

Why Do So Many Graduate Students Quit?

Universities Themselves May be Contributing to Burnout by Patterson [21] found some doctoral students burn out and offered the following explanation:

Mental illness is often offered as the standard rationale to explain why some graduate students burn out. Some research has suggested a link between intelligence and conditions such as bipolar disorder, leading some observers to believe many graduate students struggle with mental-health problems that predispose them to burning out [21].

Cassuto [5] places doctoral candidates into three categories: “Those who can’t get it done. ... Those who have the ability to finish but choose not to. ... [and] Everyone else—that is, those who complete their doctorates.” In *What Makes a Good PhD Student?* by Chenevix-Trench [22] believes most new doctoral students are “ill-prepared” because grade inflation makes it difficult to identify great doctoral candidates from ok candidates. In addition, D’Andrea [10] researched obstacles that prevented doctoral students from completing their degree. The findings were doctoral students had “difficult with planning and writing, working independently, and financial and personal-relationship pressures” [10]. Thus, one could argue, the 2 factors D’Andrea [10] presented is (1) doctoral students are not academically prepared and (2) pressures (i.e., financial and personal-relationship). However, other authors (see Lovitts [23]; Lovitts [3]; Bates [19]; MacLeod [6]; Abiddin et al. [1]) believe low doctoral student completion rate could stem from the student’s background characteristics (i.e., gender, first generation student, age, student status, prior GPA, employment status, financial status, marital status, and race and ethnicity). In *The Transition to Independent Research: Who Makes It, Who Doesn’t, and Why* by Lovitts [23] investigates her research questions from a theoretical perspective and practical observation from “high-PhD-productive faculty” [23]. Lovitts [23] analysis emphasizes that characteristics can and do impact a student’s outcome (i.e., completing or not completing their doctoral degree). However, Lovitts [23] believes that a combination of different characteristics, not an individual characteristic, impacts the student’s outcome.

Lovitts [3], Cassuto [5], Willis et al. [7] and Bates [19] feel there is a possibility the higher education institution is the cause for the low doctoral student completion rate. Lovitts [3] believes “the causes of attrition are deeply embedded in the organizational culture of graduate school and the structure and process of graduate education”.

Lovitts’ [3] study stemmed from her “own unhappy experiences as a graduate student and departure from not one but two doctoral programs”. She wrote:

I knew my experience was not unique, that about 50% of those who start PhD programs leave without a degree, yet we are isolated from one another. There were no support groups, no networks. No one cares about us. We were outcasts [3].

Furthermore, “the culture of graduate school, Lovitts [3] says, cultivates a ‘pluralistic ignorance’ in which everyone involved—deans, faculty members, students themselves—tend to blame the departing students for leaving” (as cited in Cassuto [5]). Lovitts [3] stated, “it is not the background characteristic students bring with them to the university that affect their persistence outcomes; it is what happens to them after they arrive”. Research conducted by Willis et al. [7] found “all five dropping out participants reported problematic relationship with their dissertation chair. Neglected, and in one case harassed” [7]. In addition, The Ph.D. Completion Project identified six institutional and program characteristics (i.e., financial support, research mode of the field/doctoral student’s discipline, mentoring, selection, processes and procedures and, program environment) that affect doctoral student outcomes [19].

Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. [8] found 12 factors on “both the student level and the institutional level that contribute to students’ choice to leave doctoral programs” [8]. They identified the dissertation as the number one reason why students do not complete their degree. In addition, in no particular order, student feels isolation and program/degree depersonalization, family commitments, not making the doctoral program the top priority, disconnect with faculty and students, “Doctoral students are often selected due to their dedication to precise work and a drive for excellence. Unfortunately, students with these traits are more likely to become unsatisfied and easily frustrated with poor program organization” [8], stress and losses of motivation, not knowing school regulations, guidelines and program structure ambiguity, program inflexibility, program is not a walk in the park, and hardship (e.g., financial or personal) are the remaining factors on “both the student level and the institutional level that contribute to students’ choice to leave doctoral programs” [8]. Furthermore, Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. [8] found six factors doctoral students need to be successful and complete their work on the degree. The six factors are “a sense of belonging; a motivation to accomplish; academic integration; autonomy and opportunity for choice; the ability to overcome adversity and personal sacrifice; and financial survival” [8].

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Research Question 1

The research findings of this study identify employment and financial factors as the principal reasons for non-completion of the original doctoral degree. For the employment factor, Participant #1 received a promotion that caused him to relocate. He stated, “I just physically couldn't be there for the classes anymore.” Participant #1's response raised another question: Did the student reach out to Institution A to explain his personal situation (i.e., the promotion and relocating) and ask for help? Participant #1 stated the following:

I didn't even bother reaching out to them because they were so, my, my feeling was they were so kind of set in their ways, you know, old fashion type of school that they just. No, I never reached out to them. I just, I didn't think it would make any difference. ... it wasn't a real, real friendly or warm environment at all. ... I guess I'll be quite honest with you. A matter of fact that the attitude they gave off was that, they almost didn't want you to finish. I think their attitude was, you know, who you know, who we can weed out of the program.

Participant #2 had “so many [work] responsibilities, so many commitments and deadlines”. Participant #2's response raised another question: Did the student reach out to Institution B to explain his personal situation (i.e., work responsibilities) and ask for help? Participant #2 stated, “No, I probably could have asked for a leave of absence from the program but to me that seemed like acknowledging failure.” Lastly, Participant #3 believed his personal finances was the main factor for not completing his original program. Participant #3's response raised another question: Did the student reach out to Institution C to explain his personal situation (i.e., lacking funds to complete) and ask for help? Participant #3 stated, “I didn't reach out. Once they told me that GMercyU's program was online, that was attractive to me”.

In addition, there were additional factors that prevented the doctoral-non-completers to leave their prior institution. The additional factors were the program environment, program being disorganized, perception that not all of the required courses were in line with the degree, unsupportive environment, lack of dissertation coursework, and job stressors. Furthermore, ROI (i.e., “wasn't sure that all of this effort was going to pay off”) was an additional factor for two of the three participants to not complete their original degree. Figure 2, Correlation Between Research Participants Factors for Leaving their Original Doctoral Program and the 12 Factors, provides a visual illustration of how the participants' answers in this research compares with Rockinson-

Szapkiw et al. [8] 12 factors “on both the student level and the institutional level that contribute to students' choice to leave doctoral programs”. The participants' principal factors, for leaving their prior doctoral program, are in bold and the additional factors are in regular text.

Participant's answers for leaving their original doctoral program		Rockinson-Szapkiw <i>et al.</i> [8] 12 factors “on both the student level and the institutional level that contribute to students' choice to leave doctoral programs”
Employment	→	Family commitments
Relocation	→	Program inflexibility
Financial factors	→	Hardship
Program environment	→	Disconnect with faculty and students
Unsupportive environment	→ →	Feeling isolated Disconnect with faculty and students
Program being disorganized	→	Selected for “dedication to precise work and a drive for excellence” but became “unsatisfied and easily frustrated with poor program organization”
Perception not all of the required courses were in line with degree	→	Selected for “dedication to precise work and a drive for excellence” but became “unsatisfied and easily frustrated with poor program organization”
Lack of dissertation coursework	→ →	Dissertation (according the research is the number one reason) Not knowing school regulations, guidelines and program structure ambiguity
Job stressors	→ →	Family commitments Stress and losses motivation
	X	Program/degree depersonalization
	X	Making the doctoral program the top priority
	X	Program is not a walk in the park

Figure 2. Correlation Between Research Participants Factors for Leaving their original Doctoral Program and the 12 Factors

Employment impacted family commitments. In addition, relocating needed a program to be flexible. A financial factor was a hardship because one did not have funding or able to make payment for courses. An unfriendly program environment resulted in a disconnect with faculty and students. If the program or higher educational institution has an unsupportive environment the student could have a disconnect with faculty and students followed by the student feeling isolated. One participant stated, “they almost didn't want you to finish” was the attitude they received from their prior doctoral program. Thus, one could strongly argue, the projection a higher educational institution gives matters. In addition, a program that was disorganized led a student to become unsatisfied. Furthermore, a student had the perception not all of the required courses were in line with the degree and the student felt the program was

disorganized and, then again, the student became unsatisfied. Furthermore, a lack of dissertation coursework did not assist the student in completing their dissertation and knowing the school regulations, guidelines and program structure. Lastly, job stressors impacted family commitments and created stress and loss of motivation. However, three (*i.e.*, program/degree depersonalization; making the doctoral program the top priority; and program is not a walk in the park) of Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* [8] 12 factors, were discussed during the interview, but the three factors were not any of the participant's factors for leaving their original program. However, even though none of the students stated the dissertation was a factor for them leaving their prior institution, two out of the three participants completed all their course work up to the dissertation. Therefore, one could argue, this supports Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* [8] belief that the dissertation is a reason why students do not complete their doctoral degree. Furthermore, Participants #1's comment (*i.e.*, "I didn't think it [reaching out] would make any difference. ... it [Institution A] wasn't a real, real friendly or warm environment at all. ... the attitude they gave off was that, they almost didn't want you to finish") reinforces two of the six institutional and program characteristics (*i.e.*, mentoring, program environment) that *The Ph.D. Completion Project* identified that affect doctoral student outcomes [19] and Cassuto's [5] belief the program's culture is a factor in whether the students stays in the program or leaves.

5.2. Research Question 2

According to the participants the main factors that led them to complete the ABD Completion Program at GMercyU were the program being on-line and highly flexible; restructuring lifestyle (*i.e.*, retired); and being in a different financial situation. Furthermore, additional factors that led the participants to complete the ABD Completion Program at GMercyU were the cohort model, connecting with other students, supportive dissertation chair, flexibility with program requirements, and course-structure when writing dissertation. Participant #1 felt the cohort model and connection with other students was an additional factor for helping him complete the ABD program at GMercyU. Participant #1 stated the following:

I liked the cohort model. I like, matter of fact, I'm still in touch with a couple of the guys. The other guy just in my cohort, just finished his defense a couple of weeks ago. ... felt like you were more in touch with the students even though it was all remote and it was online, the way GMercyU set it up.

Participant #2 felt his dissertation chair was more supportive at GMercyU. Participant #2 stated, "my dissertation chair the second time was very different. The second one wanted to be supportive. But, the first one didn't seem to have that as motivation." In addition, Participant #2 felt the ABD program was the right fit and design. He liked the fact that the ABD program had him complete his courses and his dissertation at the same time. He stated, "I liked it. It worked really well for me. I can't say it's the right fit or the right design for everybody. But, it certainly worked well for me." Furthermore, Participant #2 stated GMercyU was flexible with their program requirements. He was not able to attend the international in-person residency course. Therefore, his program requirements were adjusted to accommodate his needs. He completed a three-week intense international education course on-line. Participant #2 stated the following:

I had a medical procedure in May, so I couldn't travel. But I could take a [on-line] course ... There were eight or nine of us that were [in the on-line course]. ... it was an intense three weeks, ... So I just hung out in my apartment and completed the course in that three weeks because I'd had a hernia surgery so I wasn't going anywhere, except working on that stuff.

Figure 3, Correlation Between Research Participants Factors for Completing GMercyU's ABD Completion Program and the Six Factors, provides a visual illustration of how the participants' answers in this research compares with Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* [8] six factors doctoral students need to be successful and complete their work on the degree. The participants' principal factors, that led the participants in completing the ABD Completion Program, are in bold and the additional factors are in regular text.

The on-line and highly flexible program allowed the doctoral students to have autonomy and opportunity for choice. Whereas restructuring lifestyle (*i.e.*, retired) gave the student the ability to overcome adversity and personal sacrifice. In addition, being in a different financial situation allowed a student to have financial survival. The cohort model gave the doctoral students a sense of belonging, and a motivation to accomplish. Connecting with other students gave the students a sense of belonging and a motivation to accomplish. A supportive dissertation chair gave the doctoral student a sense of belonging, a motivation to accomplish, academic integration, autonomy and opportunity for choice, and the ability to overcome adversity and personal sacrifice. Furthermore, flexible with program requirements gave the student a sense of belonging, a motivation to accomplish, autonomy and opportunity for choice, and the ability

to overcome adversity. In addition, course-structure when writing dissertation gave the doctoral student a sense of belonging and a motivation to accomplish. All of Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* [8] six factors, that doctoral students need to be successful and complete their work on the degree, were found at GMercyU’s ABD Completion Program, according to the participants in this research study.

Participant’s answers for completing GMercyU’s ABD Completion Program		Rockinson-Szapkiw <i>et al.</i> [8] Six factors doctoral students need to be successful and complete their work on the degree
On-line and highly flexible	→	Autonomy and opportunity for choice
Restructuring lifestyle (<i>i.e.</i> , retired)	→	The ability to overcome adversity and personal sacrifice
Different financial situation	→	Financial survival
Cohort model	→	A sense of belonging
	→	A motivation to accomplish
Connecting with other students	→	A sense of belonging
	→	A motivation to accomplish
Supportive dissertation chair	→	A sense of belonging
	→	A motivation to accomplish
	→	Academic integration
	→	Autonomy and opportunity for choice
	→	The ability to overcome adversity and personal sacrifice.
Flexible with program requirements	→	A sense of belonging
	→	A motivation to accomplish
	→	Autonomy and opportunity for choice
	→	The ability to overcome adversity
Course-structure when writing dissertation	→	A sense of belonging
	→	A motivation to accomplish

Figure 3. Correlation Between Research Participants Factors for Completing GMercyU’s ABD Completion Program and the Six Factors

One could argue, GMercyU’s simultaneous doctoral course sequence, which includes a dissertation course-structure (see Figure 1), assisted all of the doctoral students in completing the ABD Completion Program. Thus, the Dissertation Advisement courses counter-reacts Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* [8] number one reason why students do not complete their degree – the dissertation. In addition, a cohort model also stops students from feeling isolated and having a disconnect with faculty and students. Moreover, GMercyU’s program was flexible as illustrated with Participant #2’s statement, “I couldn’t travel”, about not being able to attend the international in-person residency; therefore, Participant #2 took an online course. In addition, according to Participant #2’s statement, “eight or nine” other students benefited from the program flexibility also. Furthermore, GMercyU provides program/degree personalization, because the ABD

Completion Program director evaluates each doctoral-non-completer-student’s transcript in order for their individual learning plan. Therefore, one could argue, when GMercyU designed their ABD Completion Program they considered and understood Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* [8] 12 factors “on both the student level and the institutional level that contribute to students’ choice to leave doctoral programs”; the six institutional and program characteristics identified in The Ph.D. Completion Project [19] and Cassuto’s [5] belief the program’s culture is a factor in whether the students stays in the program or leaves. One could argue, when GMercyU designed their ABD Completion program they counter-reacted to many of the reasons why doctoral students leave their programs, in order to assist doctoral students with completing their doctoral degree.

6. Conclusion

Why do some doctoral students complete their degrees and others do not? This research study investigated: (1) *What are the principal factors that influenced doctoral-non-completer-students to leave their original doctoral program without completing the degree?* The research findings of this study identify employment and financial factors as the principal reasons for non-completion of a doctoral degree. The additional factors that led two of the three participants to become non-completers were “wasn’t sure that all of this effort was going to pay off” (*i.e.*, ROI) were an additional factor for two of the three participants to not complete their original degree. Additional factors that led at least one of the participants to become a non-completer were the institutional and program environment, including not looking out for one of the participant’s best interest as a doctoral student; and job stressors. In addition, the institution’s environment (*i.e.*, unfriendly and the attitude “they almost didn’t want you to finish”), lack of program organization, and the perception that the required courses did not fit the program objectives. However, unfortunately, none of the participants reached out to their original institution to explain their personal situation and ask if the institution could work with them. Therefore, one could argue, this supports “trickle out” effect [5] theory and, more importantly, Lovitts [3] belief that doctoral attrition rate is invisible to higher education institution’s staff because of how the doctoral-non-completer-students depart from the higher education institution. Why did the doctoral-non-completer-students just leave without attempting to reach out to their prior institutions? Did the prior institution try to reach out to the students?

Furthermore, this research study also investigated: (2) *What are the principal factors that influenced these prior doctoral-non-completer-*

students to actually complete their degree requirements in a different university's doctoral program? This study found an on-line and highly flexible program, making the doctoral program top priority, and being in a different financial situation were the principal factors for the doctoral-non-completers to complete their doctoral degree in a different university's doctoral program. In addition, a cohort model, a connection with other students, more supportive dissertation chair, the fact that GMercyU's program utilized a simultaneous doctoral course sequence model, and GMercyU was flexible with their program requirements were additional factors that helped the participants to complete their doctoral degree at another higher education institution. One could argue, GMercyU carefully designed their ABD Completion program in order to assist doctoral students with completing their doctoral degree.

At the start of this research, the ABD Completion program was in its infancy stage and no females responded to be a participant for this research. Thus, this research only had three male participants. Therefore, further research might want to consider a larger and more diverse population in a few years. In addition, if the population size is large enough one could consider a quantitative research approach. In addition, this research only had participants whose prior doctoral institutions were in the U.S. Therefore, further research should consider doctoral-non-completers that attended international programs. At the conclusion of this research (three years later) there were three ABD completion programs in the U.S.

7. References

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