told me not to do it because the topic was saturated; that is some of the best advice I received because it saved me a lot of time." Several participants conveyed the respect they had for the faculty members at the university and the value these instructors added to the program due to their expertise in their field. Dr. V communicated, "I think the instructors are well-chosen to teach what they teach" and Dr. Q said, "He was really good, and like I told you, all of the instructors were very good."

In addition to receiving knowledgeable guidance from dissertation chairs and other

faculty members at the university, the participants spoke of the competency among the library and writing center staff members. According to Dr. M, “A significant source of academic support to me was definitely the writing center and the librarian.” Dr. O, Dr. Q, Dr. T, and Dr. W spoke highly of the online sessions and information delivered by professionals associated with the university’s writing center. Dr. W stated, “I went to a lot of sessions with the writing lab, and these were super helpful.” Participants commented that the librarians always seemed available, and they were willing to help them locate research material that supported a concept or theory in their papers. Additionally, participants indicated they relied on the advice offered by writing center professionals on APA style usage as well as other aspects of writing papers. Dr. O said, “The writing center was very important. I had a lot of interaction with them and they were very, very helpful.”

In the few cases where participants perceived some negative guidance, some of the situations were resolved by the university. A couple of participants who experienced struggles with their dissertation chair suggested it was the student’s responsibility to make sure the chair was on the right path. Dr. S commented that her first chair never took her phone calls, never responded to texts, and misspelled her name. Dr. S said that she ended up having to demand a chair change due to lack of support, even after the chair underwent a couple of coaching sessions. Dr. O commented, “Keep close tabs on your dissertation chair to make sure they know exactly where you are.” Additionally, Dr. W suggested that it was important to review the dissertation process and not rely completely on the dissertation chair. According to Dr. W, “There were some issues with my chair knowing the university protocols.” Dr. Q mentioned, “I didn’t always have the guidance and support from my chair that I felt would have made a difference.”

A couple of participants made suggestions about the overall design and guidance offered by the program. The majority of the participants were extremely satisfied with the overall design of the program. Dr. O commented, “I went out of my way to tell the department chair and my dissertation chair that I have passed on my opinion to a lot of my colleagues and friends. This is a program that is designed for success.” Dr. R remarked, “The program exceeded my expectation,” and Dr. X stated, “Out of all these programs that I have done online, which is three, plus when I was physically at a university, I have never, ever received as much support as I did through this university.” Dr. X followed up on her statement and said she would rate the program a 10 as it was a great experience for her.

A few participants made some suggestions for improvement related to the overall design of the program. After the course classes were completed, Dr. Q indicated that she did not feel prepared to start the dissertation process. While she said she enjoyed the curriculum in the course classes, she felt the material covered in these core classes did not adequately equip her with the understanding and tools to embark on her dissertation. Dr. Q further stated that she wished the university would have addressed how to look at and review recommendations in published dissertations before starting on the problem statement and concept proposal papers. Dr. Q offered the suggestion, “After the courses we took, I wish we could have then had another session where we just focused on our own dissertation and learn how to focus on dissertation recommendations.” According to Dr. U, “I did not like the old mid-program review process. It was challenging, and it was not the most effective. It is my understanding that the university has changed this process. I am satisfied with the overall process.” Dr. R discussed that she would like the university to consider implementing a structured and moderated student support group.

She commented, “I would have liked to have seen something (a support group) a little more structured and moderated.

### ***Theme 3: Emotional Support***

The third common theme that emerged from participants in the study was emotional support. Most participants indicated that they relied on family members to provide emotional support. Quite a few of the participants talked about the emotional support they received from cohorts they met through the program. The other main group which the participants talked about concerning emotional support received were friends and coworkers. Several of the participants said they received emotional support from professionals associated with the university, such as their dissertation chair, faculty members, committee members, advisors, librarians, and writing center professionals.

Some of the participants indicated they might have quit, had it not been for the emotional support they received during their doctoral journey, especially during the exhausting dissertation stage. Some of the participants spoke about how they consider themselves responsible, strong-willed, and determined beings, yet they said they were not sure if these character traits would have been sufficient for them to persist and complete their degree if the emotional support they received had not existed. A couple of the participants spoke of the isolated feelings they experienced during their dissertation stage, yet the emotional support they received from various groups helped them pull through these struggling times. Participants in the study conveyed feelings of emotional support received from different sources, which included family members, professionals associated with the university, cohorts, coworkers, and friends. Words and phrases such as “encouragement,” “emotionally supportive,” “positive affirmations,” “someone to commiserate with,” “someone to listen,” “able to talk through things,” “make sure I was doing

ok,” “pep talk,” and “believed in me” were words repeatedly used by participants during the interviews. While most participants focused on the positive emotional support they received during their doctoral journey, a couple of participants mentioned some situations they perceived as negative emotional support. The words and phrases such as “demoralizing,” “not supportive,” “didn’t understand how to help,” and “not helping me” were used.

Several participants expressed gratitude for the emotional support received from family members who were always there to listen to them vent or talk about the challenges they encountered in the process. Participants, such as Dr. N, Dr. P, Dr. S, and Dr. T, used words such as “encouraging” and “emotional support” when describing the support received from family members. Dr. W expressed appreciation for her spouse with the comment, “I had somebody who was there to listen.” Dr. P applauded her husband, who helped keep her grounded during the process. She exclaimed, “He earned an honorary doctorate for leading me through it, encouraging me, and watching the times where I doubted myself or had meltdowns.” Dr. S talked about the encompassing support she received from her parents, which included emotional support. She expressed, “My parents were a tremendous support. Did my parents get what I was going through? They’re elderly, so just their support came in.” Dr. T talked about the encouraging support received from family members, especially in the form of cards. She shared, “They offered a lot of encouragement and support, both verbally and through cards.”

Some of the participants discussed the emotional support they felt they received from their dissertation chairs. Dr. R stated,

My dissertation chair was so emotionally supportive and so encouraging; she really believed in me and in the work that I was doing. She really thought that my dissertation mattered, and she just kept telling me that it was necessary to complete.



A couple of the participants commented they never felt alone through the dissertation stage as their chairs were in constant communication with them. Dr. X commented, “There was already a lot of one-on-one work, but my chair would say ‘now let me help you go through this, or how can we make this better’?” Dr. S shared, “My chair told me ‘let me walk you through this.’”

Dr. N felt strongly about the emotional support provided to her from a group of cohorts in which she started the program initially. As stated by Dr. N,

I had a peer group of five cohorts. It was a diverse group comprised of a Hispanic man, two white women, and two black women. We were with each other from the beginning of the program. Even now, we still converse, talk, and offer moral and emotional support to each other.

Several participants stayed in touch regularly with specific cohorts throughout their program, while others would periodically receive a “check in” from a cohort. Dr. V was one of the participants that communicated regularly with a group of cohorts. She shared, “Our social group (of cohorts) has been consistent with each other since the beginning of the program. It has been the thread or common denominator for me. Without this cohort support, I would have felt even more isolated.” Dr. S and Dr. U also had a cohort in which there was regular communication between the two throughout the doctoral journey. According to Dr. S, “We were in the trenches together.” Dr. U said, “There was one peer, which we started the program together, and it is actually a blessing that we graduated together. We walked across the stage together in August when the university officially had the commencement ceremony.” Dr. Q, along with some other participants, remarked that they would periodically send a quick text or an email to check on another cohort’s progress or another cohort would reach out to them with a brief note. Dr. Q

commented, “She (a cohort member) would text me periodically and ask, ‘How’s your writing going?’”

Quite a few of the participants talked about the emotional support received from friends and coworkers. Dr. T talked about a coworker who had completed a doctoral degree several years prior and understood the emotional strain the process could cause. According to Dr. T, “One of my coworkers had finished her doctorate several years ago and she would give me cards.” Dr. S, Dr. Q, Dr. X, and Dr. U all talked about their supporting friends. Dr. U referenced the notion that it was nice to have a good coworker friend to talk to while undergoing the doctoral process. She commented,

My dissertation chair focused more on the content but having a colleague outside in the workplace where you spend most of your time definitely helped me humanize the process as to what it really entailed in order for me to complete the process.

Dr. Q also felt this deep support from a friend with the statement,

My twin was really just a very good and dear friend, but my twin wrote me a greeting card and put it in the mail to me every week. Every week, I received an inspirational greeting card from him with a hand-written message of encouragement.

Most of the participants focused on the positive experiences, and emotional support received while enrolled in the program. Dr. O, Dr. S, Dr. Q, and Dr. V were some of the participants that did not always feel supported by her chair and the university. Dr. O and Dr. S said that after they changed chairs, their perceptions of their respective chairs completely changed. Both commented that they were extremely satisfied with the support they received from their second chair. Dr. V talked about her feelings of loneliness and isolation and felt that her chair did not care if she finished or not. Dr. Q discussed in detail the unfavorable emotional

support she perceived from her chair and shared the comment, “There were times when my chair was completely demoralizing to me.”

Two participants talked about the collective emotional support received from different groups and the impact this encouragement had on them. Dr. T expressed, “I really would not have been able to do this without support from those three groups that you’re asking about.” I thought Dr. Q summed up the importance of emotional support during her doctoral journey with the comment, “For someone who has a loan, works full-time, and trying to get through this program on weekends and nights, encouragement played a significant role in helping me get through the dissertation journey.”

#### ***Theme 4: Time***

Time is often an underrated yet critical component of the dissertation process to complete a doctoral degree. The participants I interviewed placed a high priority on time. Not only did the participants talk about the time they needed to research and write, but they also discussed the response time of their respective chairs. Participants who experienced quick turnaround times and responses to questions from their chairs and other professionals associated with the university recognized and appreciated this feedback.

When participants talked about time, they generally talked about time-related to the number of hours needed to conduct research and write. Words and phrases that were repetitively used included “allow me time,” “quiet time,” “time to work,” “time to write,” “time for me to focus,” and “a lot of time.” Dr. T helped illustrate the words, “allow me time” and “quiet time” when she talked about the time her family gave her to work on her dissertation. According to Dr. T, “My family gave me plenty of space and quiet time. They were very patient with me when I wasn’t at dinner because I was in my office finishing something up or wrapping something up.”

Dr. O also talked about quiet time with the comment, “My family support was from my wife, and she gave me encouragement and quiet time in which to work on my dissertation.” Dr. X discussed trying to find a balance between the time spent on the family and the time spent on the dissertation. According to Dr. X, “I had to make sure that I had my family time then I had my work time. A lot of my work time was after hours, like starting at 10:00.” Dr. P struggled emotionally with splitting her time between her family and the dissertation. She shared, “The process did take time away from my family, which is something I still struggle with to this day.” Dr. U was very appreciative of the time her family gave her to work on her doctorate. She provided, “I really just think the most helpful support came from them providing time for me to solely focus on my dissertation process.”

When participants discussed time as it pertained to their chairs and other university professionals, words and phrases such as “instantaneous response,” “respond quickly,” “take the time needed,” “turnaround rate,” “quick,” and “anytime” were used by participants. Similar to the time her family gave her, Dr. U talked about her chair giving her space and time to write with the comment, “My (chair) supported me, like my family, by giving me the time that I needed to adjust to the new life events that I experienced. He also gave me the time to write when I needed to write.” The majority of the participants’ comments about time related to their perspective chairs or university professionals were about the speed at which they received feedback after asking a question or submitting parts of their writing. Dr. V commented, “If I ever reached out to my chair, it was almost an instantaneous response, whether it was a text or an e-mail.” Dr. S and Dr. U talked about their chair’s accessibility. Dr. S stated, “I could call her, text her, or e-mail her anytime; it didn’t matter if she was on vacation.” Dr. U commented, “The turnaround rate and being so responsive and communicative from my chair was critical.” Dr. T had similar

thoughts about her chair and shared, “He communicated so well with me at any time, day or night. He would answer e-mails and call and check on me.” In addition to dissertation chairs providing quick feedback, Dr. N mentioned her committee members were well-organized, and they provided prompt feedback. According to Dr. N, “They (committee) were quick and fast; they gave good feedback, which made a big difference.”

A couple of participants talked about the time support received from friends and coworkers. Dr. Q and Dr. U discussed that the leaders in their workplace were understanding of the schoolwork demands and allowed them time to research and write, especially when significant deadlines were approaching. Dr. Q discussed support from neighbors and friends in the form of meals or mowing the lawn was extremely helpful.

#### ***Theme 5: Internal Motivation***

The fifth and final theme that arose from the participants’ questionnaires and interviews was internal motivation. The majority of the participants talked about internal motivation, drive, and persistence when responding to the fourth interview question regarding the line of support that was most critical for them in the completion of the dissertation process, as well as to the last interview question which asked participants if they would like to add anything related to support during their doctoral journey. Words and phrases that were voiced by participants that lead to the theme of internal motivation included “you have to want it,” “you have to invest in it,” “my responsibility,” “you can do anything you set your mind to,” “it is up to me,” “you have to have that drive in you,” “self-determination,” and “not going to quit.”

Dr. M, Dr. Q, Dr. S, Dr. V, and Dr. X talked extensively about how personal strength, drive, and responsibility played a significant role in finishing a dissertation and doctorate degree. According to Dr. V, “You have to want it. You have to invest in it on a daily basis. It was up to

me to be motivated to finish.” Dr. V and Dr. X talked about personal responsibility and accountability for one’s actions. Dr. X remarked, “I held myself accountable.” When Dr. S was trying to make a chair change, she mentioned her investment in herself to the university with the statement, “I told them there’s nobody that’s going to care about this more than I am.” Dr. P talked about her personality trait of staying abreast of her schedule and upcoming deadlines. She commented, “I am also OCD when it comes to meeting deadlines and in getting things done ahead of time. I made sure I kept on pace.” Several other participants also discussed staying on the right path and following through with one’s commitment to oneself.

Dr. M, Dr. Q, and Dr. W talked about personal reflection. Dr. Q discussed the fact that the doctoral journey, and especially the dissertation process, was not an easily accomplished feat. She commented, “The dissertation process is really designed to separate the weak from the strong. Self-determination is what carries you through the process.” Dr. M discussed the stress and hard work involved in finishing the degree. In addition to praying daily, Dr. M built a spiritual vision board and hung it in her bathroom so she could reflect on her goals daily. She prayed, “Lord, you’ve got to get me through this. You have to give me some strength. I need the tenacity to finish.” Dr. W also commented that she had to reflect on her purpose, from a spiritual point of view, for completing a doctoral degree. Dr. W, along with several other participants, said that they had to ask themselves periodically if they were serving God because it was through “His will” that they felt they were able to succeed.

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 includes detailed data revealed by participants during the questionnaire and interviews. After analyzing the responses obtained from both data collection methods, participant responses primarily fell into three main categories: personal support groups, the academic

community, and self. Personal support groups consisted of family, friends, coworkers who became friends, and cohorts who also became friends. The academic community that participants discussed in the interviews included: dissertation chairs, faculty/committee members, advisors, librarian/writing center, and the way the program was designed. The last category in which participants talked extensively about was their self and the integral role one's self plays in the dissertation process and doctoral journey. The five emerging themes that arose from these groups included: relationships/connections, knowledgeable guidance, emotional support, time, and internal motivation. Through the interviews, participants shared their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to events they perceived as having an important impact on the successful completion of their dissertation stage and overall doctoral journey.

Chapter 5 further discusses the findings elaborated on in Chapter 4 and suggests implications for current practice. Chapter 5 also discusses the limitations associated with the study and makes recommendations for future studies.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

Online degree programs, including doctoral programs, are on the rise in the United States (Berry, 2017; Lee et al., 2020). Enrollment growth in online postbaccalaureate programs has been documented for 14 consecutive years (Friedman, 2018). It has been predicted that with the Covid-19 pandemic pushing students towards a virtual environment, online enrollments will accelerate at a faster pace (Koksal, 2020). Attrition is a concern at the doctoral level, especially as attrition rates among online programs are 10% to 25% higher compared to traditional programs (Boton & Gregory, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2015). On average, the attrition rate for doctoral programs ranges from 40% to 60%, while the attrition rate in online doctoral programs ranges from 50% to 70% (Boton & Gregory, 2015; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Golde, 2005; Lee et al., 2020; Rigler et al., 2017; Santicola, 2013; Stock & Siegfried, 2014; Terrell et al., 2012). This study was relevant due to the continued high attrition rates in online doctoral programs.

### **Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and gather the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions related to social support influencing persistence from the perspective of students who completed a dissertation and, subsequently, an online doctoral degree between 2018 and 2020. Bancroft (2008), Berry (2017), and Rockinsaw-Szapkiw et al. (2014) postulated there was a strong link and correlation between social support and persistence. Prior research, primarily conducted in doctoral residential programs, indicated three primary types of social support that influence persistence: family, academic, and peer support (Lee et al., 2020, Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Sweitzer, 2009). However, limited research exists related to how these three types of social support impact the persistence of nontraditional students enrolled in online doctoral programs (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).



Doctoral attrition primarily occurs either soon after enrollment or during the dissertation stage (Ames et al., 2018; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Maul et al., 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). This study focused on perceptions of participant experiences during the dissertation stage of the program. Kiley (2011) and Levitch and Shaw (2014) suggested that students who were satisfied with their learning environment and the support received during their doctoral program were more likely to finish. Attrition not only wastes students' time and money, but it can also reflect negatively on the design of a school's program (Gardner, 2008a, 2009a; Gittings et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). The results of this study could provide university administrators and student services departments with valuable information related to the social support desired by enrolled students that could, in turn, lend towards higher completion in online doctoral programs.

There was one overarching research question and three subresearch questions that guided this study. The overarching research question for this qualitative case study is as follows: How does social support influence academic degree persistence and completion according to the perspective of online degree graduates? The subresearch questions are as follows:

- 1) How does family support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?
- 2) How does academic support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?
- 3) How does peer support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral degree graduates?

The qualitative case study research was used to explore the perceptions of former online doctoral students. Twelve former students who successfully completed the dissertation stage and

earned a doctorate in education from the university where the invitation was sent completed the questionnaires and semistructured interviews used for data collection. The questionnaire contained 10 questions that were designed to collect short answer responses related to the support they felt they received from their family, academic community, and peers while completing their dissertation. The initial seven questions asked for short responses, while the last three were scaled questions asking participants to rate support from each of the three groups. Semistructured interviews followed the completed questionnaires. Participants were encouraged to elaborate in more detail about their feelings, experiences, and perceptions of support from the three support groups that were the focal point of the study. In addition to asking participants about their perceptions of support, these survey instruments collected data about participants' overall satisfaction level as Kiley (2011), and Herbert (2006) indicated students' feelings of satisfaction with their online learning environment impacted retention. After the data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for meaning, specific themes and categories emerged as they related to the research questions.

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to provide a summary and interpretation of the findings from the study. The specific implications of each of the five major themes that emerged are addressed. This chapter highlights the implications of the theoretical framework and suggestions for practice. Limitations and recommendations are discussed. Lastly, reflections and conclusions are addressed in the chapter.

### **Interpretation of Research Findings**

My study had an overarching research question with three interconnected sub-research questions. The overarching question was designed to look at how social support influenced academic degree persistence and completion according to the perspectives and perceptions of

online degree graduates. There were three types of support to be examined in more depth with the sub-research questions: family, the academic community, and peer support. The first sub-research question focused on students' experiences and perceptions of family support affecting persistence to completion in their online doctoral program. Three of the five themes that emerged are strongly tied to the first research question: emotional support, time, and relationships/connections. The second research question asked the participants about perceptions of support they felt they received from their academic community. There are four of the five themes tied to this research question: relationships/ connections, knowledgeable guidance, emotional support, and time. The third sub-research question asked the participants about their perceptions of peer support. There are three themes tied to this research question: relationship/connections, emotional support, and time. A fifth theme, internal motivation, emerged during the interview process that links to all three sub-research questions. According to participants, all five themes played a role in influencing their persistence to degree completion.

**RQ1. How Does Family Support in an Online Doctorate Program Affect Persistence to Completion According to the Perspective of Online Doctoral Graduates?**

Family support, according to the perceptions of the participants in this study, played a significant role in their ability, desire, and motivation to complete their online doctoral degree. The participants relied on their existing relationships with family members to help give them emotional support through the three-to-five-year process of obtaining a doctoral degree. According to the participants, their spouses and parents were the primary groups that gave them emotional support during the process. Dr. P discussed that her husband gave her the most support, and she was so appreciative of his support that she expressed he should earn an "honorary degree" for his role. Dr. S and X indicated that although their parents did not fully

understand what they were going through academically, they played a major role in supporting them by continually offering verbal words of encouragement and motivation.

Additionally, the support of time from family members was a critical factor in persistence to completion, according to participants. As all of the participants worked while they were enrolled in the doctoral program, they expressed they would not have been able to find the time to complete their degree had it not been for the support of family members taking on some of the duties and chores the participants had previously done in the past for their families. As Dr. R commented, “My husband was extremely important. He provided a lot of domestic support. He took over all of the cooking, errand running, and encompassing domestic support for all four years.” The participants expressed their gratitude for family members allowing them space and quiet time to focus on their studies. Dr. T commented that her family gave her space and quiet time and was patient with her when she was not present at family gatherings due to the need to finish her writings.

Research supports the findings in this study. Family support, especially when support is offered by a spouse, can help students mitigate the academic stress involved in a degree obtainment by providing emotional support (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). The participants in my study had similar characteristics as nontraditional doctoral students reviewed in prior studies. Erichsen et al. (2014), Offerman (2011), and Santicola (2013) found that many nontraditional doctoral students were married with children and worked full-time in addition to attending school. These students desired a fully online program for convenience, yet they struggled to balance the demands of work, school, and personal life. Offerman (2011) suggested the external environment affected nontraditional students to a greater degree compared to traditional students.

The feedback obtained from the participants in this study indicated that they relied on their families, especially their spouses, for emotional and time support to help them persist.

**RQ2. How Does Academic Support in an Online Doctorate Program Affect Persistence to Completion According to the Perspective of Online Doctoral Graduates?**

The participants in my study discussed different types of academic support, ranging from their dissertation chair to faculty members associated with the university to the library staff. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated that being paired with a strong dissertation chair was a critical component of their persistence to completion. Several participants talked about the relationship or connection they felt to their chair during the dissertation process. The majority of the participants relied on their dissertation chair for academic guidance navigating the dissertation stage. However, in addition to feeling supported academically, several felt that their chairs also supported them emotionally with words of encouragement during their time together. Dr. R commented that her chair supported her in many different ways, from emotionally to academically to spiritually. Dr. N, Dr. U, and Dr. X discussed that their chairs guided and mentored them academically while challenging them to grow as an individual through the process. Dr. O and Dr. S developed such a strong relationship with their chairs that they continue to keep in touch periodically by setting aside time to visit on the phone or meet for a coffee.

There were a few participants in the study that did not feel they had a strong connection or relationship with their dissertation chair. Two participants elected to remain with their appointed chairs, while two participants requested a chair change. The two participants that requested a chair change were extremely grateful for their second chairs. The two participants who remained with their chairs found other means of support to persist to completion.

In addition to receiving support from dissertation chairs, the participants in the study

talked extensively about the support and assistance they received from other members of the university's academic community. Several participants mentioned specific faculty members that either gave them academic guidance or gave them emotional support through encouraging cards or words. For example, Dr. N told a story about a faculty member guiding her away from a dissertation topic that was considered "saturated" towards a more interesting problem of practice. Dr. V talked about a specific faculty member and referred to him as a "gem." She said he would tell her that she was going a great job, yet, he always offered to help her make improvements. Dr. X discussed actively talking to her committee members, who supported her through the dissertation process.

Other academic community members that the participants discussed in detail were student service advisors, financial advisors, dissertation managers, librarians, and writing center professionals. Dr. T commented that her advisor "held her hand" throughout the doctoral journey. Dr. Q found the words of encouragement offered by her dissertation manager as "inspirational." Dr. W found the online sessions offered by the writing center to be "super helpful," and Dr. O elaborated on the noteworthy assistance he received from both the library and the writing center.

According to Fleming et al. (2005), a school's environment can play a significant role in influencing a student's success. Research supports the findings of this study as students look towards faculty members for academic support; they rely on faculty members for guidance and direction via a quality academic support relationship (Cochran et al., 2014; Santicola, 2013). Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016) suggested that students who socially and cognitively engaged in their academic communities built a stronger perception of their academic abilities and potential achievements, which, in turn, positively impacted their chances of succeeding in a

degree program. Baker and Pifer (2014) found that when students connected with an integrated learning community, student and identity development took place, which allowed a student to emerge and become successful as an independent scholar during the unstructured dissertation process. The students in my study that persisted to completion in their online doctoral program had positive interactions and relationships with many different members of the university's academic community.

### **RQ3. How Does Peer Support in an Online Doctorate Program Affect Persistence to Completion According to the Perspective of Online Doctoral Graduates?**

When the participants in my study were asked about peer support, their responses centered around connections established with cohorts within the academic community. A few participants talked about the support they received from different friend groups outside of the academic community. Some of the participants were part of a small group of cohorts that networked throughout their entire program, while others developed and nurtured a relationship with one or two specific cohorts. The participants expressed that the support they received from others who understood the mental and physical stress of undertaking an online doctoral program was important. Dr. M commented that a cohort was “like a family” and “you come together as a cohesive team” during the journey. Dr. W commented that her cohorts helped keep her on the “right path.” Dr. N and Dr. V commented that the group of cohorts they connected with initially was the “thread” and “common denominator” that helped push them to the finish line. Dr. U, who talked about a cohort with whom she developed a relationship during the early stages of the program, indicated that they were determined to start and finish the program together. She remarked that they both walked across the stage together last August.

Some of the participants also talked about the support they received from coworkers with

whom they also considered personal friends. Dr. T mentioned that she received inspirational cards from a coworker who had completed her doctorate several years prior, and she found this to be encouraging. Dr. U commented that it was extremely helpful to have supporting friends in the workplace, especially as this is where she spent a large percentage of her time. She further commented that being able to “humanize the process with a colleague” and share details about her arduous journey was “definitely helpful.” Several of the participants discussed how their existing relationships with personal friends proved to be a critical component of their journey. Dr. S talked about a friend who served as a confidant and listened to her when she felt overwhelmed. Dr. Q expounded on the emotional support received from a friend who wrote and mailed inspirational cards to her every week. According to the participants who spoke about the support they received from personal friends, they relished the confidence and belief that their friends had in their ability to succeed.

The findings in this research study are supported by previous research findings. Supportive relationships can play a significant role in the development process of a student (Berry, 2017; Gardner, 2009b). Bancroft (2018), Byers et al. (2014) and Jairam and Kahl (2012) found that peer groups can provide critical social and emotional support that can significantly influence a student’s persistence by boosting their self-esteem and confidence in themselves. Jairam and Kahl (2012) further suggested that peer groups are instrumental in reducing the stress level of students during the daunting dissertation stage by providing emotional support. While faculty and dissertation chairs provide academic support to students, family and cohorts often provide much-needed emotional support during the dissertation process (Cochran et al., 2014). Participants in this study relied on their cohorts and other peers to provide critical emotional support during challenging aspects of their doctoral program.



## Summary of Findings

Results from this research study are supported by findings from previous research studies that suggest there are three main support groups that influence persistence among doctoral students: family, the academic community, and peers (Bancroft, 2018; Berry, 2017; Byers et al., 2014; Gardner, 2009; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). The participants in this study depended on family members to provide both emotional and practical support in the form of time. While some family members did not fully understand the stress or circumstances that participants were experiencing as part of the doctoral process, there were no negative resulting implications. Dissertation chairs, faculty, and other members of the academic community served as expertise guidance professionals through the coursework and dissertation stage of the doctoral journey. In many cases, a positive connection also resulted in an emotionally supportive relationship between a student and a chair or a student and another member of the academic community. Prior research has indicated that a successful relationship between a chair and a student can play a critical role in impacting student success (Holmes et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017). A couple of participants experienced a negative or adversarial relationship with their chair, although, in this study, the character composition of the participants appeared strong enough to overcome these setbacks. It has not been proven if dissertation chair support alone can affect persistence (Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

According to Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012), some students have strong coping skills. Self-determination and self-motivation character traits became prevalent among participants when the question about the most important factor contributing towards persistence to completion was asked. Internal motivation appeared to be an underlying factor that influenced

persistence in this study. Many nontraditional students enter academic programs with maturity due to real-world and career experiences (Offerman, 2011).

Peer cohorts served as important allies, especially during the isolating and daunting dissertation stage, as they understand the feelings, emotions, and work involved as a doctoral student. Bair and Haworth (1999) and Oseguera and Rhee (2009) found that students who were involved with peers during their programs experienced higher completion rates compared to those not involved with peers. Similar to findings from prior research, the participants in this study formed relationships with cohorts with whom they took classes during the coursework part of the program. These relationships provided needed emotional support during the more isolating dissertation stage.

Lastly, studies have suggested that student satisfaction plays a critical role in persistence to completion (Kiley, 2011). All of the participants in the study were genuinely satisfied with the online doctoral program from which they received their degrees. The participants felt the online doctoral program was well designed.

### **Implications of the Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by several types of theories, student and identity development, student integration, and student attrition. The findings from this study aligned with these theories, allowing validation of the research and providing further support to the principles associated with the theories. Bean and Metzner (1985) proposed a model that linked persistence to four factors: academics, student background factors, environmental variables, and the combination of academic and psychological factors associated with the student. Berry (2017) and Wao and Onwuegbuzie (2011), suggested the key factors that influence persistence were academic integration, social integration, economic integration, and personal attributes. While this

study did not ask students about their finances regarding their return to school, it did capture student perceptions about academic integration, social integrations, and personal attributes. It is suggested that student development is closely linked to identity development, and with the appropriate support, students grow and learn how to mitigate academic challenges (Gardner, 2009b; Pfund et al., 2020). Each of the participants experienced support during their program. While some participants in this study felt supported by all three groups, family, academic community, and peers, others felt supported by at least two of the groups. When students feel a strong sense of identity and belonging, Berry (2017) suggested they have a higher probability of persevering. The students in my study all persisted to completion; they indicated that the support they received along the way helped them reach their personal and academic aspirations of finishing the challenging journey and achieving a doctoral degree.

Astin (1984) posited that student development resulted from student involvement, which was directly correlated to the amount of mental and physical energy and time a student devoted to the academic experience. Tinto's student integration theory also suggested that student persistence was related to a combination of academic and social integration along with social support (Rovai, 2003). Berry (2017) suggested that the more involved a student became in the entire academic process, which included connecting with administrators, advisors, and faculty members and developing relationships with peers, the more likely the student was to achieve the desired development level sufficient to succeed in a program. Bancroft (2018) suggested that the development of peer and academic social networks was critical in persistence to completion. The participants in this study talked about the academic community and peer connections and relationships they established at the beginning of their online program that remained and carried them through the duration of their doctoral journey. Participants elaborated on the support

received and the relationships built with dissertation chairs, faculty members, advisors, librarians, and writing center professionals. The majority of the participants developed friendships with at least one or two peers from their original coursework track. Not only did these cohorts assist each other during the journey by providing important emotional support and academic advice, but most of the participants indicated these peer connections have turned into lasting friendships after completing and leaving the program.

### **Implication for Practice**

The findings of this study support previous research and theories that student integration and social experiences play a critical role in persistence to completion (Bancroft, 2018; Berry, 2017; Rovai, 2003). A practical implication is that the university should continue to employ the cohort model currently used in the doctoral program. According to Santicola (2013), the idea behind this model is that students will come together as a collective and cohesive group through the coursework part of the doctoral program. The peer connections established in the earlier phases of the doctoral journey would support students and provide the needed encouragement during the later more isolating dissertation stage of the program (Holmes et al., 2014; Santicola, 2013). In this study, the fruitfulness of the cohort model was evident by the connections made by cohorts. All of the participants indicated they connected with at least one cohort, while some formed a cohesive group during the early coursework stages. These connections remained throughout their doctoral journeys. To further support the cohort model concept, it is suggested that bi-annual face-to-face gatherings among doctoral students and academic community members be hosted by the university. Even though students are connecting virtually with each other and with members of the academic community, in-person gatherings would further promote these relationships.

Another practical implication would be for the university to host an online support group where students could ask questions and receive answers. This online site would need to be moderated by someone employed by the university to ensure the accuracy of the responses posted to questions. During the interviews, several participants indicated they have helped support and answer questions for peers who were still working on finishing their dissertation. Some participants also indicated they wished they had an opportunity to connect with students that had already encountered certain stages of the doctoral journey. It is recommended to add graduates to the online support group as alumni are often willing and able to offer guidance and support based on their experiences. The semistructured and moderated online group could be set up as a non-graded support course in the online platform and be designed in a question/answer format.

### **Limitations**

Limitations existed in this study. The first limitation of the study was that graduates from one online university participated. As such, these participants could only talk about their experiences and perceptions of support received from one university and its online doctoral program. Another limitation was the size and composition of the online university from which the participants were solicited. The study was conducted at a small private university which started their online doctoral program six years ago. Another limitation was that participants who did not persist to completion were not part of the study. I did not have access to the personal emails of students who had withdrawn from the university, and therefore, I was not able to solicit their participation. The data collected for this study was only based on students who had persisted to completion and graduated from the university.

## Recommendations

Based on the research findings, there are several proposed recommendations for future studies. The first recommendation is to conduct a study using the same research questions, yet the participants to be solicited would be individuals that withdrew from the online doctoral program and did not persist until completion. In doing so, the data collected from those who withdraw could be compared to the data obtained in this study from participants who did persist to completion. Comparing and contrasting the results may lead to helpful insight on the role support has in influencing persistence to completion of doctoral students.

The next recommendation is that researchers may wish to expand this study to include other universities that offer online doctoral programs. This study was conducted at a small private university that utilizes the cohort model in its online doctorate in an education program. Researchers may want to implement a similar study at a larger private university or a public university that offers a fully online program.

Another recommendation to university administrators would be to survey or conduct a study over a period of time of students upon graduation regarding specific academic personnel at the university they found to be motivating and encouraging, as well as the reasons backing their perceptions. The study should be designed to obtain perceptions from students on all departments and academic members, which they encountered during the doctoral journey, including, but not limited to, advisors, administrators, chair(s), librarian, and writing center professionals. The results of this survey or study could be used in the development of a training course for university members on motivation and encouragement techniques for students.

The last recommendation from this study would be to examine the need for a mentorship program for dissertation chairs new to the program. Most participants indicated the dissertation

chair played a pivotal role in the dissertation process. Since four of the twelve participants in this study experienced challenges with their chairs, and two participants requested a chair change, additional training for dissertation chairs may reduce the percentage of students dissatisfied with their chairs. Both participants who experienced a chair change indicated this experience caused them a delay in the program, and they felt they lost valuable time and financial resources. A study could be conducting evaluating experienced dissertation chair mentors who have received favorable reviews from graduating doctorates. Additionally, an examination of the use of a best-practices manual and checklist to be developed to assist mentors in coaching new dissertations chairs could be useful.

## **Reflection**

I have worked in higher education for 18 years, and during this time, my desire and goal was to return to school with the obtainment of a doctorate as a nontraditional student. However, finding the right time in my life to devote three to five years in school was a challenge due to raising children, working, and taking care of domestic affairs. I selected an online program at a reputable university. Not realizing it at the time, I selected a program that utilized a cohort model. One of the benefits of a cohort model is that students track with each other in the basic core classes for approximately two years. After a couple of classes, one of the cohorts started a text group. We shared our thoughts, experiences, and feelings on coursework, instructors, grading rubrics, and many other aspects of the academic environment. Over time, the members of this text group began sharing facets of their personal lives as well. After completing the two years of basic coursework for the doctoral program, I thought about the importance and the impact this group of peers was playing in my doctoral journey. In selecting a problem of practice, I was interested in researching the role that social support has on doctoral retention.

As I entered the dissertation stage, this group of cohorts began to play an even larger role in my doctoral journey as I was assigned a chair that was not engaged. Hearing their stories regarding their positive relationships with their chairs, the quick feedback they were receiving, the guidance they were receiving on their writings, and the progress they were making on their dissertation helped me realize that I was not progressing forward and finishing a doctoral degree was unlikely with a disengaged chair. Their stories about positive interactions and support from their chairs helped me document my need for a chair change, although this was a drawn-out process. Through their support and assistance, I continued to write and finish a draft of the first three chapters with minimal academic guidance before being assigned to a new chair that came highly recommended by my support group. As I listened to stories told by the participants in my interviews, I could relate to many of their experiences, feelings, and perceptions. I have been able to validate my feelings about the positive and negative emotions I have felt over the past few years during this doctoral journey. The support received from this small cohort that I started the doctoral program with has played a pivotal role in my persistence to completion.

## **Conclusion**

Through this study, I desired to contribute to the literature on factors that may affect the retention of online doctoral students and increase completion rates. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an understanding of how social support groups impacted the persistence of online doctoral students during the dissertation stage by exploring perceptions from students who had completed their dissertation and graduated from a doctoral education program. Three support groups were the focus of this study: family, academic community, and peers. The findings of this study align with prior and current research on support groups positively impacting completion rates.



The participants shared their feelings and perceptions involving family, the academic community, and peer support groups. They discussed the positive impacts the different groups had on influencing their motivation and perseverance to finish their doctoral program. Each support group played a different role in influencing participants. Family support was important for emotional encouragement and the gift of time. Academic support was critical for knowledgeable guidance during the doctoral journey, especially during the dissertation stage. Peer support helped students humanize the process with others undergoing the same emotions, struggles, and stress. An interesting aspect that arose from the study was the participants' comments about their internal drive and self-determination impacting their persistence. At the point of completion, participants discovered a new identity within themselves that developed after successfully navigating the doctoral journey due to their self-perseverance, as well as the external support they received.

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## Appendix A: IRB Approval

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



January 28, 2021

Eliza Gorham  
Department of Educational Leadership  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Liza,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Perceptions of Social Support Impacting Persistence of Online Doctoral Students",

(IRB# 21-005 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs



## **Appendix B: Participant Solicitation Email**

Dear Ed.D. Graduate,

My name is Liza Gorham. I am an Ed.D. doctoral candidate with ACU in Organizational Leadership. I am conducting a study on how social support groups impact the persistence of online doctoral students during the dissertation stage by exploring perceptions from students who have completed their dissertation and subsequently, graduated from an education doctoral program. I am asking for your input as you meet the participation criteria for my study.

Participants who agree to take part in my study will be asked to sign a consent form, complete a brief questionnaire online using a SurveyMonkey link, and participate in a one-on-one virtual interview that consists of six questions. Attached is a document with more information regarding your role in my study, should you agree to participate. Would you be interested and willing to participate in my study? If so, please send me an email directly at [xxxxx@acu.edu](mailto:xxxxx@acu.edu) and I will forward a consent form for participation. As a note, after agreeing to participate, you may withdraw at any time, for any reason.

Thank you,  
Liza Gorham

### **Appendix C: Pre-Interview Questionnaire**

Questions on the questionnaire administered through SurveyMonkey.

Q1: Please indicate your name and preferred email address.

Q2: Did you attend (university) for your dissertation and online Ed.D.? If so, when did you enroll in (university)'s online doctoral program and begin classes? (please give specific semester/year)

Q3: When you initially enrolled in (university's) doctoral program, what was your anticipated graduation date (specific month/year)?

Q4: After you began your doctoral journey, did your expected graduation date change after entering the dissertation stage of the program?

Q5: Did you remain on the same track during your doctoral journey with the same or original cohorts in which you started the program during the dissertation stage?

Q6: If you were not on the same track during the dissertation as your cohorts, were you in front of the others or behind them in your expected graduation date?

Q7: Were you satisfied with your progress and track from the beginning to the end of your online doctoral program?

Q8: When you were in the dissertation process of your doctoral journey, did support from your family play an important role? On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the strongest source of support), rate how important support from your family was to you in the successful completion of your dissertation?

Q9: When you were in the dissertation process of your doctoral journey, did support from your university play an important role? On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the strongest source of support), rate how important support from your university was to you in the successful completion of your dissertation?

Q10: When you were in the dissertation process of your doctoral journey, did support from your peers play an important role? On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the strongest source of support), rate how important support from your peers was to you in the successful completion of your dissertation?

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Interview Preface:

Thank you again for meeting with me today. I really appreciate you giving me some your valuable time to help me with my research study involving social support during the dissertation stage of an online doctoral program. Remember that your participation in my study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Also, if you become uncomfortable or wish to stop once the interview begins, you are more than welcome to stop and drop from the research study with no questions asked and no negative repercussions. This audiovisual interview will be recorded. After the interview is transcribed, you will have the opportunity to view the transcript and check for validity and intent. Are you ready to proceed with the interview?

Interview Guide

Before we begin the interview questions, I want to thank you for completing the questionnaire. As we go through the interview questions, please feel free to take as much time as you need to address each of the questions asked as they relate to social support impacting persistence when you completed the dissertation stage of your doctoral degree.

**Research Question:** How does social support influence academic degree persistence and completion according to the perspective of online degree graduates?

**Sub Research Question #1:** How does family support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?

**Sub Research Question #2:** How does academic support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?

**Sub Research Question #3:** How does peer support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral degree graduates?

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Let's talk about the support you received during your dissertation portion of your doctoral study:

- 1) Did your family give you support during this process? If so, what type of support did they give you. What support was the most helpful?
- 2) Did you receive support from your university's academic community? If so, what type of support did they give you. What support was the most helpful?
- 3) Did you receive support from your peers? If so, what type of support did they give you. What support was the most helpful?
- 4) Overall, what line of support was the most critical for you in the completion of your dissertation process? Explain why.
- 5) Overall, how would you describe your satisfaction level with the dissertation portion of your online doctoral program?
- 6) Is there any other information you would like to add related to the support you received during your doctoral journey?

### Appendix E: Questionnaire Response Table

Questions on the questionnaire administered through SurveyMonkey.

Q1: Please indicate your name and preferred email address.

Q2: Did you attend (university) for your dissertation and online Ed.D.? If so, when did you enroll in (university)'s online doctoral program and begin classes? (please give specific semester/year)

Q3: When you initially enrolled in (university's) doctoral program, what was your anticipated graduation date (specific month/year)?

Q4: After you began your doctoral journey, did your expected graduation date change after entering the dissertation stage of the program?

Q5: Did you remain on the same track during your doctoral journey with the same or original cohorts in which you started the program during the dissertation stage?

Q6: If you were not on the same track during the dissertation as your cohorts, were you in front of the others or behind them in your expected graduation date?

Q7: Were you satisfied with your progress and track from the beginning to the end of your online doctoral program?

Participant responses from questions 2 through 7

	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
Participant	Start Date	Anticipated graduation date?	Did expected graduation date change after entering dissertation stage?	Did you remain on the same track as your cohorts?	If not on same track at cohort, were you in front or behind them?	Were you satisfied with your progress and track?
Dr. M	2015	Spring 2018	Yes	No	Behind	See comment below
Dr. N	Oct. 18, 2016	December 2019	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes
Dr. O	Spring 2017	May 2020	Yes	Yes	N/A	See comment below
Dr. P	August 2017	See comment below	Yes – see comment below	No – see comment below	In front – see	Yes

					comment below	
Dr. Q	January 2016	May 2019	Yes – see comment below	Yes – see comment below	See comment below	Mostly – see comment below
Dr. R	Summer 2016	December 2019 or May 2020	See comment below	See comment below	See comment below	Yes
Dr. S	Spring 2016	Spring 2020	No	See comment below	Yes and no, see comment below	Yes
Dr. T	January 2018	May 2021	Yes	Yes	Ahead of them	Yes
Dr. U	January 2016	May 2019	Yes – see comment below	Yes – see comment below	See comment below	See comment below
Dr. V	October 2016	December 2019	Yes	No	Behind – see comment below	Yes
Dr. W	Summer 2017	December 2020	No	Yes	N/A	Yes
Dr. X	March 2016	Spring 2020	Yes – see comment below	Yes – see comment below	See comment below	Yes – see comment below

Comments added by participants to questions 2 through 4

Participant	Q2	Q3 – Anticipated graduation date	Q4 – Did graduation date change?
Dr. P		They did not provide an anticipated graduation date but said it would take me 3-5 years.	Yes, I did a little bit each day to make sure I accomplished my goal of completing it in 3 years.
Dr. Q			Yes, I thought I did not have an opportunity to work on my dissertation while I was taking classes. Then when I started working with my chair, they asked me to start over a couple of times, which slowed things down for me and extended the time that I would be in the program.
Dr. R			I took on additional training like the mediation program extra classes so that meant May 2020
Dr. U			I became pregnant in May 2018 and gave birth in February 2019. While pregnant I experienced severe

			symptoms in which I needed time to adjust, as well as additional time after giving birth to adjust to motherhood.
Dr. X			Yes, only by about 4 months. I completed September 2020.

Comments from questions 5 through 7

Participant	Q5 – Track with cohort	Q6 – In front of or behind cohorts	Q7 – Satisfaction with program
Dr. M			During the program track I was disappointed because a few more courses were added but towards the end I was satisfied
Dr. O			Yes, with the qualification that it became necessary to change dissertation chairs.
Dr. P	no because everybody was at a different point with their dissertations and process	I was in the front of others for the expected graduation date	
Dr. Q	yes - I did not take any breaks. Some finished before me. Some fell off track. Some are still working on dissertation.	I stated on the same track, it was the dissertation process that slowed me down. I would say that I am in the middle.	mostly. I love (university). I love my instructors. I did not have the best experience with my chair. Otherwise, I can say that I enjoyed everything.
Dr. R	I kept the Ed.D originally was in a different specialty and switched to conflict management	1 person from the cohort graduated before I but she got to skip 4 courses, then me, and no one else from my cohort yet graduated	
Dr. S	In some instances. Of course, some dropped out.	Yes and no. Some are still working hard to finish. Some finished with me.	
Dr. U	I completed all coursework with my cohort members.	I believe I was behind.	After putting everything into perspective such as getting married the same year I started the program and giving birth towards the end of the program, I am satisfied with the progress I made.

Dr. V		Mostly in ahead for a while, then fell “behind.”	
Dr. X	I remained the same track but not sure of cohort because I began the program on my own and online so I really didn’t recognize the names of people I knew and they would fluctuate in classes enrolled. So I’m not sure on the cohort.	I really don’t know.	I was satisfied with my progress from beginning to end.

Q8: When you were in the dissertation process of your doctoral journey, did support from your family play an important role? On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the strongest source of support), rate how important support from your family was to you in the successful completion of your dissertation?

Q9: When you were in the dissertation process of your doctoral journey, did support from your university play an important role? On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the strongest source of support), rate how important support from your university was to you in the successful completion of your dissertation?

Q10: When you were in the dissertation process of your doctoral journey, did support from your peers play an important role? On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the strongest source of support), rate how important support from your peers was to you in the successful completion of your dissertation?

#### Responses from questions 8 through 10

Participant	Rating of family support	Rating of university support	Rating of peer support
Dr. M	5	3.5	5
Dr. N	3	4	5
Dr. O	5	5	2
Dr. P	5	4	4
Dr. Q	5	3	5
Dr. R	5	4	3 to 4
Dr. S	5	See comment	3 to 4
Dr. T	5	5	4
Dr. U	5	5	3
Dr. V	3	1	4
Dr. W	5	4	4
Dr. X	5	5	2

Additional comments made by participants on questions 8 through 10



Participant	Comments about family support	Comments about university support	Comments about peer support
Dr. P	Family supported and was fully aware of my study time, commitment, etc. They helped me out in so many different ways.	My dissertation chair was AMAZING and his communication was EXCEPTIONAL The monthly check-in process with the ACU advisors was also a huge help.	Yes, my peers were very supportive
Dr. Q	I would have quit had it not been for the support of my family and loved ones. They made the difference.	My committee members supported me. The dissertation coordinator supported me. My favorite research Liberian supported me. I did not hear from anyone else.	I know a lot of times I was half asleep at work, but my boss kept pushing me to finish. Then, when I needed time off to finish major projects, he was always in agreement. Also, my team would provide inspiration and encouragement.
Dr. R	YES!!!! 5 my husband and kids		3 not as much if you friends, 4 if you mean other doctoral students
Dr. S		Only the support of my dissertation chair was important.	No one understand but they mean well. The only friend who truly understood was in the same boat. We started and finished together.
Dr. U	Yes, family played a huge role. 5-strongest source of support	Yes, from my dissertation chair. 5-I needed a strong chair and I got just that.	Somewhat. 3-not as strong, but I didn't need it to be based on the other support I received.
Dr. V	More support would've been good! I don't think they really understood how to support me, in all honesty.	I'd say 1. It was all on me, at my own pace... for better or worse.	They were for sure more empathetic and understanding!

Dr. X	Yes, family support was essential in my doctoral journey.	Yes, (university) provided great support.	Yes, peer support was important.
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## Appendix F: Coding Matrices for Research Questions

Sub Research Question #1: How does family support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?

Interview Question #1: Did your family give you support during this process? If so, what type of support did they give you? What support was the most helpful?

Category	Themes	Descriptions	Evidence and Subcategories
Family	Time	Family allowed time to complete and/or time challenges	<p>Dr. T: The biggest thing that they did was allow me time.</p> <p>Dr. T: They (family) gave me plenty of space and time and quiet time and were very patient with me when I wasn't at dinner because I was in there finishing something up, wrapping something up.</p> <p>Dr. P – The process did take time away from family, which is something I still struggle with to this day.</p> <p>Dr. O – My family support was from my wife, and she gave me encouragement and quiet time in which to work on my dissertation.</p> <p>Dr. S – They (my parents) would come over and fix meals.</p> <p>Dr. S – It takes a lot of time.</p> <p>Dr. X - Like by taking care of my kids and I'm talking about my parents.</p> <p>Dr. X – My husband was super supportive, always taking care of them (the kids). He took on a lot of the roles here at home.</p> <p>Dr. X - I had to make sure that I had my family time then I had my work time and a lot of my work time was</p>

			<p>after hours, like starting at 10 o'clock.</p> <p>Dr. U - My family gave me support during this process, especially in the dissertation process, I had just become a first time mother and so time is of the essence.</p> <p>Dr. U - The support of making sure I had the time to write, to read, and research, to conduct mock interviews - they definitely supported me.</p> <p>Dr. U – I really just think the most helpful support came from them providing time for me to solely focus on my dissertation process.</p> <p>Dr. U – He (chair) supported me, like my family, by giving me the time that I needed to, to adjust to the new life events that I experienced, but he also gave me the time to write when I needed to write.</p> <p>Dr. U – They (family and chair) both provided the support of time by not only, you know, keeping me on track with the timeline I placed on myself, but also given me some grace that if I got off track.</p>
	Emotional Support	The understanding and encouragement by family	<p>Dr. W- I had somebody who was there to listen.</p> <p>Dr. P - My husband gave me the most support.</p> <p>Dr. P - He earned an honorary doctorate for leading me through it and just encouraging me and watching the times where I doubted myself or I had meltdowns.</p> <p>Dr. W- Just being able to talk stuff out when I was frustrated about something.</p>

			<p>Dr. P – But they were so supportive in me achieving that personal goal.</p> <p>Dr. M – You've got this so more positive affirmations (from family), if you will.</p> <p>Dr. N – They gave a lot of emotional support.</p> <p>Dr. S – So they were a tremendous support, did they get what I was going through my parents? Um, they're elderly so just their support came in.</p> <p>Dr. S – But they didn't understand the process, like my mom would say, are you done with that big paper that you're doing?</p> <p>Dr. T - Just a lot of encouragement and support verbally through cards.</p> <p>Dr. S - So, they've helped out emotionally and then they've helped out with, wants like big milestones in my dissertation.</p> <p>Dr. R – So for my extended family, I would say there was really no support. Just, my husband and I are the first two in our families to even have a college degree.</p> <p>Dr. R – Who was extremely important was my husband. My husband provided a lot of kind of domestic support. He took over all cooking, all errand running, and pretty much just took on domestic support for all four years.</p> <p>Dr. R- And we (me and my daughters) tried to commiserate with each other, you know, about school, and whether it was high school or college, or this, and</p>
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			<p>so, there was more of a social support, and then they were, of course, really proud of me for going back to school.</p> <p>Dr. X- My family did provide me a lot of support when I first began the dissertation or even just the doctoral program itself.</p> <p>Dr. X- My husband really has always been my number one fan.</p> <p>Dr. T - Yes, absolutely, my family supported me through my dissertation, process, through the whole process</p> <p>Dr. X – Because although you may have a supportive family, they don't know what you're going through academically.</p> <p>Dr. U - They would just have to pull me back to reality and say, hey, it's ok for you to take a break. You need a mental break.</p> <p>Dr. U - So I mean, I can go on and on about support, but every way that you would define support, my family, my husband, my mother, my cousins.</p> <p>Dr. Q- My family and friends gave me a tremendous amount of support during the dissertation process.</p> <p>Dr. Q - He's (my father) not a telephone person at all, but he would always call me once a week and just give me a little pep talk and tell me how proud he is of me and that. It meant a lot for him for me to continue on this journey.</p> <p>Dr. Q - He (son) was motivation and encouragement to me as well.</p>
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Sub Research Question #2: How does academic support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral graduates?

Interview Question #2: Did you receive support from your university's academic community? If so, what type of support did they give you? What support was the most helpful?

Category	Themes	Descriptions	Evidence and Subcategories
Dissertation chair	Relationship/ Connection	Relationship and connection with dissertation chair	<p>Dr. R – Number one was the dissertation chair. God, himself, I think, chose for me, but she was perfect, and she provided all kinds of support.</p> <p>Dr. Q - We just had a very adversarial, different, difficult relationship at times</p> <p>Dr. T – He (chair) said, you know what, we are going to do this together. I am with you till the end, and we will get it done.</p> <p>Dr. U – But I also wanted to be challenged and deep down inside, I knew he (chair) was that individual that would challenge me.</p> <p>Dr. P – I think I lucked out. I hit a home run with having the best dissertation chair.</p> <p>Dr. S – So, we met up for coffee and for lunch a couple of times too. Even since I've been done, we've met, we've met for lunch and for coffee.</p> <p>Dr. V - But during that period of time, I felt like, I could have died or dropped off the face of the planet. And she (my chair) wouldn't have reached out to me.</p> <p>Dr. W – Is like, my chair didn't quite match me and didn't quite understand what I was doing.</p>

	Knowledgeable Guidance	<p>Dr. S – She was my second dissertation chair. I fired the first one. She (my 1<sup>st</sup> chair) never took my phone calls, she'd never responded to text, she'd misspell my name incorrectly. And they (administration) were like, well, no, we tried to work this out, and I was like, no. But none of them came close to what I was blessed enough to have with, with her (my second chair).</p> <p>Dr. U – The most support that I received from the university would be my dissertation chair, Dr. _</p> <p>Dr. W – Even though our communication (between me and my chair) was maybe not the best, she did get me to my goal.</p> <p>Dr. V – If we didn't know which way to go with my writing or my research, she (chair) knew someone who did, and we would call them into the meeting.</p> <p>Dr. P – My chair was definitely my right-hand person when it came to the university academic portion.</p> <p>Dr. N – He (my chair) guided me, but he let me make decisions, so I still felt like it was my paper.</p> <p>Dr. Q - I didn't always have the guidance and support from my chair that I felt would have made a difference.</p> <p>Dr. Q - And then, everybody was giving me feedback, but my chair</p> <p>Dr. S – Hands down, it was my dissertation chair, Doctor _.</p> <p>Dr. M – First and foremost that was very important, is my chair. My chair</p>
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	Emotional Support	<p>was very vital and critical.</p> <p>Dr. R - In my cohort, I can say, two for sure had to change chairs, and another 1 or 2, had to change a committee member, that maybe was not a good fit.</p> <p>Dr. W – There was some issues with (chair) knowing the university protocols.</p> <p>Dr. Q - My chair would always say, ok, you've done this, let me give it to the committee first and then I will take a look at it. Well, I thought you would take a look at it first, chair, and then give it to my committee.</p> <p>Dr. O – The only problem I had was with my first dissertation chair. I began to work on the rest of it (after concept proposal). I realized after some of his feedback that he had no idea where I was in the program.</p> <p>Dr. O – And it became evident to me that he (chair) didn't have a clue where I was in the program that ended up costing me at least one, possibly two more semesters, because he didn't know where I was.</p> <p>Dr. O - I got a new dissertation chair, who was very supportive, very helpful, and remains so to this day.</p> <p>Dr. Q - There were times when my chair was completely demoralizing to me.</p> <p>Dr. R – My dissertation chair was the most important support that I needed during that time.</p> <p>Dr. X - There was already a lot of that one-on-one work like, ok, now let me</p>
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	Time	<p>help you go through this, or how can we make this better?</p> <p>Dr. S – Let me (second chair) walk you through this.</p> <p>Dr. S – No, no, no, (said to administration), she's (chair) not being supportive. She's not helping me. She's doing nothing. Like I'm out on a limb out here, we're not doing this I want her fired, I'm firing her, I'm paying for them. I'm telling you, I'm paying for this, I'm done.</p> <p>Dr. V - If I ever reached out to her, she (chair) was always like, it was almost an instantaneous response, whether it was a text or an e-mail</p> <p>Dr. S – I could call her, I could text her, I could e-mail her anytime, it didn't matter if she was on vacation.</p> <p>Dr. X – My chair would respond quickly and if he was going to be out, he would let me know ahead of time so I could submit and have him review it</p> <p>Dr. U – He (chair) allowed me to take the time that I needed just to adjust to these life-changing events.</p> <p>Dr. U –I could expect to hear back from him, on average, within 48 hours, and it was crucial for me, because that kept me working. If he was a chair that would take the seven days or 10 days to respond to me, that would allowed me to have too much time.</p> <p>Dr. U – Definitely that turnaround rate, and being so responsive and communicative.</p>
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	Emotional Support		<p>Dr. V – (about a faculty member) He's a rarity, he's a gem, truly, and he, I think one of his greatest strengths is looking at someone and saying, hey, you could do this better and you're doing a great job, let me help you.</p> <p>Dr. N – Some of the best advice I got was when I sent someone my topic and they told me not to do it because the topic was saturated; that is some of the best advice I got because it saved me lots of time.</p> <p>Dr. V - I had gotten some really critical or what I perceived as negative feedback from one of my committee members. I thought, how is this supposed to build me up? How is this supposed to make me better? This is discouraging and I just had a mental breakdown one night. My chair and then my other committee member were where they counteracted what this other committee member said and so it kind of re-emphasized, hey, I am on the right path.</p> <p>Dr. T – The professors and the teachers of the courses were always available to support and answer any questions.</p> <p>Dr. O - All of the faculty in my classes were very supportive. Their feedback was very constructive.</p> <p>Dr. Q - There were times that my chair portrayed me to be less than intelligent and Dr. _ (on my committee) would give me a nudge.</p> <p>Dr. Q - Those cards (from a faculty member), you know, and those letters, the little things, but they made a huge impact on me.</p>
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	Emotional Support		<p>questions or I doubts about deadlines, or how to do things.</p> <p>Dr. V – (about advisor) I needed someone who was also in it because she has to, you know. What I had really hoped for was not there. I don't know, that's not necessarily the university's fault. It's just, her interpretation was different.</p> <p>Dr. X – So I really, really felt that the support from (university) online, right there, their advisors. I thought I received all around support from the advisors, too, the chair of the committee, the dissertation manager.</p> <p>Dr. Q - Words of encouragement, I found that to be very inspirational, as well, because she (dissertation manager) was just nice to everybody.</p> <p>Dr. P – The once a month check in from my advisor was helpful. In the beginning, I was not a fan of my advisor. My advisor changed four or five times. In the end, I found (the advisor) helpful.</p> <p>Dr. R – My advisor, who kept me kind of, like, there's only so many classes left to go, or what do you need?</p>
Library Writing Center	Knowledge Guidance	Feelings and perceptions regarding support received from the Librarian and Writing Center professionals	<p>Dr. W – I went to a lot of sessions with the writing lab that was super helpful.</p> <p>Dr. T – I left out the writing center, but they were amazing, also, very helpful.</p> <p>Dr. M – Academic support would be, would definitely be the writing center and the librarian.</p> <p>Dr. O – I received support from the library.</p>
	Time		

	Emotional Support		<p>Dr. O – The writing center was very important. I had a lot of interaction with them. And they were very, very helpful.</p> <p>Dr. X – All the scholarly work that we have access to, it's amazing all the databases. I think that was very supportive</p> <p>Dr. Q - I will say that the Writing Center was very helpful as well, especially Dr. (writing center professional)</p> <p>Dr. Q - Ms. (librarian) she would always have words of encouragement for me.</p> <p>Dr. Q - So, God bless the university research librarian team</p>
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Sub Research Question #3: How does peer support in an online doctorate program affect persistence to completion according to the perspective of online doctoral degree graduates?

Interview Question #3: Did you receive support from your peers? If so, what type of support did they give you? What support was the most helpful?

	Themes	Descriptions	Evidence and Subcategories
Cohorts/ Other students	Relationship/ Connection	Feelings and perceptions of support received from cohorts (students who went through the program with participants)	<p>Dr. W – Our cohort, we actually made a Facebook group and we really kept up with each other on that Facebook group.</p> <p>Dr. W – I have some classmates that I feel like I was able to message them whenever I needed to, and that they would get me on the right path.</p> <p>Dr. M – (The university's) Saturday grouping that were face-to-face where I could put a name with a face and meet students I had seen in the discussions</p>

			<p>Dr. M – We're still friends to this day.</p> <p>Dr. M – It's like a family, as a cohort, I think you come together as a cohesive team and that is, you're able to just network.</p> <p>Dr. N – I had a peer group of five cohorts, a diverse group, a Hispanic man, two white women and two black women and we were with each other from the beginning, even now, we still, converse and talk, just moral support, emotional support.</p> <p>Dr. T - Because we (cohorts) had developed a relationship.</p> <p>Dr. V - We (with another cohort) connected several times, we would go to coffee.</p> <p>Dr. P – So there are two colleagues that I really connected with.</p> <p>Dr. S - And we both signed up, and we went through the whole thing together and we both graduated together.</p> <p>Dr. V – Our social group (of cohorts) - since we've been consistent with each other, that's kind of been the thread, the common denominator for me. And so, I think, without that, I would have felt even more isolated.</p> <p>Dr. S – We were in the trenches together.</p> <p>Dr. U - So there was one individual peer, which we still talk, even if it was just a simple, have you written anything today?</p> <p>Dr. U - It was one in which we started the program together and it is actually</p>
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	Emotional Support	<p>a blessing that we graduated. We walked across the stage together in August when (the university) officially had the commencement ceremony.</p> <p>Dr. V – The text thread (between several cohorts) was my main source of friends and support.</p> <p>Dr. M – I am now taking that (information shared between my cohorts), and I'm passing that on to a friend who is in a cohort, I want to say she's in a cohort behind me.</p> <p>Dr. Q – She (a cohort) would text me periodically. How's your writing going?</p> <p>Dr. V - Someone who from our original cohort, that started that Facebook group and so we were posted in there for a long time. I mean maybe a year and a half, and it kind of fizzled out, but that was helpful</p> <p>Dr. R - My cohort, it was so interesting because there was a group of us that started out and we were tracking pretty well until that first major hurdle, and I forgot what that's called, from there, we splintered because two of us made it to the other side of the process. Some others really struggled there. So I found I was giving more support to them, because I was on the other side of it.</p> <p>Dr. V - She would send me a text if I hadn't heard from her. That, hey, you know, what's up? What stage are you? How are you doing?</p> <p>Dr. R - I did find it helpful that I could offer somebody else support, and some alumni tried to start like a</p>
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			<p>support group for people who got to past the proposal.</p> <p>Dr. V - Those are things that are outside of the University parameters, you know, those are student formed groups, which I think are great.</p>
Coworkers and Friends	Emotional Support	Support and encouragement received by friends of participants	<p>Dr. T – One of them (coworker) had finished her doctorate several years ago and she would give me cards.</p> <p>Dr. O - Friends in general, very much so.</p> <p>Dr. O – I think there were 1 or 2 people (at work) who felt threatened by the fact that I was going on to do my doctorate.</p> <p>Dr. S - So, that was a huge source of support, or, you know, I would call her (friend) just crying, like, I have so much to do, or I'm just overwhelmed, or I can't.</p> <p>Dr. S - I have a couple of friends and they would, you know, congratulate me whenever I finished a class or when I told them I'd done something good or the next milestone, you know, in the process.</p> <p>Dr. X – Maybe my 2 or 3 closest friends, from work would be like, you know, just keep going.</p> <p>Dr. U – So, my dissertation chair focused more so on the content, but having someone outside in the workplace, you know, where you spend most of your time, just having a colleague that you could rely on support, definitely helped me humanize the process in what it really entailed in order for me to complete.</p>

			<p>Dr. U – Having managers, or leaders or supervisors that also understand what you are going through and what the task is at hand and supporting you in any way possible.</p> <p>Dr. Q – So my twin is really just a very good and dear friend, but my twin wrote me a greeting card and put it in a mail to me every week. So every week, I received an inspirational greeting card from him with a hand written message of encouragement.</p> <p>Dr. Q – I receive periodic texts from friends, they would say, how is the dissertation going.</p> <p>Dr. Q - They (neighbors) would just provide a lot of motivation and encouragement and plus signs in my yard that were encouraging as well.</p> <p>Dr. Q – My boss, I reported to the CFO at the time, he would always say, look, you know, come talk to me and tell me what's going on with your dissertation.</p> <p>Dr. Q - He (friend) believes in me, and I just need to believe in myself and keep going.</p> <p>Dr. Q – (I want to) thank him (friend) for his love and support and devotion</p> <p>Dr. Q – My other neighbor would cut my grass.</p> <p>Dr. Q – They (neighbors) would cook dinner and bring it over.</p> <p>Dr. U – The administrators and leaders in my place of employment were understanding and gave me time to</p>
	Time		

			write and finish, especially during COVID.
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Interview Question #4: Overall, what line of support was the most critical for you in the completion of your dissertation process? Explain why.

Categories	Themes	Descriptions	Evidence and Subcategories
Self	Internal Motivation	Intrinsic motivation and internal values	<p>Dr. V - You have to want it. You have to invest in it on a daily basis. It is up to me to be motivated to finish,</p> <p>Dr. V - I know this is my responsibility. It's up to me to be motivated to finish, and yet I felt totally alone in it</p> <p>Dr. V - It's our responsibility to seek them out (our dissertation chairs) and to say, 'Here's my progress.</p> <p>Dr. V - I'm praying, and hoping that, if it's my, it will be my life's work yet to come. It's his will, not mine</p> <p>Dr. P- But I am also OCD when it comes to meeting deadlines and in getting things done ahead of time and keeping on pace.</p> <p>Dr. S – When trying to obtain a chair change, I told them there's nobody that's going to care about this more than I am.</p> <p>Dr. S – On obtaining the degree, if I don't model for them (my children) that you can do anything you set your mind to.</p> <p>Dr. S –As you get closer to being done, there's a lot of stuff that you kinda have to find out on your own.</p>

			<p>Dr. S – I think to go and earn your doctorate anyways and make it through the doctoral portion, I mean, the dissertation portion. I mean, it's just, you have to have that drive in you.</p> <p>Dr. X – I've always been someone that I take on a challenge and I really don't talk about it. I held myself accountable. It taught me how to be persistent, and gave me that, my own motivation to keep going.</p> <p>Dr. Q - I had to struggle and fight for it on my own. Self-determination is what carries you through.</p> <p>Dr. Q - The dissertation process is really designed to separate, though, the weak from the strong.</p> <p>Dr. Q - I'm gonna do it, because I'm not going to quit. I was not going to give up because I had encouragement.</p>
Chair	Relationship/ Connections	Perceptions of how a participant's chair played an integral role in the dissertation process	<p>Dr. M – We connected not only as a student/chair, but we also connected on a more spiritual level.</p> <p>Dr. U – I know, being in that relationship (with chair), it really helped me grow as an individual and just become a better person and even better student.</p> <p>Dr. M – Relationship building, very critical to the success of you being paired with the right person. If you're not paired with the right person, it can prolong your journey.</p> <p>Dr. M – (The dissertation manager) to really listen and hone in on what we're saying and what I expressed was pivotal and critical to her pairing</p>

	Knowledge Guidance		us up with the right chair
			Dr. X – So I think the overall support for the dissertation process was really the communication with my committee and with my chair. He (chair) was mentoring me through the process.
			Dr. R – My chair just, exceeded my expectations.
	Emotionally supportive		Dr. O – My new dissertation chair, without hesitation at all. He was very supportive. His feedback was very helpful. It was quick. He really streamlined the process,
			Dr. R - My dissertation chair was so emotionally supportive and so encouraging. She really believed in me and in the work that I was doing. She really thought that my dissertation mattered, and she just kept telling me that it was necessary.
	Time		Dr. U – But as far as the most crucial for my completion, I'm definitely going to have to lean more towards Doctor (dissertation chair) and just how responsive he was; I've heard some horror stories about other students.

Interview Question #5: Overall, how would you describe your satisfaction level with the dissertation portion of your online doctoral program?

Categories	Themes	Descriptions	Evidence and Subcategories
Design of program	Knowledgeable Guidance	Overall thoughts on how the online doctoral program was designed	Dr. W – I really enjoyed being in the program.  Dr. M – And I'm glad that I stuck with (university) and I think any university that you go to, they're

			<p>going to have their ups and downs and I'm really glad that I stuck with (university).</p> <p>Dr. O – A nine, really, a point off, it would have been a 10, but it took me longer than it should have because of my first dissertation chair. But like I said, that that issue was quickly resolved.</p> <p>Dr. T - the IRB approval part was painful. Very, very, very painful and almost caused me to not be able to finish when I was supposed to finish.</p> <p>Dr. O – I went out of my way to tell the department chair and my dissertation chair, that I have passed on my opinion to a lot of my colleagues and friends that this is a program that is designed for success.</p> <p>Dr. S - In between a seven and 8, instead of it, probably an 8 and a half, maybe it's because I don't need a lot of direction.</p> <p>Dr. R – (The program) exceeded my expectation.</p> <p>Dr. X – Out of all these programs (3 online programs) that I've done, even when I was physically at the university, I have never, ever, ever, received as much support as I did through (university)</p> <p>Dr. X - I would say that it was a 10, it was a really, really great experience for me.</p> <p>Dr. U – I did not like their process, ok, the old mid program review process was, it was challenging, and it obviously was not the most</p>
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			<p>effective, because, as we know, (the university) changed their process, I am satisfied with the overall process.</p> <p>Dr. Q – Good, but maybe at that point, after the courses we took, we could have then had another session where we just focused on our own dissertation and learn how to focus on dissertation recommendations.</p> <p>Dr. V - I'm genuinely satisfied with the program.</p> <p>Dr. Q - The two years that I spent on curriculum were very eye opening. I learned a lot. I'm very grateful for the organizational leadership and conflict resolution curriculum that I encountered, that I learned from, but it didn't really prepare me as much for the dissertation process.</p> <p>Dr. V - I do think that the program is built well. I was blessed with a good chair from day one.</p> <p>Dr. Q - I know people who never passed the mid program review, and I don't know where they are today.</p> <p>Dr. Q - I still didn't even do my dissertation on what I did my mid program review over because when I got to work on my chair, he made me start over and go find another research topic.</p> <p>Dr. Q - I really struggled with understanding all the components to the dissertation.</p>
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Interview Question #6: Is there any other information you would like to add related to the



support you received during your doctoral journey?

Categories	Themes	Descriptions	Evidence and Subcategories
Self	Emotional Support	The purpose, reason or drive for completing the doctoral degree.	<p>Dr. T – I really would not have been able to do this without support, from those three groups that you, that you're asking about.</p> <p>Dr. R - She (my chair) would text me, call me, e-mail me, just to make sure I was doing OK, and sometimes ordered me to take a mental health break</p> <p>Dr. Q - So, someone who has a loan, who works full-time, who's trying to get through this program, on weekends and nights, encouragement plays a significant role in helping you to get through the dissertation journey.</p>
	Knowledgeable Guidance		<p>Dr. W – Give us (admissions) your work schedule, we'll make it work for you.</p> <p>Dr. O - Keep close tabs on your dissertation chair make sure they know exactly where you are.</p> <p>Dr. R - I would have liked to have seen something (a support group) a little more structured and moderated.</p>
	Internal Motivation		<p>Dr. W – My family asked me, ‘Are you doing it to serve God or why are you doing it? What's your purpose?’</p> <p>Dr. S – So it wouldn't have mattered in what shape or form, I think, that the program was delivered. Once I started, I wasn't going to stop until it was done, like a dog gnawing on a bone.</p> <p>Dr. S – So knowing that I was doing it for them, my kids, to be a role model), for that reason, is probably the only reason that I finished.</p>

			<p>Dr. V – You can do anything you set your mind to.</p> <p>Dr. X - The dissertation process itself, that really takes a lot of self-regulation, self-determination, you know, to do it, and I think it made me realize too, that I just have to keep on going because I could see my family doing other things to help me.</p>
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