

Exploring the Importance of an Introductory Doctoral Course

Anna C. Treacy Nicole Casillas Lynda R. Wiest

University of Nevada, Reno

Abstract: *This article presents a case study conducted by two course participants and a course instructor who jointly explored their experiences in an introductory doctoral course they had recently completed. Through personal experiential stories, the authors discuss the benefits of the course, suggest improvements, and describe the classroom climate. Four themes that appeared in the authors' individual narratives about the benefits of the course relate to dispositions, knowledge/practical skills, meaningful connections, and personal reflection/insight. Themes on suggested improvements relate to time constraints and the need for a broader range of faculty and student role models. The paper concludes with a brief description of the class climate, recommendations for doctoral programs, particularly in relation to inclusion of an introductory doctoral course, and recommendations for future research.*

Keywords: *Teacher education, doctoral programs, case study*

Doctoral students face a number of challenges en route to degree completion, for example, those related to financial support and program environment (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Sowell (2008) showed that after ten years in a program, 57% of doctoral students completed their degrees, 31% left their program, and the remaining students were continuing their doctoral studies, with males and White students being more likely to complete their programs than females and students from minority ethnic groups, although this varies by field of study. A number of research-based practices may help improve doctoral student retention, among them mentoring—which extends beyond advising—that includes support and guidance from program faculty on matters such as difficult experiences encountered and job/career options in addition to dissertation research (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008).

The purpose of this case study is to explore the value of one experience, an introductory doctoral course, intended to support doctoral students at a research university in the Western United States. The authors, two doctoral student participants in the course, and the course instructor, engaged in reflective analysis independently and jointly to determine the benefits and shortcomings of the course and to describe the class climate from their varied perspectives. The results provide insights and recommendations for doctoral students, doctoral program faculty, and higher education researchers.

Anna Treacy and Nicole Casillas are both currently Ph.D. candidates in the doctoral program in the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Reno, focusing on a concentration in special education. Lynda Wiest, Ph.D., is a professor of math education in the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Reno. Her main areas of interest and expertise are mathematics education, educational equity, and teacher education. She can be contacted regarding this article at wiest@unr.edu

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this section, professional literature on doctoral student challenges and support are summarized. The literature indicates a need for programmatic experiences such as the introductory doctoral course examined in this paper.

DOCTORAL STUDENT CHALLENGES

Doctoral students face a number of challenges during their degree programs. Some psychosocial challenges include feelings of isolation, stress, and anxiety (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007). These psychosocial challenges can be especially hard for female doctoral students and doctoral students of color. For example, a qualitative study conducted by Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, and Smith (2004) found that the majority of African American female participants who were either full-time doctoral students or recent graduates of a doctorate in education reported feelings of isolation. Some participants noted a desire to leave their doctoral program because of isolation. Additionally, other challenges involve financial concerns, time constraints, and balancing school, work and personal demands (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; West, Gokalp, Vallejo, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011). Finally, interpersonal challenges exist between doctoral students and others, such as spouses, parents, and advisor/chair. For example, West et al. (2011) found that doctoral students attending a selective research university reported challenges with their dissertation chair.

Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, and Abel (2006) reviewed organizational and personal factors that contribute to students leaving their doctoral programs prior to earning their degree. Organizational factors included the student selection process, program structure, effectiveness of advisors and mentors, program flexibility, and sense of community in the program. Personal factors included relationships with significant others, family responsibilities, support systems, employment responsibilities, financial strains, time constraints, and overload (balancing various personal, academic, and work commitments). The researchers implemented a stress management course that was offered to doctoral students. Twelve doctoral students who took the stress management course as an elective found the course to be helpful. At the end of the course, the doctoral students eliminated most of their stress-related behaviors (e.g., drinking excessive amounts of caffeine and grinding their teeth). Further, when confronted with new stressors, the doctoral students continued to use stress management techniques that they learned in the course. Stubb, Pyhalto and Lonka (2011) surveyed 669 doctoral students in Finland about their experiences regarding their scholarly communities in terms of socio-psychological well-being. The doctoral students experienced some stress, exhaustion, and anxiety. In addition, some doctoral students reported lack of interest in their studies. The first finding revealed that students who reported empowerment and inspiration in their scholarly communities reported less stress, exhaustion, and anxiety, and were less likely to report lack of interest in their studies. However, the second finding revealed that doctoral students who did not report empowerment, but instead the opposite, felt disenfranchised in their scholarly communities. They reported more stress, exhaustion, and anxiety, and they were more likely to lack interest in their studies.

Barnes et al. (2010) examined open-ended survey questions from doctoral students regarding their experiences with their advisors. A total of 2,391 doctoral students

completed the survey. The authors reported only on the qualitative content of the open-ended survey questions. Four positive attributes of advisors were identified in the data: accessible, helpful, socializing, and caring. The three negative attributes were inaccessible, unhelpful, and uninterested. Fountaine (2012) found similar experiences for doctoral students attending historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Overall, Black doctoral students reported positive experiences with faculty interaction. Specifically, high levels of internal engagement, external engagement, and advisor engagement were all associated with a positive doctoral experience. However, selection engagement, interpersonal engagement, resource engagement, and negative engagement were associated with negative doctoral experiences.

Many studies conducted on advisor-advisee relationships have focused exclusively on the doctoral students' perspectives (Fountaine, 2012; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Hopwood, 2010; Jazvac-Martek, 2009). However, few studies have been published on the perspectives of doctoral advisors. Gardner (2010) conducted a study in which she examined the perspectives of 16 faculty members who serve as doctoral student advisors. Faculty views of their role in the doctoral student socialization process (e.g., values, skills, and norms of academia) were described. Three themes that appeared related to the interaction of students within the structure of the academic setting (e.g., the student selection process and the consistency of program goals), the interaction among students in the program (e.g., influences from advanced cohorts and post-doctoral students), and the interaction between students and faculty members (e.g., formal interactions, such as courses faculty teaches and informal interactions, such as conversations during faculty office hours). In general, the faculty members emphasized the structure of the academic setting in relation to the influence on doctoral student socialization. Grover (2007) asserted that the relationship between a doctoral student and her/his advisor is crucial to progressing through the various stages of doctoral study.

Doctoral students are not alone in encountering challenges in academia. Faculty members also encounter challenges, such as stress due to heavy teaching loads, and research demands in academia (Daly & Dee, 2006). The busy schedules of professors may sometimes negatively affect doctoral students, because professors are often inaccessible (Barnes et al., 2010). Professors assume many roles (Gardner, 2010). They serve the role of a teacher, scholar, committee member, advisor, and mentor. Balancing these various roles can be challenging for professors.

Barnes and Austin (2009) analyzed interviews with 25 exemplary doctoral student advisors. These faculty members were classified as exemplary because they have graduated a larger percent of doctoral students than is typical. Data from this study derives from a larger investigation of how advisors successfully guide their doctoral advisees. This study focused on better understanding how faculty advisors comprehend their advising role. Three major themes were revealed: advisors' responsibilities; advisor functions; characteristics of the advising relationship and advisors' behaviors. Advisors perceived that their responsibilities included helping advisees to be successful, to develop as researchers, and to develop as professionals. Advisor functions included collaborating, mentoring, advocating, and chastising. Finally, characteristics of the exemplary advising relationship and advisors' behaviors were the following descriptors: friendly, professional, collegial, supportive, caring, accessible, and honest.

DOCTORAL STUDENT SUPPORT

Doctoral students are a heterogeneous group of individuals (Selmer, Graham & Goodykoontz, 2011). Therefore, certain aspects of a doctoral program (e.g., relationships with advisor/chair) may be viewed as challenges for one doctoral student, but they may be viewed as a support system to another doctoral student. Despite the many challenges doctoral students encounter, many doctoral students persevere with high levels of motivation, self-efficacy, and confidence (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Grover, 2007; Hines, 2008; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011). Perseverance correlates with the types of support systems that are both cultivated by the student and made available to the student by the university. Support systems include both immediate and extended family members, student advisors, faculty members, peers, and advanced students (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). In addition to having a support system, doctoral students report that financial support such as assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, and loans help support their doctoral studies (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011).

Baker and Pifer (2011) investigated the key experiences, challenges, goals for performance/advancement, key relationships, types of support present/absent, and identity (personal and professional) among 31 doctoral students, specifically focusing on the dissertation stage of the doctoral program. Findings revealed that many students relied on support systems, particularly relationships, to help them navigate the challenges often associated with writing a dissertation. Relationships with faculty advisors, as well as with advanced students, played an important role in assisting students to overcome the lack of structure that exists during this stage of doctoral study (Baker & Pifer, 2011). The majority of doctoral students' advisors helped them develop a writing schedule, whereas advanced students shared their own strategies, such as setting weekly writing goals and participating in writing support groups. Several researchers have reported findings regarding the importance of peer and faculty support in a doctoral program (Grover, 2007; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011; Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006).

Similarly, Gardner and Holley (2011) found that first-generation doctoral students (n=20) received support from faculty advisors, peers, advanced students, and other mentors. One doctoral student stated that she wanted to find an advisor who would help guide her through the doctoral program. Other doctoral students found encouragement from peers and advanced students. Conversely, many of the doctoral students interviewed in this study did not find support from their family members. They noted that many family members do not fully understand doctoral study. One doctoral student explained that her family does not recognize the purpose of her being in school and questions her as to why she does not have a job. Finally, many of the doctoral students in the study relied on student loans, fellowships, and assistantships to help pay for their doctoral education. Similar findings were evident in Martinsuo and Turkulainen's (2011) study of industrial engineering and management doctoral students in Finland. Participants in this study expressed peer and advisor support as being integral to completion of their degrees.

Stewart, Williamson, and King (2008) surveyed Black/African American and Latino students at a Ph.D. Project prospective business doctoral student conference. The goal of the Ph.D. Project was to encourage ethnic minorities (e.g., Black/African Americans and Latinos) to apply to Ph.D. programs in business. Specifically, the authors examined

contributing factors that influenced participants' decisions on whether or not to apply to a Ph.D. program in business. Findings indicated that cognitive values (e.g., studying complex topics), social supports (e.g., parental social support for education), and financial concerns (e.g., level of debt) were more substantial in compelling participants to apply to a Ph.D. program than current job-related factors such as job satisfaction. Financial concerns had the largest impact on applying to a Ph.D. program. The greater the financial concern, the less inclined participants were to apply to a Ph.D. program.

BRIDGE FROM DOCTORAL STUDENT TO PROFESSOR

Many have called the process or the road to an earned doctorate a journey (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Grover, 2007; McAlpine, 2012; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009; Selmer, Graham, & Goodykoontz, 2011). Doctoral students must learn the practical knowledge and skills it takes to become a professor (Gardner, 2010; Grover, 2007). There are various stages one must experience to successfully complete a doctorate (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Grover, 2007). First, doctoral students must immerse themselves in coursework for the first two or three years in their respective programs. Often, a doctoral candidate must pass a mid-program review. The completion of coursework is followed by intense comprehensive exams. Upon successful completion of comprehensive exams, doctoral students prepare their dissertation proposal and apply for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for collecting data for their dissertation study. Lastly, doctoral students must execute their dissertation study and then successfully pass the oral defense of their study. Doctoral programs are more than just going through the various stages. A doctoral student who plans to become a professor is encouraged to present her/his research at professional conferences, submit research papers for publication, teach college level courses, and participate in committee meetings (Grover, 2007). Doctoral students must be able to navigate their programs successfully if they intend to become professors in academia someday (Baker & Pifer, 2011).

Grover (2007) identified four stages in a doctoral program. Additionally, he identified common mistakes doctoral students make in each stage, and offered suggestions on how to prevent mistakes. The first stage, called the *Stage of Exploration*, is where doctoral students become cognizant of the fundamentals of the program. Grover emphasizes the need for doctoral students to be aware of their resources (faculty and peers), and to understand the politics involved in academia to be successful in their programs. The four mistakes doctoral students make during this stage include being too reactive, being reluctant to ask for help, not building an asset base (referring to research), and not understanding academic politics. To prevent the mistake of being too reactive, it is recommended that doctoral students be proactive. Doctoral students should take on challenging tasks such as presenting a research paper at a conference. The second stage is the *Stage of Engagement*, characterized by students nearing the end of coursework, but prior to comprehensive exams. Students are engaged in their coursework and usually conduct research with faculty members. Two common mistakes Grover cites are not taking full advantage of the opportunities of teaching and research, and the opposite, taking on too much at one time. Students should strategically plan what they can handle and identify whether certain projects are of value to their doctoral program. The third stage, referred to as the *Stage of Consolidation*, is when doctoral students are intensely engaged in their dissertation research. Five common mistakes students make in this stage are: students may become lazy after comprehensive exams and it may take them several months, maybe even years, to get back on track with their dissertation; not

carefully selecting their committee; not utilizing their advisor's support; being too ambitious; and not locating resources such as dissertation funding. It is advised that students be politically astute when choosing committee members. Students unfortunately may pay the "price" if they find themselves in the midst of political chaos among committee members. Therefore, doctoral students must choose their committee members wisely. The fourth and final stage is known as the *Stage of Entry*, which is when doctoral students are starting their transition from doctoral student to professor. The first mistake doctoral students make in this stage is not balancing the need to complete their dissertations while simultaneously searching for jobs. The second mistake is that students leave their programs too early, thereby starting a job without first successfully defending their dissertations. Tips to prevent these mistakes are for doctoral students to learn how to prioritize what is important. They must learn to balance completing their dissertation with finding a job.

A study by Selmer et al. (2011) reported a case study about their own experiences as doctoral students in education that included various phases of their doctoral program. The authors (professors in education) discussed the importance of coursework, the dissertation phase, and the importance of mentoring in a doctoral program. The authors admit that doctoral experiences are unique to each individual. However, they also note that the doctoral journey is a shared experience. The authors emphasize that the learning experiences in their doctoral program taught them each how to interact with and mentor their own doctoral students.

METHOD

A qualitative methodological approach was used to explore the influence of the introductory doctoral course, EDUC 779, on the students who took the course. Qualitative research is "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). The authors wanted to explore their experiences within the course with open-ended questions to gain greater understanding of their doctoral experience and to take a deeper look into the pros and cons of the course. The qualitative research approach was needed to guide their course of inquiry. A case study based on the qualitative research paradigm was determined to be the appropriate research design. Merriam (1998) defines a case study in qualitative research as "a single entity around which are boundaries" (p. 27). Paul, Kleinhammar-Tramill and Fowler (2009) state that "many researchers agree that a 'case' is a bounded entity of some kind" (p. 56). The bounded phenomenon for this case study is the introductory doctoral course, EDUC 779. The university catalog description for EDUC 779 states: "Introduction to doctoral study and the expectations of doctoral-level professionals within educational contexts." The course is required for all doctoral students in the field of education.

The authors met three times during the semester that followed the end of the introductory doctoral course, EDUC 779, and they regularly communicated via email. During the first meeting, the structure of the study was outlined, research questions were determined, and qualitative validity strategies were determined. The authors were given the task of writing their personal experiential stories in relation to EDUC 779. These personal narratives formed the data for this case study. Each author was to independently write a response, from her own perspective, to each of four, open-ended questions that focused on the course benefits, shortcomings, and classroom climate

established. In answering the questions, the students described their experiences and their assessment of those experiences, and the course instructor wrote her goals and decisions in constructing the course, as well as her perceptions of how it played out. The questions were:

- Which course content and approaches benefited you most, and in what way(s)?
- What knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions gained through this course will best help prepare you for future academic and professional life?
- How might the course be improved to better prepare you for future academic and professional life?
- Describe the classroom climate established in this course. Which aspects were most and least beneficial?

During the second meeting the authors further established strategies to better ensure research integrity. In an effort to reduce research bias and check the accuracy of the findings based on the aforementioned research questions, the authors chose to incorporate several validity strategies as defined by Creswell (2014). These strategies included triangulation, member checking, and clarification of bias.

Triangulation, defined by Creswell (2014), is the use of “different data sources of information” (p. 201) to examine “evidence from the sources to build a coherent justification of themes” (p. 201). Triangulation is used if these themes are developed “based on converging several sources of data” (p. 201). Each personal narrative was considered a different data source. The authors wrote these independently and were not allowed to read each other’s until all three narratives were complete. After all authors had completed their individual written narratives, they independently reviewed each other’s stories for overarching themes.

Member checking was employed to “determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they were accurate” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). At the final meeting, the authors collectively discussed and agreed on the themes that form the results for this paper. During the time that the participants wrote their narratives and subsequently looked for themes in the stories, they did not discuss the data with each other to avoid influencing each other’s perceptions.

Articulating potential research bias is a component of good qualitative research and explains how the researchers’ background may shape the findings of the study (Creswell, 2014). Each of the authors delved into their backgrounds when writing their personal narratives. Anna shared the following regarding her personal, academic, and professional background:

I was hoping to take two courses during the fall of 2012. The doctoral seminar course would be the third and most inconvenient course to add to my schedule. My husband and I were in the middle of closing on our first home at the start of the semester. It is important to note that I am a mother of three with a daughter who is five years old and twin boys who are three years old. Professionally, I own and manage my own business, and at the University my graduate assistant assignment is an instructor and academic advisor for the College of Education. The management of my own documented disability is also a personal responsibility, which needs prioritizing in order for me to balance academia, business, and family life. Receiving an incomplete in the course was necessary, due to the constraints on my time, the difficulties I have had this past year trying to successfully balance the responsibilities in my life, and the unpredictable nature of my disability.

Nicole provided the following background regarding her ethnicity:

As a doctoral student of color, specifically of Mexican descent, it has been a challenge to find faculty mentors of color in the University setting. It is important to me to be able to make connections with faculty of color. Having role models of color (e.g., faculty of color) validates the fact that I have every right to be at the University working toward my doctorate. Currently, in the department that I am affiliated with, there is not one faculty member of color. There must be representation of various minority groups to better facilitate the education of doctoral students' of color. In addition, it has been a challenge to connect with other doctoral students of color. I am one of but a few in the department. Not having other students of color that I can relate to is sometimes difficult. It would be beneficial to the department, the University, and the future professoriate to increase the number of underrepresented groups. Diversity is important.

Lynda provided the following background regarding her perspectives on the course itself and her role as course instructor:

As the course instructor and a professor who has championed the need for the introductory doctoral course, while self-selecting to continue teaching it, I am quite invested in the course. I thus promote its continuation and the fact that it should be offered at least once a year. I presume that most students in the course will choose to pursue positions as higher education faculty. I thus prepare students for this job and assume teaching the relevant knowledge and skills (grant-seeking, writing and publishing, speaking at conferences, etc.) will benefit all students receiving a doctorate in education, regardless of the specific job ultimately pursued. Finally, I believe that this introductory course will best serve students by balancing the ideal and the real, with a healthy dose of honest insights, and that peer collaboration and idea sharing promotes student learning, engagement, and networking.

The authors' backgrounds shape their perspectives, which in turn provide the lenses through which they viewed and interpreted the data in this study. These worldviews can introduce bias that may shape the findings of the study. The authors share these qualities: they were born and raised in the United States of America; they are all women; they started their doctoral program in their thirties; they are proactive, enthusiastic learners who are eager to learn and apply what they have learned; one is a full professor and the two students aspire to become full professors. Both student authors are married with young children and are in the middle of doctoral study focusing on special education. These characteristics will likely shape the results and interpretation of those results. Each of the authors brings bias to this study, and though every effort will be made to ensure objectivity, personal biases will have some influence on this case study. In particular, the authors enter this study with the perspective that successfully completing a Ph.D. and becoming a college professor is valuable and important, each values being a strong, intelligent woman, and each enjoys the process of learning.

RESULTS

Three main themes were identified in the participants' narratives: benefits of the course, suggested improvements, and classroom climate (see Figure 1). The data generated in these written accounts focuses mainly on course benefits, a category that contains four themes. Similarities across participants' written accounts also appear in suggested improvements and descriptions of the course's classroom climate. Each of these categories and subcategories is described below.

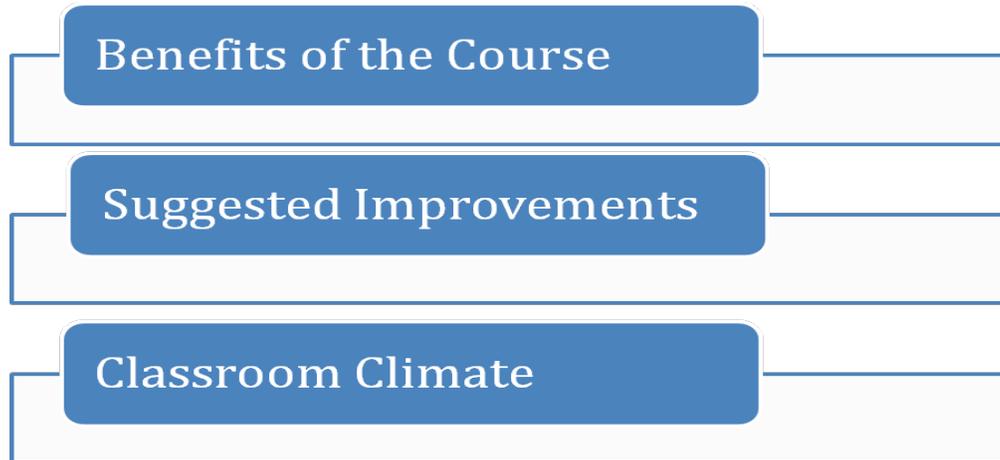


Figure 1. *Three Main Themes*

BENEFITS OF THE COURSE

Four themes, three of which are particularly prominent and a fourth that appears to a lesser degree, were identified in the data (see Figure 2). The three most salient themes are dispositions, knowledge/practical skills, and meaningful connections. The fourth theme, personal reflection and insight, is somewhat less prominent.



Figure 2. *Four Sub-themes within Course Benefits*

Dispositions. The professor developed the course topics and content with the intent to help doctoral students successfully navigate doctoral study and life as a future college professor (or other advanced position in education). Dispositions are one important area she explicitly addresses in the introductory doctoral course (EDUC 779), including research, writing, and publication ethics, appropriate conduct as a doctoral student and a professor, job-seeking behaviors, and an inclination toward scholarly productivity.

In their narratives, the two doctoral students reported the importance of developing dispositions that would serve them well in their academic and professional goals. Anna said the course motivated her. She expressed gaining a greater sense of personal support collectively inspired by the professor, guest speakers, and peers. This support helped her to continue in the program during times of struggle. Relationships and connections formed with peers and faculty due to participation in EDUC 779, as well as information and strategies acquired during the course, helped alleviate feelings of aloneness and self-doubt. Nicole wrote, "My outlook is more optimistic in terms of being a successful doctoral student." Nicole also noted that she gained an increased sense of self-efficacy and pride through the course. Both doctoral students reported higher confidence and decreased anxiety regarding their ability to complete their doctoral program and be successful in academia.

Practical knowledge and skills. In addition to dispositions, knowledge and skills are the other two important components that form the tripod by which Lynda, the course instructor, constructs the content for EDUC 779. Knowledge shared relates to doctoral and professorial expectations, for example, attention to what constitutes quality research and reputable professional literature, as well as details regarding the publication process. Sample skills include writing mechanics, presentation skills, and grant-writing skills. Knowledge and skills related to graduate student issues and concerns, including doctoral student health and well-being, are also addressed.

Anna and Nicole agree that the course content provided valuable information that enhanced their knowledge and skills. They listed the following benefits in this area: curriculum vita (CV) preparation, job-seeking skills, interview skills, grant-writing skills, insight into the promotion and tenure process in higher education, collaboration skills, an understanding of the process of writing for publication and serving as a manuscript reviewer, procedures for submitting a research protocol to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and tips for balancing life responsibilities (personal, academic, and professional). Anna described the course as "providing a roadmap to attaining a Ph.D. and faculty position," feeling that she received a "course in reality," including "the good, the bad and the ugly."

The knowledge and skills gained in EDUC 779 motivated the two doctoral students in this investigation to pursue activities that they would not have otherwise. These activities went beyond course and program requirements and helped to further prepare them for future employment in academia. Anna attended a Faculty Senate meeting, which helped to enlighten her regarding the inner workings of the University. Nicole started co-teaching a course and became more active as a doctoral student in professional clubs and organizations, including the Graduate Student Association. The two students began writing papers for publication independently and collaboratively.

Meaningful connections. Lynda made an effort to structure the building of relationships through group work with peers, and by introducing College faculty and other education professionals into the course. For example, numerous opportunities for class work and discussions were conducted in small groups that varied in composition over time. Students were introduced to numerous higher education and other education professionals, as well as several peers who were more advanced in the education doctoral program. Anna and Nicole found interconnectivity (meaningful connections and relationships) to be invaluable to their well-being in the doctoral program. Anna stated:

When I feel most alone, scared of failing, wondering how I will get through, I think back to what I have learned from my peers and professors. The bonds I have formed with fellow students and faculty help to keep me moving forward. This course has helped me create bonds, strengthen the bonds already formed, and work to prioritize relationships.

The importance of having mentors and role models was emphasized throughout EDUC 779. Tips and proper protocol for creating and maintaining a successful relationship with one's doctoral chair were discussed in some depth. Many education professors, other education professionals, and doctoral students in various stages of completion across different program areas shared their personal experiences and insights with the class as guest speakers. Collectively, these stories provided personalized insights into strategies for supporting successful academic and professional work for individuals pursuing education doctorates. Each guest speaker addressed the need for meaningful connections. Peer support was part of this recurring theme. Not only can it provide socio-emotional and academic support, but establishing meaningful peer relationships opens opportunities to collaborate on projects that will help enhance the doctoral experience and practical preparation for future careers.

Personal reflection and insight. Personal reflection and insight is the fourth theme found within the three participants' written narratives. Although this topic might relate to the theme of dispositions, the authors considered it worthy of being addressed in a separate category. Lynda encouraged EDUC 779 students to use and enhance personal reflection and insight through various course tasks and group discussions. One written assignment that targeted this goal was a personal philosophies and theories paper. For this assignment, students had to read summaries of key education philosophies and theories. Each student was then required to identify the philosophy and theory that best fit her or his own perspective and explain why. This was a challenging assignment and forced the students to reflect on their own beliefs regarding the field of education.

One of the main benefits of EDUC 779, according to all three authors, was the window it provided into what it takes to successfully transition from the role of doctoral student to academic faculty member. One course assignment involved interviewing a faculty member in the student's intended area of study to gain information about the field (e.g., hot topics and common types of research methodologies used) and life as a college professor (e.g., typical responsibilities and most and least preferred aspects of the job). The assignment gave students insights regarding design of their own road maps. It afforded deeper and more nuanced understanding of such questions as: What will I do with my life? Do I want to be a professor? Is this right for me and for my family? If not, what is the right course for me? Anna and Nicole found that they were able to engage these questions more fully and in a more informed manner as a result of the course. Both want to be professors, and EDUC 779 has allowed them to commit more firmly to this goal.

SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

Time. The three authors agree that time was a problematic aspect of EDUC 779. Lynda, the course instructor, noted: "More time to practice the skills learned and greater discussion time would likely improve the course impact." Additionally, she wrote, "The course lacks time for addressing topics in some depth and breadth." Lynda offered the following as possible solutions: address fewer topics, have fewer guest speakers, or split the course into two three-credit courses. Anna also noted that the course could be improved by adding more time, perhaps changing it from a three-credit to a four-credit

course. Nicole suggested incorporating more in-depth application of the material, such as: submit a literature review to a journal for publication; present a poster at a conference or hold a mock conference that includes feedback from peers and the course instructor; conduct a job-interview presentation in class; write and submit a grant proposal; teach a short session within one's area of study (to practice higher education instruction); create a college course syllabus. Students do write a literature review that they are encouraged but not required to submit for publication. They also have a variable assignment where they choose from several options, such as writing a grant proposal. However, Nicole would like more extensive application of course material across a variety of areas. Inability to include this again relates to course time constraints.

Role models. Both doctoral students expressed the importance of having a greater number of role models with whom they can relate more directly. Anna would have liked to hear from women guest speakers with families. Nicole noted the need for more diversity among students and faculty to provide doctoral students with role models that have similar backgrounds. She speaks from the perspective of a Latina: "There must be representation of various minority groups to better facilitate the education of doctoral students of color."

CLASSROOM CLIMATE

The authors agree that the EDUC 779 classroom climate was passionate, engaging, and honest. The professor actively sought to establish this type of atmosphere. According to the two doctoral students, her level of energy, passion, and engagement with students set the tone for the course. The result was a safe climate that enhanced students' ability to fully experience the course material and maximize its benefits. The structured but somewhat informal nature of the classes with opportunity for frank questions and comments, along with small-group discussions and tasks, encouraged a collaborative and supportive climate that the three authors considered to be a vitally important aspect of the course.

DISCUSSION

The themes produced within the framework of the case study regarding EDUC 779, coupled with the literature review, support the need for doctoral students to successfully complete an introductory doctoral course to gain knowledge, skills, and dispositions that can help them successfully complete their program (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hines, 2008; Stubb et al., 2011). This study demonstrates the need for rich relationships among doctoral students, their peers, and their doctoral advisors in addition to the need for doctoral programs to provide carefully constructed introductory doctoral courses taught by passionate, engaged, and experienced professors (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Fountaine, 2012; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Hopwood, 2010; Jazvac-Martek, 2009).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DOCTORAL STUDENT SUPPORT

The authors make four recommendations for supporting doctoral students based on the literature reviewed and their own evaluative reflections. First, the authors recommend that doctoral students take an introductory doctoral course within the first year of starting their program (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011). Establishing a support network and comprehending the key steps for attaining a

doctorate early on are strong determinants in the successful completion of a doctoral program (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Gardner & Holley, 2011). A one-day graduate student orientation is inadequate. Further, the authors contend that this course should be required rather than recommended. Mandating the course would help ensure that every doctoral student in the program receives an opportunity to create a successful path to degree completion and future employment (Hadjiioannou et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2006; Stubb et al., 2011). Second, based on their collective experience and critical reflection in relation to the introductory doctoral course, the authors believe it would be more beneficial to split EDUC 779 into two courses. The first course might be based on developing the foundational tripod of relevant knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This course would be a three-credit course similar to the one examined here. The second course would involve application of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions gained in the first. This follow-up course could be a structured, guided course like the first, or it might be an independent study, in which students choose from a list of tasks that require them to apply what they learned in phase one. Sample assignments might include writing and submitting a paper for publication, a grant proposal, a research protocol to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and a proposal for a conference presentation. The third recommendation is to allow room for flexibility and responsiveness in a doctoral program. The multiple academic, vocational, and personal responsibilities that doctoral students often juggle require special consideration. For example, allowing students to take an incomplete under reasonable conditions is one way to provide support to doctoral students and respond to their individual needs. The first author, Anna, found it necessary to take an incomplete in EDUC 779. She is a married mother of three who works two jobs and goes to school full-time. Anna's advisor and the EDUC 779 instructor, Lynda, encouraged Anna to take an incomplete rather than withdrawing from the course. This move allowed Anna to continue her planned progress through the program and to avoid potentially negative affective consequences that might have resulted from dropping the course. The fourth and final recommendation is to prioritize the importance of the advisor/advisee relationship from the moment a doctoral student is accepted into the program (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Fountaine, 2012; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Grover, 2007; Hopwood, 2010; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Selmer et al., 2011). The importance of this relationship should be explained upon acceptance into the program. Doctoral programs should help each doctoral student partner with the most suitably matched program advisor.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The authors identified five areas in which research is needed. These include: (1) the effect of the successful completion of an introductory doctoral course on retention and attrition rates; (2) benefits of advance training for faculty for the role as advisor/mentor to graduate students; (3) a comparison of doctoral students who have and have not taken an introductory doctoral course similar to the one described in this paper (Barnes et al., 2010; Gardner, 2010); (4) ways in which the instructor of an introductory doctoral course can and should communicate and collaborate with other program faculty, in particular, the advisors of students in the class; and (5) the effects an introductory doctoral seminar has on various students and how the course can better serve a greater range of students, including students with disabilities (e.g., Fountaine, 2012). The fifth item was raised because of Nicole's call for a greater number of racially diverse role models and a later discussion where Anna divulged that she has a documented

disability, which led her to wonder how much consideration is given to helping students with disabilities navigate doctoral programs. Anna has had to learn through trial and error what is and is not appropriate with regard to seeking and attaining accommodations for her disability. Gardner (2009) states, "If little research exists about other underrepresented populations' experiences while in graduate school, the research on doctoral students with disabilities is by far the sparsest" (pp. 37-38). Research that provides insight into how to support doctoral students with disabilities would be an important area of study.

REFERENCES

- Baker, V. L., & Pifer, M. J. (2011). The role of relationships in the transition from doctoral student to independent scholar. *Studies in Continuing Education, 33*(1), 5-17. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2010.515569
- Barnes, B. J., & Austin, A. E. (2009). The role of doctoral advisors: A look at advising from the advisor's perspective. *Innovative Higher Education, 33*(5), 297-315.
- Barnes, B. J., Williams, E. A., & Archer, S. (2010). Characteristics that matter most: Doctoral students' perceptions of positive and negative advisor attributes. *NACADA Journal, 30*(1), 34-46.
- Castro, V., Garcia, E. E., Cavazos, J., & Castro, A. Y. (2011). The road to doctoral success and beyond. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 6*, 51-77.
- Council of Graduate Schools. (2008). *Ph.D. completion project*. Retrieved from <http://phdcompletion.org/index.asp>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Daly, C. J., & Dee, J. R. (2006). Greener pastures: Faculty turnover intent in urban public universities. *The Journal of Higher Education, 77*(5), 776-803.
- Fountaine, T. (2012). The impact of faculty-student interaction on black doctoral students attending historically black institutions. *Journal of Negro Education, 81*(2), 136-147.
- Gardner, S. K. (2009). *The development of doctoral students: Phases of challenge and support*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Retrieved from <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-047050904X.html>
- Gardner, S. K. (2010). Faculty perspectives on doctoral student socialization in five disciplines. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 5*, 39-53.
- Gardner, S. K., & Holley, K. A. (2011). 'Those invisible barriers are real': The progression of first-generation students through doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 44*(1), 77-92. doi:10.1080/10665684.2011.529791
- Gildersleeve, R., Croom, N. N., & Vasquez, P. L. (2011). 'Am I going crazy?!': A critical race analysis of doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 44*(1), 93-114. doi:10.1080/10665684.2011.539472
- Grover, V. (2007). Successfully navigating the stages of doctoral study. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 2*, 9-21.
- Hadjioannou, X., Shelton, N., Fu, D., & Dhanarattigannon, J. (2007). The road to a doctoral degree: Co-travelers through a perilous passage. *College Student Journal, 41*(1), 160-177.
- Hines, M. T. (2008). A comparative analysis of the dissertation self-efficacy of American and Scottish doctoral students. *Focus on Colleges, Universities, and Schools, 2*(1), 1-14.

- Hopwood, N. (2010). A sociocultural view of doctoral students' relationships and agency. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 32(2), 103-117. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2010.487482
- Jazvac-Martek, M. (2009). Oscillating role identities: The academic experiences of education doctoral students. *Innovations In Education & Teaching International*, 46(3), 253-264. doi:10.1080/14703290903068862
- Lewis, C. W., Ginsberg, R., Davies, T., & Smith, K. (2004). The experiences of African American Ph.D. students at a predominantly white Carnegie I-research institution. *College Student Journal*, 38(2), 231-245.
- Martinsuo, M., & Turkulainen, V. (2011). Personal commitment, support and progress in doctoral studies. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(1), 103-120.
- McAlpine, L. (2012). Identity-trajectories - Doctoral journeys from past to present to future. *Australian Universities' Review*, 54(1), 38-46.
- McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2009). Identity and agency: Pleasures and collegiality among the challenges of the doctoral journey. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 31 (2), 109-125.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Paglis, L. L., Green, S. G., & Bauer, T. N. (2006). Does adviser mentoring add value? A longitudinal study of mentoring and doctoral student outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(4), 451-476.
- Paul, J., Kleinhammer-Tramill, J., & Fowler, K. (2009). *Qualitative research methods in special education*. Denver: Love Publishing Company.
- Selmer, S., Graham, M., & Goodykoontz, E. (2011). Three women's educational doctoral program experiences: A case study of performances and journeys. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 2(3), 14-25.
- Smith, R. L., Maroney, K., & Nelson, K. W., Abel, A. L., & Abel, H. S. (2006). Doctoral programs: Changing high rates of attrition. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education & Development*, 45(1), 17-31.
- Sowell, R. (2008, March). *Ph. D. completion and attrition: Analysis of baseline data* [PDF document]. Retrieved from Council of Graduate Schools Web site: <http://www.phdcompletion.org/resources/index.asp>
- Stewart, M.M., Williamson, I.O., & King, J.E. (2008). Who wants to be a business PhD? Exploring minority entry into the faculty "pipeline." *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 7(1), 42-55.
- Stubb, K., Pyhalto, K, & Lonka, K. (2011). Balancing between inspiration and exhaustion: PhD students' experienced sociopsychological well-being. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(1), 33-50.
- West, I. J., Gokalp, G., Vallejo, E., Fischer, L., & Gupton, J. (2011). Exploring effective support practices for doctoral students' degree completion. *College Student Journal*, 45(2), 310-323.