A Grounded Theory of Persistence in a Limited-Residency Doctoral Program

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Abstract
Approximately 50% of doctoral students in social science, humanities, and educational doctoral programs fail to earn their Ph.D. This number is 10% to 15% higher for students enrolled in online or limited-residency programs. Using in-depth interviews and qualitative data analysis techniques, this grounded-theory study examined participants’ recollections of their experience as students in a limited-residency doctoral program and their reasons for withdrawal while working on their dissertation. The resultant theory clarified relationships between attrition and support issues (i.e., advisor support, dissertation process support and program office support). The theoretical model helps identify steps faculty and administration may take in order to reduce high levels of attrition.

Main Arguments
Method
• A qualitative, phenomenological approach was taken to understand a group in a particular setting.
• Participants were formerly enrolled in an information systems limited residency doctoral program at the university where the study was conducted.
• A non-random sample of 17 participants were interviewed for approximately 20 – 90 minutes using unstructured questions starting with, “Tell us about your experience in the doctoral program.”

Data Analysis
Analysis proceeded from initial open coding, to axial coding to the selection of a selective code.

Open Codes
Students confirmed:
• A lack of administrative and faculty support
• The program’s coursework was effective
• They wanted more “face time.”

Axial Codes
Further refinement yielded three axial codes:
• Advisor Support Issues
• Dissertation Support Issues
• Program Support Issues.

Selective Code
• Sixteen participants identified advisor support issues as their reason for dropping out. This was chosen as the selective code.

About Grounded Theory
• Glaser and Strauss (1967) confirmed grounded theory studies are not designed to confirm hypotheses, their intent is to allow theory to emerge from the data. The resulting theory “fits” the data.
• In this study data collected from the field “grounded,” or supported, the proposal of a viable theory.

Conclusion
Theoretical Model: The Nature of Participants’ Experience of Doctoral Attrition in a Limited-Residency Program

The three axial codes become independent variables in this model while doctoral attrition becomes the dependent variable.

Moderating variables are also introduced along each of the model’s relationships to empower researchers to test the impact of initiatives designed to positively impact the independent variables.

Actions For Enhanced Advisor Support
Since advisor support issues were confirmed as the selective code, an additional model was added to address it:

Limitations
• Participants may not be typical of other doctoral programs.
• Recruiting was difficult because participants may have been hesitant to share experiences where they perceived themselves to have failed.
• Recollections are often incomplete.

References