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**ADULT STUDENT PRACTITIONERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THEIR  
PERSONAL EXPERIENCES**

by  
Mark T. Zorzi

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
February 7, 2011

Dissertation Chair: Robert Campbell, Ed.D

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## **Dedication**

*I dedicate this dissertation to my family, especially my wife Orysia for her patience and understanding; to my parents Raymond (Ray) and Geraldine (Jerry) for instilling the importance of hard work and higher education; and to my children Joshua, Stephen and Noah, may you also be motivated and encouraged to achieve your dreams. I Love You All!*

## Abstract

Mark T. Zorzi

### ADULT STUDENT PRACTITIONERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

2011/2012

Robert Campbell, Ed.D

Doctor in Educational Leadership

The purpose of this study is to describe the changes that working practitioners experience while perusing a doctoral degree. This qualitative study centered on the experiences of ten students who have successfully completed the doctoral program of Rowan University. Data was collected through personal interviews that explored their academic backgrounds as well as their views and experiences with the coursework. This study adopted elements of interpretive inquiry for development of a case study that sought to analyze meaning-making interactions of the participants lives and to make meaning of their doctoral experiences. A series of open ended questions in one-on-one interviews revealed the factors that motivated the participants to pursue doctoral degrees. The participants interviewed were working practitioners in their field of study who have achieved professional success in their chosen fields. The study sought to explain how the individuals themselves interpret the changes they experienced both personally and professionally.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
List of Tables .....	ix
CHAPTER 1 .....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Purpose of the Case Study .....	2
Significance of the Study .....	3
Background of the Case Study.....	4
Research Questions.....	5
Assumptions.....	6
Research Design.....	6
Makeup of Doctoral Student.....	7
Definition of Terms.....	11
Summary .....	12
CHAPTER 2 .....	13
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	13
Graduate Students .....	13
Learning Styles .....	15
Socialization.....	16
Institutions.....	18

Effects of Doctoral Education.....	20
Transformation of the Adult Learner .....	20
Meeting the Student’s Needs .....	24
Theories of Adult Education: Malcom Knowles .....	25
Theories of Adult Education: Merriam and Caffarella .....	28
Theories of Adult Education: Howard Y. McClusky .....	29
Theories of Adult Education: Jack Mezirow .....	30
Summary .....	31
CHAPTER 3 .....	31
METHOD .....	32
Purpose of the Case Study .....	32
Research Questions .....	32
Methodology .....	33
Methodology - Setting .....	33
Methodology Sample Population.....	34
Pilot Sample .....	34
Methodology - Research Design.....	34
Methodology - Methods Utilized – Interviews and Personal Notes .....	35
Data Analysis .....	36

Triangulation / Creditability .....	36
Transferability.....	39
Dependability.....	39
Conformability.....	40
Summary.....	40
CHAPTER 4 .....	41
RESULTS .....	41
Organization and Interpretation of Data .....	43
Findings.....	44
Research Question 1 .....	46
Research Question 2 .....	56
Research Question 3 .....	58
Research Question 4 .....	64
Summary.....	70
Introduction.....	71
Interpretation of Findings .....	72
Research Question 1 .....	72
Research Question 2: .....	76
Research Question 3: .....	78
Research Question 4: .....	79
Implications for Social Change.....	81



Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research.....	82
Summary.....	83
REFERENCES .....	85
APPENDIX A Participant Consent Form.....	92
APPENDIX B Participant Questioner.....	93

## List of Tables

Table 1. <i>Demographic of Participants</i> .....	44
Table 2. <i>Thematic Category 1: Lived experiences of Ed.D students in Rowan Doctoral Program</i> .....	52
Table 3. <i>Sub Thematic Category 1: Personal and professional contributions of the program</i> .....	53
Table 4. <i>Thematic Category 2: Completion of a rigorous program design as a challenge of Ed.D students</i> .....	58
Table 5. <i>Thematic Category 3: Enabling program environment aids students in coping program challenges</i> .....	60
Table 6. <i>Thematic Category 4: Students' motivational factors help students in coping program challenges</i> .....	63
Table 7 <i>Thematic Category 5: Descriptive characteristic of the program that satisfies students</i> .....	69

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A key goal of American universities is to develop teachers, administrators, and researchers through doctoral programs. One measure of their success in achieving this goal is the percentage of students who manage to complete all of the requirements for a doctoral degree (Allan & Dory, 2001). The importance of doctoral training has motivated a large number of studies to understand the process of doctoral education and the difficulties that students encounter while completing their programs (Allan & Dory, 2001).

However, a dearth of research exists about why students do or do not succeed in obtaining the degree. While little information is available to explain the impact on a working practitioner in a doctoral program, this study is designed to document the experiences of doctoral students who have successfully navigated the Rowan University doctoral program. With the national dropout rate of 50% of all doctoral students who enter a doctoral program, Rowan University's doctoral program had a graduation rate of over 80% in 2007.

Rowan University came into existence in September 1923 in the form of Glassboro Normal School. In 1993, Henry and Betty Rowan donated \$100 million dollars to the institution, the largest gift ever to a public college or university. In 1992, the school's name was changed to Rowan College of New Jersey. In 1997, the college achieved university status and changed its name to Rowan University. Rowan offers six majors, 14 degrees, and 87 undergraduate majors (Rowan, 2009). Rowan's College of

Education offers one Doctoral Degree; thus, Rowan University is accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (Rowan, 2009).

This study examines working practitioners who have successfully navigated the Rowan Doctoral program and the transformation they experienced, “the process of transformation...influences much more than one’s professional preparation; it also entails the development of the whole self” (Gardner, 2009a, p. 7). Rowan’s Doctoral program came into existence in 1997, and is designed for K-16 educational professionals. Rowan’s location in southern New Jersey provides access to a doctoral program for residents who may find other institutions out of reach due to proximity. For example, the closest institution to Rowan University for residents in the Glassboro area is Rutgers University. Rutgers is located 75 miles from Rowan, putting a terminal degree out of reach for many. Rowan offers an affordable and convenient alternative for students interested in obtaining a doctoral degree (Rowan, 2009).

### **Purpose of the Case Study**

The broad purpose of this study is to address an area of literature with respect to doctoral graduates that is not fully explored in the current literature. Scholars in various fields such as history, sociology, and education (Merriam, 1998) have utilized case studies in various settings. The goal of a case study is to “gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (Merriam, p.19). Maloney (1998) reviewed 112 articles on graduate student education, seeking gaps in the literature of doctoral students’ development. Specifically, the study aims at examining the evolutionary process of Rowan University doctoral students on their educational journey.

The focus of this study is the experiences of working practitioners who succeeded in graduating from the Rowan Doctoral program. As the demographics of doctoral students change with the population shifts in the United States, additional information is required to explain the personal and professional changes that take place within the students who have completed a Doctoral Program. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) stated that women entering doctoral studies now exceed men in this educational pursuit. Students are entering the doctoral program with differing learning styles and expectations from the program. The student population is changing in the number of students seeking their doctoral degree and the makeup of this population. The ability of the program to respond to the needs of this new generation of students will influence the satisfaction exhibited by the student population. Program administrators, faculty, and staff members must be made aware of the changing demographics and recognize the changes necessary in their programs to meet the needs of this new student population (Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will be useful in designing programs, support groups, and curriculums to meet the needs of the Rowan Ed.D student. The information will be available to students anticipating entering the doctoral program, outlining the difficulties they may experience; examples include time constraints, family obligations, and work related priorities. Generating this information will assist administrators, faculty, and staff of the needs of these non-traditional students. With this information in hand the administration, faculty, and staff will have the ability to create new programs designed to enhance

student satisfaction and success rates, reducing the high attrition rates among doctoral students. The administration's responsiveness to the needs of the future doctoral students will establish a culture of collaboration between the student and the institution giving a voice to the students who do not fit in the traditional undergraduate model.

### **Background of the Case Study**

Doctoral students are often referred to as the forgotten student (Phillips, 1995). The rationale behind the forgotten doctoral student is due to the limited amount of attention institutions of higher education pay to these students. Institutions of higher education focus on enrollment numbers of doctoral students, as opposed to their retention rates. The *Council of Graduate Schools 2008 report* documented doctoral students' drop out rates in excess of 50%. Much research has been performed in an attempt to explain this trend (Gardner, 2009b; Lovitts, 2001); however, this study will take a different approach and examine what makes doctoral students successful. This researcher has chosen Rowan University, a medium size institution located in South Jersey, to perform a qualitative analysis of the journey experienced by working practitioners who have successfully completed their doctoral studies and achieved a degree in Educational Leadership.

In order to understand the success students experience in Rowan's doctoral program, I felt it imperative that I understand the doctoral students' development and their satisfaction with the program. Doctoral students are complex, in that they are not the typical undergraduate student who attends college full-time with little demand placed on their free time. The doctoral student body is made up of individuals from twenty two

years of age up to and including individuals in their sixties. The doctoral student has multiple demands on his/her time that require institutions of higher education to evaluate their curriculums to meet the needs of the doctoral student population. A doctoral student may be a full-time professional, a parent, un-employed, under employed or any number of positions within society (Knowles, 1984).

### **Research Questions**

According to Creswell (2005), research questions “narrow the purpose statement to specific questions that researchers seek to answer” (p. 117). To support the purpose of this study, the experiences of working practitioners who succeeded in graduating from the Rowan Doctoral program will be explored. The following research questions will guide the framework of the study:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of students enrolled in the Rowan Ed.D program?

RQ2: What are the life changes encountered by Ed.D program students in Rowan University?

RQ3: How do graduate students respond to the life changes encountered while enrolled in the Ed.D program?

RQ4: How do students describe their satisfaction with the Rowan Ed.D program?

### **Assumptions**

This study is based on the following assumptions:

1. Students know and can articulate their decision to seek a doctoral degree at this time in their professional careers.
2. The students who participated in the study did so openly and honestly.
3. Students in a doctoral program have unique needs that are different from the traditional student seeking an undergraduate degree.

### **Research Design**

Utilizing a qualitative research design, the participants were able to tell their stories, particularly how they came to successfully navigate the bureaucratic structure of the institution. Through reflection on their experiences, I will generate a view of the professional and personal changes these individuals have gone through. By using Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy (adult student), I will be able to determine if the needs of this diverse student population are being met by the institution. This study utilizes a constant comparison method, in seeking themes to develop as the participants expand upon their journey to doctoral degree completion. This data will represent the voice of the student and will represent their accomplishments. The data will demonstrate their overall satisfaction with the program and address the personal and professional changes these individuals experienced because of the program.



## **Makeup of Doctoral Student**

The doctoral student body is comprised of older adult learners returning to institutions of higher education in order to enhance their formal education. This study includes background information on the participants' professional employment status, family background and time to complete their studies in order to understand the specific needs of this student population. Specific needs of this population may include motivational factors, requirements of class time, or financial restrictions. Given the age and background of doctoral students, additional emphasis on the student is required to meet the needs of this diverse population. Gardner (2009) stated that education is a life-long journey. Individuals return to higher education to enhance their personal and professional lives in their later years in life. Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy outlined four assumptions with respect to adult learners who return to educational institutions seeking their terminal degree.

1. *Adults need to recognize why they are learning.* In order to keep the student motivated, the information presented to the student must be of value to the student. Doctoral students customarily work full time, attending to their educational endeavors in evenings. The doctoral student has external forces placing demands on their time, if they feel the information presented is of no immediate value it will lead to disaffection and increase dropout rates.
2. *Adults need to learn experientially.* Most doctoral students are leaders in their fields. These individuals pioneer changes within their institutions. These changes

represent leaders' experimentation with innovations that increases capacity and reduces expenses.

3. *Adults consider learning as a problem-solving exercise.* With age and experience comes knowledge. Many of the leaders of our society have achieved their position through acknowledgement of a problem and their ability to rectify the situation. The individuals seeking terminal (doctoral) degrees all possess the ability to recognize a problem and develop alternatives to address them.
4. *Adults' learning is dependent on the immediate value of the topic.* It is human nature to gravitate to topics of interest. Doctoral students also place value on educational exercises that provide immediate value to themselves.

It is imperative that we understand the student's experiences and structure a program that will both challenge and motivate the doctoral student. Greater understanding of the student may allow institutions to adjust their curriculum to challenge and motivate the doctoral student with the intent of increasing retention rates.

Understanding the doctoral student's experiences and expectations could lead to increased student satisfaction and retention. Lovitts' (2001) research documented that college and university faculty place the blame on student failures for high attrition rates. These individuals fail to consider environmental factors affecting the doctoral students. Similar to undergraduate students, the doctoral student requires relationships with faculty, staff and fellow students to foster their development. Student relationships develop through group work with fellow students, as well as faculty availability both in and out of class. The student's personal and professional constraints may restrict his availability to

meet with faculty. The faculties' ability to meet off hours or in alternate locations convenient to the student will enhance student satisfaction and increase retention rates (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). Recent research has documented that students' scholarly development is significantly enhanced when it is collaborative work involving faculty, staff, and peers (Manathunga & Goozee, 2007).

Doctoral students' educational pursuits have a direct impact on their personal and professional lives. The students' ability or inability to juggle the demands of a family, career, and education have added to the stress already exhibited on this student population. Doctoral students are viewed as overachievers and have found success throughout their educational pursuits. These students are regarded as overachievers because of their prior educational pursuits and the success they have achieved in their professional lives utilizing the education they received in undergraduate studies. Students who withdraw from their doctoral studies feel like failures, and these feelings result in a reluctance to seek leadership positions inside and outside of their organizations. Their future success in their personal and professional lives is impacted negatively. Understanding the transaction that occurs within the student on a personal and professional level in conjunction with the demands placed upon them in their multitude of rolls (professional, parents, caregivers) will provide crucial information to colleges and universities to meet the students' needs and expectations.

Understanding the graduate student encompasses the processes of socialization into the culture of the institution. Success rates dramatically increase when the student is acclimated with their environment and have a positive working relationship with the

constituents (faculty, staff, and students) of the institution. Formal socialization needs are met through the course work as students obtain the knowledge lacking in their profession. Informal socialization needs are met through group projects and interactions with fellow students. Rowan's doctoral program utilizes Cohorts to increase students' success rates and meet their socialization needs. A cohort refers to a group of students who joined a program of study and take the majority of coursework together (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Miller & Irby, 1999; Potthoff, Fredrickson, Batenhorst, & Tracy, 2001).

The student development process requires additional research with respect to doctoral students. Little empirical data is available to support the changes they experience on a personal and professional level. In order for institutions to tailor their programs to meet the diverse needs of the student population, additional studies are required. Students who have navigated through doctoral programs speak of hardships, sacrifices, and periods of joy. The successful transaction requires more than acquisition of knowledge, it requires building personal relationships between the student, faculty and staff of the institution. We need to recognize that the graduate student has unique needs and that these needs should be studied and analyzed to develop student retention and satisfaction. The ability to meet with advisors outside of normal business hours or the addition of curriculum that is of interest to the students will work to motivate, satisfy and retain students.

A lack of empirical data outlining the changes experienced by a doctoral student in conjunction with the needs and expectations of the student base is a major contributor to a 50% attrition rate. Current literature describes graduate school as an extension of

undergraduate education (Gardner, 2009). Katz (1976) described graduate school as “one of the most intense socializing experiences in American society” (p. 107). These conflicting sentences illustrate the gap in knowledge that I intend to study. The lack of knowledge and understanding of the student contributes to the turnover of students attending the program resulting in increases in expenses to the institution.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms apply:

*Doctoral Student:* An individual over the age of 22, who is pursuing a doctoral degree (Ed.D) in Educational Leadership. Doctoral student is interchangeable with graduate student.

*Andragogy:* Malcom Knowles’ theory utilized to describe how adult students learn. An adult student is defined as anyone who has accepted a role that society associates with an adult. Examples include full time employment, financial independence, family responsibilities and community involvement.

*Qualitative Study:* An in-depth understanding of how humans behave, and why they behave in this manner. Qualitative studies do not utilize numerical data; it is based on participant observations, structured interviews, and reflective journals.

*Transformational Learning:* Mezirow (1991) described transformational learning as a process in which the learner re-evaluates past beliefs and experiences, causing a cultural shift in their feelings and actions.

## **Summary**

Chapter 1 was designed to introduce the reader to the topic of this dissertation. It was designed to provide the reader a broad overview of the topic to be studied. It is the intention of this study to assist other students who are contemplating this educational journey, providing them with the expectations and deterrents encountered by those who preceded them. It is hoped that this study will document the steps necessary for Rowan University and the doctoral students to grow together adding to student retention and satisfaction.

Chapter 2 will provide the reader with a Literature Review of the data available on this subject area. The research available on this subject area will be critically analyzed and the research synthesized, providing the reader detailed information on the project. Chapter 3 will provide the methodology chosen for the study. The reader will be provided the data collection techniques and the triangulation of the data for validity. Chapter 4 will outline the findings of the study. This chapter will outline the actual learning from the present study. Chapter 5 will present the conclusion generated from the contextual experiences of the study participants and implicate the findings with the recent literature.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter includes a review of the literature as it pertains to working practitioners and higher education. This literature review will address two primary areas. First, the review will focus on the makeup of a doctoral student, what motivating factors affect their achievements, and specific characteristics among the doctoral students. Second, the literature will examine the effects that a doctoral education has on the students. The review will include theories on adult learning and their contributions to this study. This review will conclude with a discussion on the contributions that this body of literature is going to make to students contemplating doctoral studies.

The literature was gathered from Ebsco Academic Search Premier, ProQuest Direct and several classroom readings. Utilizing the data collected provided additional sources of information from references connected to the literature. The literature gathered is utilized to explore the participants understanding of their experiences. It was not the intent of the research to structure the literature in any particular direction; but to allow themes to emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

#### **Graduate Students**

There are, generally speaking, two types of doctoral student, one being fresh from their undergraduate studies, and one in the form of an older adult who is returning to school after a period (Gansemer-Topf, Ross & Johnson, 2006).

This literature review will focus on the older adult student, a practitioner working in their field who returns to school on a non-traditional route to obtain a doctoral degree. Much of the available literature on this older adult population will focus on the constructivist view of learning.

The constructivist view combines characteristics of self-direction, active inquiry and individuality in learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Constructivist learning posits that students with greater experiences retain and process information more efficiently than students with less experience (Loyens, Rikers, & Schmidt, 2009).

The older adult student is often described as a transformational leader; their educational pursuits transform their values, ethics, and long-term goals (Barlett & Bartling, 2007). Bass (1985) believed that to be a transformational leadership is to have the ability to influence and change the behaviors of followers. The review will examine the personal and professional transitions experienced by the student, in conjunction with the theories behind adult education. The review will conclude with literature on the needs of this diverse student population and answer the question, regarding the personal and professional changes the doctoral student experienced because of their educational pursuits.

Historically, institutions of higher education have focused exclusively on traditional undergraduate students (Gransamer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006). The traditional college student is viewed as a full time student who is 18-22 years of age (Freedman, 1987). When we speak of a traditional doctoral student, it is understood to be a student who has recently completed their undergraduate degree and has moved directly



into a full time role as a doctoral student. These individuals typically have at least one parent who has completed an undergraduate degree, is highly motivated and financially stable. The traditional student is single with no children or work commitments.

The non-traditional student is typically an older student who has taken time off in-between high school and college (Freedman, 1987). This student attends college on a part-time basis while working full time. These individuals usually have a spouse and dependent children. These individuals range from 22 to 65 years of age. The depiction of a non-traditional student seeking an undergraduate degree is similar to the student seeking a doctoral degree. One major difference between the non-traditional students under study is this non-traditional student has achieved a bachelor's degree; they have taken time off between their bachelor's degree and their doctoral degree.

### **Learning Styles**

Demographics of the doctoral students within the United States are changing. For the first time in history, the number of women entering doctoral studies exceeds that of men (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). With these changes in demographics, the learning styles and expectations of the students are also changing. The research indicated that men and women learn differently (Wehrwein, Luhan, & DiCarlo, 2007). Women require only one mode of instruction – either visual or auditory – while men require multiple modes simultaneously. Men also require a structured environment that includes instructors who speak clear and loud, as well as a comfortable learning environment.

## **Socialization**

As individuals progress through their educational careers, the instruction becomes more individualized, with students taking greater responsibility for their own development. Baird (1990) noted that an important part of this development depends on the student forming supportive networks with their peers. These social networks are impeded by the adult student's roles outside of the institution. Adult students tend to be employed full-time, with the responsibilities of a spouse and parent.

In an effort to boost socialization of students at the graduate level of education, many institutions are turning to the cohort method of instruction. A cohort refers to a group of students who joined a program of study that takes the majority of coursework (Unzueta, Moores-Abdool & Donet, 2008). Research has documented that individuals learn best when they go through a program with other individuals, sharing knowledge and experiences. These individuals develop a support system that plays a major role in their success rates. Traditional learning styles of lecturing to students are being replaced with a peer-to-peer support system that is increasing retention and completion rates of doctoral students.

A cohort's characteristics is similar to team learning in an organization (Senge, 2006). Team learning or cohort learning requires the participants to learn how to tap the potential of all participants. The intelligence of a team is far greater than the intelligence of individuals. A second aspect of building a team is the conscious notation that team members can be counted on to complement each other. A final aspect of team learning is the mastering of dialog and discussion.

Dialog can be described as a free flow of information where the participants listen to one another, as opposed to discussion where the participants defend different points of view. A productive team requires open dialog where participants are free to express their opinions and ideas to group members in an environment free of embarrassment that contributes to learning.

A cohort has the potential of increasing student retention rates and satisfaction rates for doctoral students; however, another aspect of a cohort is the development of effective leaders. As the individuals in a cohort become aligned, they develop a shared vision and purpose (Senge, 2006). Individual leadership styles develop from peer-to-peer encouragement and support. Four themes emerged when the characteristics of effective leaders were evaluated in relationship to group learning (Duemer, Christopher, Hardin, Olibas, Rodgers, & Smith, 2004).

1. Individuals exhibit confidence and assertiveness when working in a group setting, causing other members to feel a greater confidence in the individual.
2. Prior experiences working in group settings provide interpersonal skills required of a leader. These interpersonal skills added to the confidence and assertiveness of the individual to call out underperforming members of the group.
3. A third characteristic of an effective leader is time management. This individual will keep the group on task and assist them in meeting deadlines.
4. The final characteristic exhibited by an individual in a group setting is expertise. The individual's leadership skills are enhanced by group processes where

individual share decision making responsibilities and enhance a feeling of belonging in the group.

The relationships that develop because of group interactions between group members have a direct effect on learning (Duemer, Christopher, Hardin, Olibas, Rodgers, & Smith, 2004). Student development is enhanced when the competitive nature of the participants is diminished. A cohort is an open society where individuals communicate in order to discover each other in the development of the cohort personality (Unzueta et al., 2008).

### **Institutions**

There are some institutions that treat their doctoral programs as "cash cows" (Orr, 2010). These institutions recognize the income stream to be realized from this student population. Given the reduction of financial assistance from Federal and State resources, the survival of the institution depends on the discovery of additional income sources (Goodman, 2009). These institutions also face economic challenges in the form of decreases in charitable donations and Endowment Investments (Masterson, 2008); they find themselves competing for fewer students capable of financing their own scholarly interests. Consumer spending is also lower due to a world recession, with unemployment in the United States at historic rates across the Nation (Arnone, 2002). Families are confronted with raising prices of consumer products and shrinking household incomes. Institutions of higher education need to analyze the dropout rate of doctoral students, in order to meet the needs of these students, and retain this source of income. Historically, Colleges and Universities have experienced increases in admissions in a recession, as

aging Americans attempt to make themselves more marketable in a shrinking economy (Douglas, 2008).

This proves to be a difficult task, as these institutions are reducing the number of Scholarships offered while increasing tuition rates in an attempt to offset decreases in income from endowment investments, state and federal support (Brown, 1992). Similar to other industries, institutions of higher education must generate a cost comparison analysis. As an example, these institutions must evaluate the cost of attracting new students against the costs associated with retaining the students presently enrolled. Historically, the costs of attracting new students far exceed the costs of retaining their present students (Lau, 2003; Lovitts, 2001). Costs such as advertising, background checks, and medical history represent an investment in students that is lost when a student withdraws from their studies.

Adults who are returning to college in pursuit of their doctoral degree have many roles in society (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007). For instance, graduate school students may have parental and marital roles, as well as responsibilities in an organization. As such, these individuals have responsibilities to transcend into their new role as student. Given the variety of responsibilities of these individuals, they face many obstacles to success. These obstacles include family, work, personal and financial responsibilities (Knowles, 1970). Institutions of higher education must be willing to adapt their programs to meet the needs of these students, not the other way around. With increase competition via the internet, adult learners are provided access to programs that are appropriate for their learning needs and lifestyles (Edelson & Malone, 1999).

## **Effects of Doctoral Education**

Adults enroll in a doctoral program at a point in their lives when they seek to change their direction in life (Phillips, 1995). The individual enrolled in the program will undergo changes in their self, and relationships with others. Students have defined the doctoral student experience as a period of exile (Taylor, 1976). While there are rewards to be obtained at the completion of the doctoral degree, the costs of the journey are considerable. Students struggle with the demands of their personal, academic and professional careers, making decisions of one at the expense of another (James, 1985). The demands placed upon the student at the doctoral level from external and internal sources increases the needs of relationships to form between the students themselves and the faculty of the institution (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007).

The selection of an advisor will have a major impact on the success or failure of the doctoral student (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). Students who select advisors with common interests enjoy better relationships that lead to student's success (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010). As student/ advisor relationships develop, the advisor becomes more of a mentor to the student, and takes personal responsibility for their success. As the students develop this relationship, they gain feelings of belonging that directly relates to their satisfaction. Student satisfaction contributes to retention rates and student success (Zhao et al., 2007).

## **Transformation of the Adult Learner**

Most doctoral students perform their research on a part time basis while holding down a full time job. Because of time constraints placed on these students, institutions

must be willing to accommodate their needs. Elsey (2007) studied graduate student satisfaction with their programs of study and compared it to graduation rates. Students who were satisfied with their experiences in the doctoral program had a higher graduation rate. Barnes (2010) studied doctoral students' interaction with their advisors as a means of motivation. Barnes presented the following question to be answered by the participants under study, "What positive or negative characteristics do doctoral students assign to their advisors?" The majority of the study provided documentation to support the fact that students' success is directly related to their perception of a positive relationship between themselves and their advisors (Zhao et al., 2007).

Taking these step further, doctoral students who were permitted to select their advisor based on common interests or mutual respect resulted in a better relationship. Students who were assigned advisors were less satisfied with their advisor relationships.

The advisor has several responsibilities to the student and the institution. The advisor is a faculty member who is responsible to guide the student through the program of study. They serve to evaluate the students' writing and direct their dissertation. The advisor is also responsible to assist the student in departmental matters, through to graduation. Barnes (2010) interviewed 107 students in similar levels of completion of their doctoral degrees. What was discovered is that students who reported having quality interactions with their advisor were more likely to graduate than students who did not have a positive relationship with their advisor.

Barnes (2010) stated that advisors must take on many roles from advisor, coach, counselor and critic. They must act as a teacher, mentor, and role model. Barnes listed five roles of responsibility for the advisor:

1. To help them be successful
2. To develop as researchers,
3. To develop their professional capacities
4. Find their passion
5. Make a successful transition into their doctoral programs

From an advisor's perspective, their role encompasses support and mentoring students, while acting as a role model for their advisee. Forty-four percent of all students who failed to complete their dissertation cited a poor advisor relationship as the primary reason. These students listed differing expectations of the advisor/advisee as the reason behind this poor relationship.

Barnes (2010) found four attributes that lead to a positive or negative student/advisor relationship. First is accessibility, the availability of the advisor is the number one reason students cite as a positive attribute. Advisors, who provide flexibility in their schedule and respond promptly to phone and e-mail correspondents, provides the students with emotional and professional support that students appreciate (Zhao et al., 2007). Students acknowledge that the advisor has a busy schedule, as they do also, so when an advisor provides flexibility this demonstrates dedication to their profession.

A second attribute mentioned by students was helpfulness. Advisors who assist the student understand the rules; both formal and informal is essential to the student's



success (Zhao et al., 2007). Students who receive limited or incorrect information on the program lead to failures. The third attribute is similar to the second attribute, that being socializing. Throughout the program, students generate a social network of professionals that work together for success. Advisors are also faculty members, and as such, they work together with the students to form these relationships both inside and outside of the classroom. Advisors who ignore the importance of scholarly relationships are depriving the students of an important aspect of their education.

The fourth attribute is caring, whereby the question asked is whether the advisor cares for the student. A positive attribute of caring is established when the advisor is interested in the student's academic and personal well being (Zhao et al., 2007). Advisors who demonstrate caring go beyond the requirements to ascertain that what the student experiences within the institution are positive.

While a positive student/advisor relationship does not fall on the advisor alone, it is imperative that the advisor coming from a position of power take the lead to make the relationship positive (Zhao et al., 2007). The advisor must be cognitive of the fact that their behaviors and attitudes can affect their students both positively and negatively. Speaking from a student's perspective, the student must find an effective means of communicating with the advisor. The student must meet initially with the advisor and outline their expectations of the advisor, and the advisors expectations from the student.

Understanding the doctoral student's experiences and expectations will lead to increased student satisfaction and retention. Lovitts' (2001) research documented that college and university faculty place the blame for high attrition rates on the student

failures. These individuals fail to consider environmental factors affecting the doctoral students. Similar to undergraduate students, the doctoral student requires relationships with faculty staff and fellow students to foster their development. Presently, colleges and universities perform extensive background investigations into student admission applications. With an attrition rate of 50%, this method of admission into a professional program is ineffective. Additional research is required to document the experiences of student's successes and failures within the program (Lovitts, 2001)

Doctoral students are viewed as overachievers and have found success throughout their educational pursuits (Lovitts, 2001). Doctoral students' pursuits have a direct impact on their personal and professional lives. Students who withdraw from their doctoral studies feel like failures, and these feelings result in a reluctance to seek leadership positions inside and outside of their organizations. Future success in their personal and professional lives is impacted negatively. Understanding the transaction that occurs within the student on a personal and professional level in conjunction with the demands placed upon them in their multitude of roles such as professional, parents, and caregivers will provide crucial information to colleges and universities that seek to meet the needs and expectations of these students.

### **Meeting the Student's Needs**

Edelson and Malone (1999) provided the example of Pace University, an evolving institution undergoing tremendous growth and their discovery of the importance of catering to adult education. As Pace continued to expand their main campus to meet the tremendous growth, a decision was made to close a satellite campus that catered to adults

with classes held primarily in the evenings. It was estimated that the adult clientele would be willing to travel the extra distance in city traffic or utilize mass transportation. What Pace discovered was that the population was unwilling or unable to commute that distance; instead these individuals attended institutions that fit into their schedules. Pace made several errors in their estimation of the clientele they served. Pace sought to meet the needs of the institution over that of their population, failing to consider competition and believing the population needed them.

Edelson and Malone (1999) provided another example focusing on creating partnerships between institutions for higher education and industry. The authors discussed the benefits to both institutions when Bell Atlantic formed a partnership with community colleges to educate their work force in technology. For Bell Atlantic, the authors cited that the company received a work force that was educated in the latest technologies, as well as other benefits afforded a graduate from a two-year college. The college recognized increased funding through tuition, a new curriculum that united several departments within the college, and new degree offerings to the public. The community colleges recognized the potential in such a venture, evaluated the impact of instruction of an adult population on their capacity, and utilized their initiative and innovation to move forward.

### **Theories of Adult Education: Malcom Knowles**

Malcom Knowles' study of andragogy and adult education has expanded upon the work of Alexander Kapp, a German school teacher. Alexander Kapp first used the term andragogy in 1833 to describe the need for lifelong learning (Taylor & Kroth, 2009).

More recently, Malcolm Knowles utilized the term andragogy to define the term of helping adults learn, in direct contrast with pedagogy that is concentrated on helping children learn.

In the early work of Kapp in 1983, the author explained that self-reflection and lifelong learning are key aspects of human existence. Kapp described lifelong learning as a healing of the mind and body. Through lifelong learning, one's inner self is improved in the form of their personality. Kapp also stated that the outer self is improved through the use of skills. Kapp also noted that education takes place outside of the structured institution. Kapp recognized that learning takes place in one's everyday activities.

Andragogy and Pedagogy distinctively differ, when considering the target learners. Pedagogy is defined as the art and science of educating children, which is often used as synonym for teaching (Taylor, Kroth, 2009). On a basic level, pedagogy represents the teacher's capabilities of transmitting information to the student. Although andragogy shared some of the characteristics of pedagogy, Knowles defined andragogy as the art and science of helping adults to learn. According to Knowles, "andragogy makes four basic assumptions concerning adults: (a) Adults have the need to know why they are learning something; (b) Adults need to learn experientially; (c) Adults approach learning as a problem-solving exercise; (d) Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value" (p. 295).

Andragogy concentrates on getting the adult active in the learning process. The adult learner provides feedback and becomes an active participant. Pedagogy is a teacher-lead instruction, where student involvement is limited to the presented instruction.

Knowles' definition of an adult implies that a person is responsible for their own lives. Knowles further described an adult as an individual who performs adult roles. Adult roles are defined as those roles dictated within a specific culture such as parent, soldier, worker, spouse, as well as other socially acceptable roles. Other researchers have attempted to narrow the definition of andragogy specific for adult learners in a school environment.

Adults have special learning needs. Unlike children's education, adult learners seek liberal education, where the teacher acts as a facilitator and guide the students to meet their educational needs, as opposed to filling them up with facts (Taylor & Kroth, 2009). It is imperative that the instructor understands the needs of the students and cover the topics that reflect their interests. Adults learn by performing tasks. The instructor must allow the students to work in groups and assume leadership positions within the group.

The theory of andragogy is based on an assumption that adults must be taught differently from children, due to the fact that they comprehend information differently. While children's education is based on content, children learn and accept knowledge without doubts, and where learning is evaluated through test scores, which measure the students' ability to recite predetermined answers. Andragogy differs with pedagogy, which focuses on teaching techniques that encourage new concepts and knowledge to emerge. This technique includes new techniques for teaching adults, examples of which include group discussions, problem solving sessions and interviews, as opposed to

quizzes. Adults learn more on processes, with a foundation on content from childhood education experiences.

Unlike children, adults' life experiences give them the ability to generate knowledge unknown from the mainstream knowledge, if they are granted the opportunity to process information in the appropriate way (Knowles, 1998). These experiences and knowledge is what separates the child student to the adult student. An effective instructor will draw upon these experiences and apply knowledge that is relevant to the topics of education. By relating theories and concepts to students' life experiences, the instructor leads adult learners to learn through reflection.

Unlike a child attending school, the adult learner must be motivated (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006). Adult learning motivation varies from seeking friendship within the school environment to seeking knowledge. Adults will commit to learning when they believe that the information is relevant and attainable. Adults seek constant, structured, and helpful feedback. Adults do not want to experience learning activities as an attack on their competence. Finally, adults want to be rewarded for their efforts. Rewards can be as simple as a demonstration of the applicable application of the knowledge to their present work environment.

### **Theories of Adult Education: Merriam and Caffarella**

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) assumed that adults' experience, critical reflection, and development are elements of adult learning. Merriam and Caffarella supported Knowles' contention that adults learn from their personal experiences, which makes teaching more relevant when teaching techniques are anchored to students' experiences.

When adults can assimilate their new knowledge to previous experiences, adults are better able to retain meaningful information. Through reflection, the adult learner is able to assimilate their learning experiences to their present knowledge adding to their learning experiences. While Knowles suggested that adults are problem solvers, Merriam and Caffarella, on the other hand, included *development* as a third addition to the basic assumptions of andragogy. Development is defined as the ability of the adult learner to think critically with the presented information.

### **Theories of Adult Education: Howard Y. McClusky**

In 1963, Howard Y. McClusky introduced his theory of margin (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). McClusky's theory centered on adulthood and the transitions the adult encounters with age. Throughout the aging process, an adult seeks to balance the energy needed to accomplish the daily tasks with the amount of energy an adult possesses. The theory of margin is a ratio between the demands of life and the power available to deal with the load. An excess of power over load or a greater margin provides the opportunity for adults to participate in the learning process.

McClusky described load and power as external and internal factors (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). External load represents the daily activities of life; examples include family, and work responsibilities. Internal load represents the personal aspirations, for example personal desires. Power is a combination of external and internal resources. In order to participate in the learning process, the adult must have available power; thus, adults must be capable of juggling their responsibilities and demands on their time in order to preserve power for learning activities.

### **Theories of Adult Education: Jack Mezirow**

Mezirow's (1981) theory of perspective transformation is grounded in the belief that humans are shaped by our personal experiences. Central to Mezirow's theory is critical reflection on previous experiences. Mezirow's theory is based on the belief that a person's behaviors result from previous experiences. In order to transform or change the person, one must understand himself or herself. By understanding oneself, an adult can comprehend their belief systems and culture behind their actions. Through understanding individuals' frames of reference and what contributes to their belief systems, one can begin to view the world differently. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) stated that "transformational learning is about change, dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (p. 130).

Mezirow's goal in the development of transformational learning is to change the frames of reference (1991). As individuals develop over time, the individual relates daily experiences to previous experiences through reflection. Reflecting upon previous experiences provides the framework for applying meaning to new experiences. This reflection is commonly referred to as assumptions resulting from cultural, social or educational experience. When individuals apply critical reflection to these experiences, they begin to question their preconceived assumptions and begin to look at experiences differently. The individual must be willing to accept new explanations to these experiences in order for transformational learning to occur.



## **Summary**

Chapter 2 contains a discussion of the literature and theories behind the adult learner. Based on the reviewed literature and recent empirical research, there is little information available that documents the journey of adult learners' experiences as they navigate through a doctoral program (Phillips, 1995). The literature that documents the difficulties encountered in institutions of higher education provides evidence of the need for these institutions to be flexible to meet the needs of adult students. The theories outlined the information available regarding adult development and transformation; however, these theories do not address the specific requirements of an adult student working through doctoral studies. The majority of the documentation available concentrates on the study of undergraduate and traditional students. The field of adult education in particular non-traditional doctoral students requires research in order to determine what attributes lead to student success or failure.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHOD**

There is a need to understand how working practitioners describe their doctoral program learning experiences. This phenomenological case study aimed to understand and capture the lived experiences of Rowan University doctoral students. This chapter presents the research design, methodical techniques, and procedures of data collection and data analysis. The appropriateness of the procedures are also justified.

#### **Purpose of the Case Study**

The purpose of this study is to generate empirical information that captures the lived experiences of students enrolled in Doctor in Education (Ed.D). Specifically, the study aims to capture the experiences of student practitioners who graduated from Rowan's doctoral program.

#### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding the proposed study are the following:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of students enrolled in the Rowan Ed.D program?

RQ2: What are the life changes encountered by Ed.D program students in Rowan University?

RQ3: How do graduate students respond to the life changes encountered while enrolled in the Ed.D program?

RQ4: How do students describe their satisfaction with the Rowan Ed.D program?

## **Methodology**

The qualitative researcher collects data by observing behavior and/or through interviewing the participants. Qualitative methodology is utilized to answer research questions of why, how and what is occurring in order to provide a greater understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2004). During the data gathering, the researcher must remain independent, not focusing on the participant's interpretation of a problem or issue. Qualitative researchers must apply meaning to what they witness or hear. Taking an ethnographic holistic approach to data collection, the researcher must comprehend multiple perspectives to the problem under study, identifying the major factors, and developing an understanding of the phenomena.

Qualitative research generates knowledge from data emerging as themes developed through an interview process. Thus, the study examined the conclusions from the data emerging from the transcripts of the participants' interview. The study aimed to identify the themes and issues encountered by working practitioners in a doctoral program. In qualitative research, the objective of the researcher is to capture relevant textual meaning of the experiences. Thus, the study seeks relationships or connections of themes as they developed.

### **Methodology - Setting**

The setting of this study was within the work environment of the doctoral graduate of Rowan University's. The natural environment of the participant allows the research to experience the problem under study (Creswell, 2009).

### **Methodology Sample Population**

Participants in this study were chosen from individuals who graduated from Rowan University's doctoral program. The sample included practitioners who are gainfully employed in their chosen fields and are willing to share their experiences. It was also important to this study that the participants represented the diversity of the institution, including gender, ethnicity, and family background experiences. Qualitative research design populations vary in the number of participants. In order to saturate all information available, the present study would use a sample consisting of ten individuals (Creswell, 2004).

### **Pilot Sample**

The interview questions were piloted with two working practitioners presently engaged in a graduate degree program. Neither of the two individuals is enrolled in Rowan's doctoral program. The rationale behind the pilot sample was to provide the researcher the opportunity to enhance the reliability of the interview questions, develop follow up questions, and estimate the interview sessions with the participants.

### **Methodology - Research Design**

A phenomenological case study approach was used to capture the lived experiences of Ed.D graduate students at Rowan University. A phenomenological approach focuses on experiences shared by the participants to generate meanings out of these experiences. Qualitative research is appropriate for the study, because the intention is to gather and code data into meaningful and manageable categories. These categories formed the basis of a theory, or a hypothesis to explain the phenomenon under study.

Utilizing case study methodology, this study aimed at understanding the lives of doctoral student practitioners as they were socialized into their role as students. This study was designed to capture the lived experiences of these individuals at various stages of their personal and professional development (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010).

### **Methodology - Methods Utilized – Interviews and Personal Notes**

In qualitative study, the researcher is a part of the study. The interest of the researcher in the study developed because of his own experiences in the Rowan Doctoral program. Because of the researcher's reflection on experiences coupled with the literature on the subject area, the researcher has become more objective towards the phenomenon. In order to remain objective, the focus was on capturing the meanings associated with the participants words than the researcher's subjective views.

Each individual in the study was interviewed for approximately 60 minutes. Additional time was added if needed at the participant's convenience. The interview aimed at generating a descriptive summary of the experience of the participants. It was important to establish trust between the researcher and the participants in order to elicit open and honest communication, which adds validity to the study (Creswell, 2004). The questions were designed to encourage the student to tell his story.

Through a series of open-ended questions in an environment comfortable to interviewee, the researcher hoped to gather rich descriptive data that details their stories of success. The goal was to find social, cultural, personal and professional changes experienced by these individuals. The interview questions were open-ended pre-

determined questions that evolved based on the responses of the participants (Patton, 2002).

Personal notes gathered throughout the interview provided insight to the researcher's thoughts and reactions throughout the process. Often referred to as "reflective notes," the information represents the personal feelings, and impressions of the researcher (Creswell, 2009). Reflective notes were utilized to substantiate the findings and provide creditability to the data collected.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data collected began at the inception of the first interview. The interview data was transcribed and coded using NVIVO 9 software, a tool specifically designed for qualitative data analysis. NVIVO 9 is useful in isolating transcribed data and developing categories. This software allowed the researcher to manipulate the data faster and easier than any of the manual methods.

The researcher began the analysis by reviewing the transcribed interview of each study participant. Notations were provided in every transcription for triangulation of data sources. The information that generated in the transcription was then coded into the NVIVO 9 software. Upon completion of the coding process, the two documents were reviewed and compared for data consistency.

### **Triangulation / Creditability**

Phillips (1995) stated that the researcher achieves creditability in their research and writings when someone, other than a participant, recognizes the lived experiences as similar to their own. The qualitative approach to this study utilized interviews and

observations to gather the rich descriptions from participations that have experienced the transformation. The ten participants in the study ensured that multiple perspectives from various participants were generated to increase the creditability of the findings.

The interview and observation data was collected concurrently and analyzed individually (Jang, McDougall, Pollon, Herbert, & Russell, 2008). The qualitative data from the ten interviews and observational field notes with doctoral graduate practitioners were analyzed inductively. Qualitative data was transcribed, coded and then categorized into themes. The data collected through observations was also coded, and categorized into themes. These themes represent two sets of data that were pared together, seeking shared meaning.

A second scan of the data sought out lack of clarity or redundancy in the data. The themes were then consolidated and reviewed for consistency, identifying similarities and differences, seeking patterns. As the information was being sorted, reviewed and combined, the reflective notes of the researcher were included in support of the findings. The inclusion of reflective notes in the final report assisted in the organization and structure of the report.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to review the data gathered throughout the process. The researcher must review the transcriptions from the interview seeking out mistakes that may have occurred in the transcription. The researcher must also review the coding to verify they have not deviated from the established codes thereby affecting the meaning of the textual data. Utilizing triangulation from the various sources of data built justification for the themes. Triangulation of data involves the

combination of three sets of data to support conclusions or findings (Maxwell, 2004). In data triangulation, the researcher must recognize his or her own biases. Researchers' bias occurs when a researcher seeks out data in support of their findings, or data that is compatible with their theories. Utilizing multiple forms of data collection (interviews, observations and field notes) allows for the triangulation of data adding to its reliability (Hinchey, 2008).

Member checking is another method of increasing validity within the data collected. Member checking involves follow up meetings with the participants to determine their feelings toward the accuracy of the transcribed interview data collected. There are differing opinions to the usage of member checking. Creswell (2009) suggested that transcripts of the initial interview should not be made available to the participants because it allows the participants to manipulate or change the data. Maxwell (2004) recommended member checking as verification that the researcher has not misrepresented the meanings of the participants. Member checking may provide alternative interpretations of the events observed by the researcher. Maxwell (2004) further suggested that the researcher seeks out situations that do not support their conclusions. Identifying discrepant data and analysis of this data will support the conclusions reached in the study. Researchers tend to notice information that supports their conclusions while ignoring those that do not.

In this study, member checking is considered a form of validity procedure. The researcher of the study concurs with Creswell (2009) and chose not to make the transcripts of the interviews available to the participants. Similarly, peer review was



utilized as a method of providing creditability to the data gathered. Peer review is an evaluation of the researcher by others in the same field, in order to enhance the reliability and creditability of the research. The reviewer aimed to seek out errors or weaknesses in the data, hoping to provide an impartial evaluation. To avoid biases, the reviewer was selected outside from the influence of colleagues, relatives or friends, thus avoiding any conflicts of interest. The word peer is often referred to as someone of equal standing; however, in this context peer review is utilized in a broader context to refer to someone of a higher standing.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the likelihood that emergent themes could be utilized in another situation (Licoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, transferability is limited to the specific institution and program studied. There was an attempt by the researcher to develop transferability in the selection of a diverse population to be interviewed, the use of peer debriefers and the data collected described the experiences of a specific population's behavior; however, due to the limitation of the institution and program, transferability lacks these essential traits.

### **Dependability**

In order to ensure dependability as the data gathered, the data were coded and themes were developed to fit the phenomenon under study; however, as new data were discovered, the themes were modified to reflect the data (Creswell, 2004). As a second method of assuring dependability, I documented my actions, and placed them in the chronological order I followed in their execution.

### **Conformability**

A phenomenology study is not generalizable to the group of individuals; rather, the study describes the phenomenon as it naturally occurs in a specific case. The present study assumes that only the readers know the applicability of the research findings (Merriam, 1988).

### **Summary**

The chapter presents a thorough discussion of the proposed processes for the present study. The chapter presented the justification for the use of a phenomenological case study in examining the lived experiences of the Ed.D graduate students in Rowan University. This process involved evaluating an event, breaking down the information into small fragments or categories, and then re-constructing the information into meaningful description of the event (Maxwell, 2004). The phenomenon is explained based from the gathered textual data generated from the ten transcripts of the study participants. The chapter also presented the techniques in coding the data and generating themes that aim to provide answers to the research questions sought for the present study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

The purpose of this study is to explain the lived experiences of Rowan Ed.D doctoral students, to understand their experiences, their satisfaction with the program, and how their needs were met as experienced throughout the program. Through a phenomenological examination, four research questions were posed: (a) What are the lived experiences of students enrolled in the Rowan Ed.D program? (b) What are the life changes encountered by Ed.D program students in Rowan University? (c) How do graduate students respond to the life changes encountered while enrolled in the Ed.D program? (d) How do students describe their satisfaction with the Rowan Ed.D program?

The focus of the study involved working practitioners who have successfully graduated from Rowan University's Doctoral Program. This research is important, due to the rapid expansion of the program, the changing demographics associated with this expansion, and the lack of information available that details the factors that contribute to the success rate of a doctoral student. This study is significant, because it aims to build the literature regarding the needs of students who do not fit the traditional student model, with the aim to provide valuable data that could assist the University in shaping the future of the program at Rowan University.

A phenomenological design was used to gather the lived experiences of ten working professionals who graduated the Ed.D program at Rowan University. The participants of the study were graduates of the Rowan Doctoral program from its inception in 1997 to its most recent graduating class of 2011. The interviews were held

in locations convenient to the participants, such as participants' offices, open classrooms, and participants' homes. While the researcher prepared a guide questionnaire, the structure of the interview allowed the researcher to ask clarifications regarding the responses of the participants.

The study investigated a population of Ed.D graduates who were purposely selected based on gender, age, ethnicity, and degree of career path selected, classified as either traditional or online. The participants were recruited based on the recommendations of my dissertation chair and committee, peers in the program, and the department chair of Rowan's doctoral program. The participants were initially contacted through e-mail to seek their permission to participate in the study. An invitation letter was sent to respective potential participants' email addresses. The invitation letter contains the objective of the study, including the process of data collection. The participants who provided their consent to participate were asked for a date, time, and venue that they found convenient for the interviews. As such, during the scheduled interview with the participants, all were asked to complete and sign the consent form, which discussed the right of the participants in the study and the right of the researcher to use the data collected. The final list of the participants with their demographics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Demographic of Participants*

Participants	Age	Gender	Coursework
Dr. B	56	Female	On-Line
Dr. C	50	Male	Traditional
Dr. D	37	Male	Traditional
Dr. G	50	Male	Traditional
Dr. H	60	Female	Traditional
Dr. J	48	Male	On-Line
Dr. K	50	Male	Traditional
Dr. T	45	Male	Traditional
Dr. S	48	Male	Traditional
Dr. Z	50	Female	Traditional

### **Organization and Interpretation of Data**

All participants' interviews were audio recorded. Following the ethical procedures, all participants were informed that the interview would be audio recorded to ensure the validity of the data analysis. To ensure the creditability of the data, the researcher utilized member checking during the transcription of individual interviews. The transcripts were generated exactly as spoken in the interview, including statements such as *err*, *umm*, and *ahh*, in order to capture the degree of certainty of the participants' responses.

This study used the content analysis method to interpret interview transcriptions of all participants involved in the study. The presentation of the interpretation of the results begins with the identification of relevant categories specific to each of the research questions. These categories were then arranged and grouped according to specific themes. For instance, experiences were accounted in the respective transcripts to answer research question 1 "What are the lived experiences of students enrolled in the

Rowan Ed.D program?” The Nvivo qualitative software accounted all instances pertaining to the experiences of the participants in the program. These accounted experiences were then grouped, and the software accounted the number of occurrences these experiences were being mentioned.

### **Findings**

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed five thematic categories as a result of the questions posed by the researcher. For research question one, “What are the lived experiences of students enrolled in the Rowan Ed.D program?” 11 thematic categories were identified. For research question two, “What are the life changes encountered by Ed.D program students in Rowan University?” three thematic categories were identified, which constituted the theme “completion of rigorous program design as a challenge of Ed.D students.” For research question three, “How do graduate students respond to the life changes encountered while enrolled in the Ed.D program?”, two themes were identified: (a) Enabling program environment aids students in coping with program challenges, and (b) Students' motivational factors help students in coping with program challenges. Finally, for research question four, “How do students describe their satisfaction with the Rowan Ed.D program?” the theme “program characteristics that satisfies students” was identified.

As I reflect on the life changes encountered by the participants of Rowan's Ed.D program, a book written Kegan and Lahey comes to mind (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). "How the way we talk can change the way we work" is broken into individual short stories outlining a seven-step process that individuals encounter when experiencing

change. The book explains the seven steps as seven distinct languages that speak to the changes experienced by the participants of this study.

The first three languages provide examples of how an individual is transformed based on what they are committed to. It is natural instincts for an individual to complain about things they do not like, as opposed to speaking towards their personal belief. The individuals in this study recognized this and have vocalized this in the interview process when they expanded upon their choice of words. The participants spoke of their reflection of events prior to issuing their opinions or responses to questions asked of them. This careful choice of words reflected what Kegan & Lahey (2001) were speaking of when they spoke of declaration of commitments. As a leader, one is faced with decisions, and in order to avoid becoming part of the problem, one must become committed to a goal and declare his/her commitment.

The final four languages mentioned in Kegan and Lahey (2001) focus on individual leadership style. Changing the way we communicate with one another can foster growth, understanding, and organizational effectiveness. As the participants in this study communicated to the researcher their responses to individuals in both a professional and personal capacity reflect supportive, timely, and problem solving relationship as opposed to deconstructive criticism, which tends to be vague, threatening and pessimistic. The transformation that the authors noted has a direct correlation with the practitioners in this study. As the level of education increases within the participants their decision making becomes clear, precise, and helpful.

## Research Question 1

The researcher asked probing interview questions to ascertain the experiences of the participants in the program. These probing questions are relevant, particularly in determining whether these experiences are to be considered significant experiences that help students succeed in the program. Eleven thematic categories were then identified.

The majority of the participants indicated that their experiences in the program contributed to their personal and professional growth. Dr. B described her completion as a professional achievement that earned more respect from coworkers, subordinates, and students. Dr. J articulated that the completion of a degree from the University changed his leadership views. Dr. J recalled:

I think it was actually Dr. Campbell that says the doctorate opens doors for you. but they are not jobs that it opens up it shifts your thinking if done the right way it has been truly a transformational experience for me so I really feel that I am on the outside looking in as opposed to the inside struggling with what's going on my thinking has opened up so drastically that there is nothing I can't accomplish

All the participants also mentioned that their experiences involved the preparation for the rigor of academic research. Many of the participants observed the interrelatedness of the program core courses to research. Each core course has been designed to build the competency of students to perform an individualized research project. One of the probing interview questions to the participants was their perception of the preparation leading up to their dissertation research. Dr. B, a member of the initial hybrid cohort offered by Rowan University, summed up her preparation:



Yes and no we were the first cohort we did not have a class called dissertation 1 and dissertation 2 the cohort immediately following us had that holy cow we were missing that piece; we had the pieces of the dissertation we had quantitative research we had qualitative research we had both qualitative and quantitative as separate courses but we never had you know dissertation 101... that kind of pulled that all together

While a majority of the participants admitted that their exposure to formal research is limited, they also recalled that they placed a great deal of importance on research courses, such as action research and participatory research. Dr. Z put into perspective his classroom preparation:

I was not familiar with action research nor was I a fan of action research initially but I think I was convinced by the program. I had become a believer in the value of participatory research and I think I was prepared to become a researcher in the workplace so that notion of participating in the um research on the job I think I was prepared I got the skills on how to navigate that in a way that really impacted my being an employee.

Academic research to some had been very difficult. Dr. K, for instance, articulated that research is a responsibility that must be equally shared. Dr. K said:

...trying to balance work, family, school you know the reality was it [research] was sometimes very difficult to do that um ah an and part of it would be that the university share some of that responsibility because not all the courses were as well structured as they could have been, and nor did they present all the tools

needed as well as they could have...The university certainly offered a lot and I did a lot but there were short comings on both sides.

Dr. R felt unprepared to do academic research. Dr. R cited that students are responsible to seek faculty guidance and support to accomplish the rigor of research. Dr. R, felt he is responsible for his own actions and it was his responsibility to seek the support he felt was lacking. Dr. R articulated his strategies in developing his competence in research. Dr. R said:

I am going to say no just because of her um poor instruction but yes because with books that were supplied through Rowan I ended up just getting those books myself and just reading them and teaching myself about qualitative research.

Meantime, nine of the participants indicated that their experiences in the program offered them the experience of having professional interaction within a classroom environment. The participants expressed their desire for personal interactions with faculty and peers in order to experience academia.

The participants entering a doctoral program for the first time were approaching it like another master's degree. These individuals quickly discovered the gravity of the situation they were in, the workload and the expectations of the instructors made it clear that the rigors of a doctoral degree far exceed that of a master's degree. Dr. Z expresses his initial reactions to the program.

I liked the cohort model I liked that we were together by in large. Initially I didn't really think that would make much difference; but it really did I really enjoyed getting to know that group that I went through it with; it wasn't a perfect cohort at

all times in terms of always being the same group but by in large I appreciated that very much.

Two participants, Dr. S and Dr. G, traveled miles round trip to attend traditional classes at Rowan University. During the interview, Dr. G said:

Dr. G - we wanted a traditional program we didn't want um the Seaton hall executive quick fix group dissertation type uh we looked at Rutgers it really came down to Rutgers vs. Rowan and where we live the travel wasn't really going to be that different I mean that Rutgers is a little closer but traffic is worse, um so take the travel out of the equation the things we heard about Rutgers is you basically became somebody's lackey for a while and neither one of us had the time or the energy to do that.

With Dr. S and G's intention to enroll at Rowan University, the cohort model of instruction of the University has been deeply appreciated. A cohort forces the students to interact with one another, thus building professional learning communities and professional networks. The participants described their experiences within a cohort as a contributing factor to their academic success. Dr. S described her experiences within the cohort as a cohort within a cohort. Dr. S said:

...we had each other um I think if you were not if we didn't have someone close by proximity and someone who could understand that would impact your ability to get it done because I think you need people other than family because they don't understand and your friends unless they have been through a doctoral

program they don't understand so you have to find people who understand so if you can find a core group within your cohort that really could help you get it done

Nine of the participants also cited that through the Ed.D program of the University, they were able to experience the opportunity to make educational choices. These participants felt that their career choices required them to earn a doctoral degree. Dr. C exemplified his achievement particularly during his changing role in the organization. Dr. C clarified that,

...in certain industries a bachelors right you need a bachelors in order to get a job in other industries it might be a masters, well in this industry it's a doctorate so if you want to if you don't want anything above a blocking your way it's you just have to get a doctorate otherwise that will be an uphill artificial obstacle for your entire life um and there are by getting a doctorate you there are doors presented to you they are open but these are doors presented to you that will never be presented so I got it as a matter of utility.

While the participants of this study acknowledged that they did not seek a doctorate degree to pursue a new employment position, they did acknowledge other opportunities. Dr. Z has taken advantage of one opportunity, "the doctoral level education offered opportunities to be an adjunct professor that I did not have before". The opportunity to teach at the higher education level was cited as a career opportunity that over 50% of the participants found intriguing. While this is not a career path the participants chose to pursue at this time, the participants appreciated the fact that it was

an option for their future career. Dr. G has plans to utilize this degree in the future, "I also want to teach at the college level when I retire."

Seven of the participants also indicated that the program at Rowan University allowed them to experience professional and personal reflection. As such, the participants acknowledged that prior to seeking a doctoral degree; the amount of time they dedicated to personal reflection was limited. The participants speak of being in an "automatic mode" when at work, where they perform their duties with little regard. Upon completion of her doctoral degree, Dr. B describes herself, "I don't know that I am smarter. I think I am much more reflective, much more thoughtful." Other participants spoke of reflective journals that were a requirement of their studies. Now that their studies are completed, they continue to utilize these journals as a means to "flush out" their thoughts. Three of the participants said that through the training they had in the University, they became a deep thinker, which digs deeper into the meaning of the situation.

The participants of this study were asked to reflect on their experiences within their cohort. While all of the participants spoke highly of their experience, seven of the participants acknowledged that its impact on their degree completion was immeasurable. While at times the cohorts became fractured, the individuals contributed to each other's success.

In an effort to obtain a greater insight into this phenomenon, the researcher asked about the deeper meaning of the relationships shared by their cohorts. Seven of the participants cited that cohort members bonded to individuals with similar interests and

occupations thus motivating them to pursue and finish the program. These participants indicated that they remained in contact with one another. The cohort provided an instrument for these professionals to form a professional network where they continue to rely on one another's expertise in their field. Dr. Z described that "the ones that had the most impact on me I kept in contact with."

Table 2  
*Thematic Category 1: Lived experiences of Ed.D students in Rowan Doctoral Program*

Thematic Categories/Constituents	# of Participants to Offer this Experience	% of Participants to Offer this Experience
Felt that graduate program contributed to their personal and professional growth	10	13.2
Students preparation for the rigor of academic research	10	13.2
Experienced professional interaction within a classroom environment	9	11.8
University offers opportunity to make educational choices	9	11.8
Participants experienced professional and personal reflection	7	9.2
Acknowledgement of personal and professional achievements	7	9.2
Motivated by peers to pursue graduate studies	7	9.2
Gained respect from colleagues	6	7.9
Discovered and earned self-confidence	5	6.6
Experienced program bureaucracy	3	3.9
Challenges in setting priorities	3	3.9

While results of the analysis revealed that lived experiences of the participants had made personal and professional contributions, the results of the analysis revealed six thematic categories. Table 7 shows that the program at Rowan University augmented the knowledge and skills of the participants, the program encouraged students to pursue and complete the course, provided future opportunities and personal satisfaction, assisted

students in building professional learning community/professional networks, and developed camaraderie as a result of classroom interaction.

A majority of the participants indicated that the program augmented their knowledge and skills. Dr. K, for instance, has reached a turning point in his career after completion of the program. According to Dr. K, Ed.D provided the knowledge and skills that were necessary to make his career more successful. Dr. K said:

It has given me some of the skills or many of the skills that I'll need as I look to take the reins of a much larger school district in the state of New Jersey and eventually maybe in other states so the superintendent position although you are at the top of the organization in your given school district there are different size districts and ah of course the larger school districts carry more responsibility more prestige ah and that's what I am looking to move toward.

The tangible benefits experienced by the participants also became the words of encouragement received by a majority of the participants. Moreover, the cohort design in place at Rowan University provided the opportunity for the participants to experience the program with other individuals with similar demands for their time and attention. The cohort program also contributed to long-term relationships between participants. These relationships provided the support, encouragement and confidence that participants considered as a success factor. Dr. R explained this phenomenon:

I really did bond with like a little tight group of people and we got each other through the program and were are still friends we still keep in contact we talk

weather its e-mail or go Phillies game or something like that but I eventually found you know that group of small group of people that got me through

Seven of the participants indicated that the program provided future opportunities.

Dr. G contemplated how the Ed.D degree would help him in his later years of life and said that, "I also want to teach at the college level when I retire." Dr. R added that "I would like to teach um at the Higher Ed. level which would be nice for me I have been teaching in an elementary school now for eleven years."

Five of the participants indicated that the program had provided them personal satisfaction. The participants said that the journeys were difficult and rewarding.

However, Dr. B described her struggles and said that:

...there were many many times (I am the joke of the cohort) I quit, 26 times I asked myself what am I doing this for and the cohort people just kept assuring me up and saying come on your smart you can do this I didn't think I was smart enough

I didn't think I could preserver enough um I have stickers that people gave me that says every time you think you want to quit take these little stickers and so I quit more times than anybody in the program but I'm so happy that I did it and so happy that I am through it and finished

Finally, the participants experienced the concept of *professional learning community* where camaraderie develops among students and mentors as a result of the interaction. While all of the participants mentioned the feeling of belonging when they were interviewed, only five of them had a vivid description of what a professional



learning community is. For several reasons, bonds of friendship and professional relationships were emerging while enrolled in the program. The participants described their classmates and mentor as their extended family members.

Dr. Z expressed his interactions with his peers in the program as invaluable experience that provided the support he sought to achieve success in the program. Dr. Z spoke of these experiences in terms of positive and negative experiences. The program design was to force interactions among the students to the point where the students pressure one another to learn and grow personally, academically, and professionally.

I had a great relationship with peers it was tremendous at times but I think I got the most learning out of the program from my interactions in the cohort from the peers in the cohort they challenged me in a way that I have never been challenged before sometimes I hated it um but ultimately they produced the greatest amount of learning and change in me as a person.

Data of the study revealed that participants keep in contact with one another after the completion of their education. While not every member of the cohort may remain in contact with the group, a significant number of participants continue to turn to one another for professional support in their careers.

Table 3

*Sub Thematic Category 1: Personal and professional contributions of the program*

Thematic Categories/Constituents	# of Participants to Offer this Experience	% of Participants to Offer this Experience
The University augmented the knowledge and skills	10	23.8
Students received encouragement to pursue the program	10	23.8
Program provides future opportunities	7	16.7
Program provided personal satisfaction	5	11.9
Program assisted students in building professional learning community/professional networks	5	11.9
Program develop camaraderie as a result of classroom interaction	5	11.9

**Research Question 2**

In seeking answers to research question two, investigative questions were asked. An analysis of the data revealed only one theme, “completion of a rigorous program design as a challenge of Ed.D students.” The theme was identified after three thematic categories emerged from the interview data. These are required competencies of students prior to the enrollment of the Ed.D program; the interrelationship of core courses to the dissertation process, and finally the program used a step-by-step process.

Nine of the participants offered an observation that students in the program must have a good professional understanding of research and the research process. These participants all agreed that the program ensures that students develop competence in academic research. Many of the students had struggled to complete the course requirement due to their limited experience in research. Dr. Z, for instance, shared that he

struggled to master research work and claimed that he had limited exposure to research prior to his enrollment with the Ed.D program.

Eight of the participants shared that while mentors expect students to have had acquired knowledge regarding research, the program is even more difficult since all core courses are attached to a dissertation research project. Dr. K explains his initial entry into the program and what he discovered by the way of program structure.

When I first entered the program there seemed to be a very solid program where everything was interrelated all the courses were interrelated everything you took led to the dissertation and that was the way it was sold to me.

Dr. B, when speaking on the dissertation portion of the program, agrees with Dr. K as she too viewed the program structure as "teaching me how to do each part of it as we went along and the program was imbedded the dissertation was imbedded in the program."

The participants in this study agree that Rowan University has the curriculum in place to direct the students and provide them with the tools to be successful. The students understand the expectations of the program, as Dr. R expands upon earlier comments "OK starting here I am going here and here is the steps in between and as long as I achieve those I am going in the right direction."

Table 4

*Thematic Category 2: Completion of a rigorous program design as a challenge of Ed.D students*

Thematic Categories/Constituents	# of Participants to Offer this Experience	% of Participants to Offer this Experience
Students required competency	9	88
Courses embedded within the dissertation process	8	88
The program used a step-by-step process	5	80

**Research Question 3**

In seeking answers to research question three, two themes emerged in the analysis. Those themes are (a) Providing a program environment that aids students in coping with program challenges, and (b) Students' motivational factors help students in coping with program challenges. The first theme generated six categories, which details a description of an enabling environment that helps students cope in the program challenges.

Seven of the participants indicated that the faculty and staff of the program offer their valuable time for both personal and professional discussion. Dr. Z, for instance, recalled the level of support he earned from his mentor. Dr. Z said that, "dissertation chair took an interest in my personal life that in a way that was very encouraging I still maintain a relationship with her."

Six of the participants observed that professional teaching staff at Rowan University took personal interest in the students' success. Dr. G described the availability of the faculty and staff he encountered in the program. Dr. G said:

I didn't feel like we couldn't reach out to people you are correct but we were respectful of their times we didn't try to push that envelope um maybe because we are administrators and um hey if doctor whoever is saying their office hours are two to four-thirty and they had a four forty five class and we need to see them we try and get there at four thirty and catch them at the end to speak to them for fifteen minutes um but we weren't going out of our way to try and get them to accommodate us.

Dr. K added the positive experiences he encountered from the individual faculty of the institution and the assistance they provided to him; however, he too made it a point to meet with the faculty at a time convenient to both himself and the faculty member.

I always took the attitude that it was my job to get to see them now it was that is an old ethic when I say old I say it is not practiced anymore so if Dr. Coaxum or Dr. White said be here at this time I would go to my boss and say I have to be at so-n-so and try to get that approved or I would say I have to be at school by three,

Table 5

*Thematic Category 3: Enabling program environment aids students in coping program challenges*

Thematic Categories/Constituents	# of Participants to Offer this Experience	% of Participants to Offer this Experience
Availability of the faculty and staff for personal and professional discussion	7	20.6
Faculty offers camaraderie among students	6	17.6
University offers an environment where professional learning community happens	7	20.6
Faculty offers refreshers for reinforcing learning	5	14.7
University offers practical application that supports real working environment	5	14.7
Support educational endeavors	4	11.8

All of the participants described themselves as goal-oriented individuals. They believed that the achievement of personal and professional goals is important motivational factor that help them in coping with program challenges. Their personal stories stretched from the completion of one goal to the anticipation of another. The prospect of completing their goal was a contributing factor that motivated these individuals. Dr. D puts into perspective his insights regarding doctoral degree prior to entering the program and now having graduated from the program.

...it was a goal and like any goal once you reach it you look back and ya I can do that again if I had to when I don't want to but now what is the next thing what is the next accomplishment so um I still value it just as much I think it I think before

you get something that anticipation is there and it's like anything you buy a new watch you buy anything it's like I can't wait to have it and once you get it you say this is great for a while and then you get well OK I still have to do the job I still have to do whatever.

Dr. D's analogy of the purchase of a new automobile reflects the overall feelings of the participants. Several of the participants alluded to a letdown following the completion of the degree. They have worked hard and achieved their goal; however, this is a terminal degree and their academic endeavors are over. When asked about feelings of the degree completion and their departure from the university lifestyle, several participants responded that they will continue with academia in undertaking a new role, that of an instructor.

Moreover, seven of the participants reflected about self-satisfaction as a motivational factor in dealing with changes while enrolled in the Ed.D program. The students view themselves in a new light and acknowledge the responsibilities of their degree. Dr. B puts into perspective the changes she encountered in a personal and profession capacity as a result of achieving her degree.

...the degree it's who I am now I am a doctor so that has certain rights privileges and responsibilities that come with it I didn't realize that before I got here but I'm think I am much more careful about my ethical decisions I am much more careful that what I say is true

Dr. C described his personal and professional transformation as a result of this program with reflection and careful selection of verbiage.

a doctorate brings certain responsibility as people are looking up to you as being a doctor so it brings with it certain personal responsibilities it seems that people are more interested in what I have to say more interested in my opinion. I am being more careful with my wording.

Dr. G also explained that changes are possible; however, the way you were raised is going to have an impact on who you are. The culture of your surroundings, in conjunction with the ethical beliefs of your community and parents, will define the individual. Dr. G expanded upon these feeling when he stated.

...you are who you are because of how you were raised because of the mind set of your parents and certainly what you believe is right and what you believe is wrong weather its religious weather it's that is where you find your comfort.

The participants of this study identified a Doctor regardless of their degree as someone they look up to and aspire to become. They believed that their expectations of professional growth/promotion have motivated them in coping with program challenges. Their experiences throughout the program caused them to reflect on their understanding of the profession and doubt their abilities to achieve such accolades. Seven participants mentioned that they no longer set an individual above another as a result of their educational achievements. Dr. Z explained the changes he exhibited upon reflection of the program.

I guess it's like anything that you hold in high esteem once you achieve it is not necessarily all that you thought it was cracked up to be you know I think that it



represents a very difficult and very challenging body of work I think it's neat to accomplish but I don't think I don't hold the EdD on a pedestal any longer.

Dr. J exemplifies the feelings of several of the participants in this study when questioned if his perception of the degree has changed, "Yes drastically I have always shied away from it because um I thought it was a sense of elitism." Dr. J further explained the reaction of the people he encounters, and his understanding of the changes in their perception of a doctoral degree.

...people talk to me differently treat me differently respect me differently but I haven't changed from yesterday you know likely you have your doctorate now the organization is very different my um the perception is unbelievably; but I haven't changed from April 7th when I defended to April 8th.

While several participants believed that the achievement of the doctoral degree is a significant achievement, Dr. C stated "anybody can do an Ed.D, its easy you just have to do the work so it's the same like they say anybody can run a marathon you just have to go train for it."

Table 6  
*Thematic Category 4: Students' motivational factors help students in coping program challenges*

Thematic Categories/Constituents	# of Participants to Offer this Experience	% of Participants to Offer this Experience
Achievement of personal and professional goals	10	41.7
Participants self satisfaction	7	29.2
Expectations of professional growth/promotion	7	29.2

#### **Research Question 4**

In order to comprehend the student satisfaction with the program, participants were requested to comment on their satisfaction with curriculum, faculty and peers in the program. Participants were asked to tell their stories of success, as well as a memorable experience that added to their satisfaction of the program. Table 5 presents five thematic categories that emerged from the analysis of the data.

The participants of this study were asked to reflect upon their experiences within their cohort. All of the participants spoke highly of the experience and acknowledged that its impact on their degree completion was immeasurable. The participants described that they remain in contact with faculty and cohort members through professional networks. In an effort to obtain a greater insight into this phenomenon, the researcher evaluated the extent of relationship development to determine the lasting impact of the cohort. What came as no surprise is that cohort members bonded to individuals with similar interests and occupations throughout the program. What did come as a surprise is the number of individuals who remain in contact with one another. The cohort provided an instrument for these professionals to form a professional network where they continue to rely on one another's expertise in their field.

Dr. Z described the responses from all of the participants, "the ones that had the most impact on me I kept in contact with." Dr. R continued with this line of thinking, as he described his professional network as one of professionalism and friendship.

...I really did bond with like a little tight group of people and we got each other through the program and we are still friends we still keep in contact we talk weather its e-mail or go Phillies game.

Dr. S described her cohort as "a cohort within a cohort." While she acknowledged the cohort experiences, she detailed how certain individuals gravitated to one another. Due to extenuating circumstances, she did not have the ability to socialize with cohort members outside the classroom. Dr. S did not view this as a detriment to her degree completion, but rather cited it as a reason for her answer to the question of remaining in contact with members of her cohort upon completion of the program, "a couple yes a couple of them not everyone but a couple of them".

All participants believed that a one-to-one relation was formed outside the cohort. Each of the participants spoke fondly of one critical friend within the program with whom they bonded and relied to complete their education. Dr. D decided to take a year off in the middle of the program for personal reasons, and his critical friend did so in support of his endeavors. Dr. D described his relationship with his critical friend "we kind of did the program together I he was always there for me because he took a year off too at the same time I think more out of support for me than anything else."

Dr. S and Dr. G leaned on each other for support during their commute to and from Rowan University. Dr. S explained how these two individuals accomplished the program working together.

...if you can find a core group within your cohort that really could help you get it done that is almost like what we had with one another like when I got tired he

pushed me when he got tired I pushed him you know when we both wanted to quit we pushed each other you.

Dr. C encapsulated the feelings of every participant in the study when he spoke not only about the bond with a critical friend, but also of the perceived embarrassment of not completing the program.

...it's that you're doing it with someone else, I did it with Dr. G. B. so we you know we were together and we got to get this done and we both understand why we need to get it done and you know another the embarrassment factor if not finishing it once you started, once you started you have to finish it um this is strong motivating factor um so that it's you know its yourself esteem of needing to go.

Six participants provided their insight into their understanding of a cohort. Older adult students are motivated by their studies when they can apply the classroom work to their profession. The stress of work and school takes a toll on these working practitioners. The overall satisfaction of the participants increased when they experienced coursework that they were able to utilize in their everyday working environment. The participants' stress levels were diminished, with an increase in productivity both inside and outside of the classroom. Similarly, five participants also described the program as a coursework that met the students' needs. The students acknowledged bringing knowledge received in the classroom directly into their work environments. Dr. Z explained this when he expands upon his commitment to work.

...my work as I went through the program my work increasingly became part of school so I was able to mix them or have them overlap as the program progressed as I progressed through the program it overlapped more and more and by dissertation my dissertation was directly related to my work so once I could double up and once I was working on my dissertation I was also working at my job that made it very doable in the end.

Dr. R expanded upon these sentiments as he discovered that his work environment became the center of his dissertation research. When the two of these forces came together, Dr. R worked to complete his dissertation.

I am a technology specialist and my dissertation is about technology and the focus was on the teacher um and not students so it was teachers integrating technology into the classroom so every day I walked into the building I was in my study so it was it was very easy for me to take my dissertation and my doctoral life and have it you know come into the building every day.

The participants further stated that the program prepared students to professionally journey through the rigors of academic requirements. They described a long and lonely journey that they are going through alone. The participants explained their need of interaction with their biological family that was diminished as a result of their educational pursuits. Dr. C compared his professional journey to that of a marathon. According to Dr. C, anyone can obtain a doctoral degree if they are willing to train for the event and endure the physical punishment that accompanies it.

...anybody can run a marathon you just have to go train for it and do it so you see that all the time you see some 72 year old guy run a marathon he is not a Hercules he just trained for it, so it's the same thing with the Ed. D you have the time and you have the money to do it.

The participants had similar qualifications of self-descriptions that spoke of determination, stamina, drive, and motivation. Dr. Z explained "there was no quitting in my game," the determination and drive compelled the participants to the finish line or graduation. Dr. R went into detail, in an attempt to demonstrate how his doctoral studies are paralleled to a marathon.

...when I first started the program I have also um got kind of goateed into doing a the broad street run in Philadelphia; when I completed that first round of classes and completed that run it was just really um it just let me know like I could really do anything if I put my mind to it. When I completed my leadership theory course it was literally three days after I finished my first marathon so that was like a really nice like because it was all that they parallel each other you know it was undiscovered territory for me for both I never ran before I had gone back to take doctoral classes and you know maybe having to prove something along the lines to myself

The participants also believed that the program imbued students the value of determination to complete the program. The participants stated the story of the "Pound Rock" and described the program as "Pound the Rock," of which a priceless gem is lodged inside a large rock. The only way to free this gem and obtain its riches is to get a

hammer and chip away at the rock little by little. Eventually, you will free the gem and dwell in its riches. This story is a representative of the doctoral program. The participants explained that they chipped away at their class work, little by little, until they achieved their doctoral degree. Dr. B explains how they utilized this story to bind as a cohort.

...we had matching tee shirts made we all had pound the rock tee shirts pound the rock is Dr. Bobs statement you know how do you get big rocks out of your yard you just keep chipping away at it and let it time you just keep chipping away, and that is the program you just keep chipping away until its gone you know so pound the rock became our theme you know we adopted it.

Dr. D puts this phrase into perspective with his interpretation of pounding the rock, "I think Dr. Bob has the best line ever pound the rock just keep pounding the rock just keep going until somebody tells you not to show up just keep showing up and just keep pushing forward."

Table 7

*Thematic Category 5: Descriptive characteristic of the program that satisfies students*

Thematic Categories/Constituents	# of Participants to Offer this Experience	% of Participants to Offer this Experience
Students remain in contact with faculty and cohort members/Professional networks	10	25.0
One-to-one relations form outside of the cohort	10	25.0
Implementation of cohort scheme	6	15.9
Coursework that meet the students needs	5	12.5
Program that prepares students' to professional journey through rigors of academic requirements	5	12.5
Imbibe to students the value of determination to complete the program	4	10.0

## Summary

The purpose of this study is to explain the lived experiences of Rowan Ed.D doctoral students, and to understand their experiences, their satisfaction with the program, and how their needs were met as experienced throughout the program. Four research questions were posed in the study: (a) What are the lived experiences of students enrolled in the Rowan Ed.D program? (b) What are the life changes encountered by Ed.D program students in Rowan University? (c) How do graduate students respond to the life changes encountered while enrolled in the Ed.D program? (d) How do students describe their satisfaction with the Rowan Ed.D program?

All of the participants stated that the graduate program contributed to their personal and professional growth. They believe that it provided them with the necessary preparation for navigating the rigors of academic research. They believed that the completion of a rigorous program design is a challenge expected of students enrolled in the program. As such, the achievement of personal and professional goals is crucial. The cohort model forces individuals to interact with one another and provides the mechanism for the individuals to discover each other's strengths and weaknesses. The participants' stories speak affectionately about their educational journey when requested to reflect upon it. Not every participant would agree with the rigor of the program; however, they all agreed that the experiences changed them both personally and professionally. Rowan University's faculty and staff provided a nurturing environment, which proved to be a major contributing factor to these individuals' success.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

#### **Introduction**

Universities in the U.S offer graduate doctoral programs to produce competitive teachers, school administrators, and researchers who have future roles in the human resource development of the country (Allan & Dory, 2001). However, the national dropout rate of 50% of all doctoral students who enter a doctoral program in the country has been an alarming issue in the higher education institution. While the rigorous doctoral training has been one of the cited difficulties that students encounter while completing their programs (Allan & Dory), Rowan University achieved a graduation rate of over 80%, surpassing the national dropout rate according to Dr. Marybeth Walpole of Rowan University. Within this context, the present study investigated the experiences of doctoral students who have successfully navigated the Rowan University doctoral program.

While there is a dearth of research that examines the factors of students' completion to doctoral degree, little emphasis has been cited for students who are also working practitioners (Allan & Dory, 2001), who are confronted with greater demands on their time compared to fulltime doctoral students. This case study aims at examining the personal and professional changes experienced by the students who have completed the program at the Rowan University, with an objective that the results of the study could contribute to analyzing the needs of present and future doctoral students. Administrators, faculty, and staff may use the present study in designing programs that could enhance student satisfaction and reduce the attrition rate in doctoral degree programs.

Chapter 5 discusses the interpretation of the results presented in chapter 4. Chapter 5 also includes recommendations for action, recommendations for future research, implications for social change, and concludes with a summary.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This section attempts to analyze the research collected and interpret the results attained. The interpretations are based on the theoretical framework and the literature review.

#### **Research Question 1**

What are the lived experiences of students enrolled in the Rowan Ed.D program? The present study contextualizes doctoral students as adult learners and uses the Knowles (1984) theory of andragogy to describe adult learners seeking formal education. In Knowles' theory, four assumptions were made regarding adult learners who return to educational institution for higher educational degrees. The first assumption details the need for adults to recognize the reasons for learning. Adult learners are confronted with life challenges such as working full time and tending to family responsibilities. Hence, they are vulnerable to disaffection and loss of commitment in their studies when prior responsibilities are compromised for educational endeavors (Knowles, 1984). University professors are encouraged to weigh the value of information for presentation to their students to ensure a sustained interest to completing their degree. The second assumption is that adult learners learn through experiences. They are practitioners in their respective fields who pioneered the application of the theoretical concepts introduced in academic institutions. As such, professors are entrusted to collate these experiences as means in

introducing concepts. The third assumption is that adult learners are experience-problem solvers, and approach learning as an exercise. This implies that adult learners have innate research abilities, acquired through experiences. Finally, Knowles (1984) posited that adult learners learn when there is immediate value of the topic. Adult learners select, process, and act only to the information that they perceive as valuable.

Using the tenets of Knowles (1984), the present study found that graduate education at Rowan University contributes to the personal and professional growth of all doctoral graduates. This finding is consistent to the first assumption of Knowles (1984), which states that learners must recognize their reason for learning. The participants recognized growth and changes that occurred within themselves during their educational journey at Rowan University. The participants also recognized their learning needs; these needs became their goals in completing the program. This also implies that professors at Rowan University had teaching strategies that are appropriate for adult learners.

The experiences of the participants suggest that through their doctoral education, they have become more successful in handling organizational demands. The finding is consistent to Knowles (1984) second assumption, which states that adult learners learn through experience. Their exposure to academia in Rowan's Doctoral program contributed to changing their views about leadership, which resulted in earning respect from coworkers and subordinates. Although the experiences of the participants' exposure to formal research is limited, the interrelatedness of the program's core courses to research has been designed to build the competency of students to achieve an

individualized research project, such as action research and participatory research. The experiences of the participants insinuate that while academic research had been very difficult to some, research is a responsibility that must be equally shared. As such, students should be responsible for their own actions and employ strategies in developing their competences in research. The findings are also consistent to Knowles (1984) third assumption, which states that adults are problem-solvers. Thus, though the program may be difficult to complete for some with lack of competency in research, their natural ability to cope and resolve problems aided them to finish the course.

The demands placed upon the student at the doctoral level from external and internal sources increase the need for relationships to form between the students themselves, as well as the faculty of the institution (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). Student relationships develop through group work with fellow students, as well as faculty availability both in and out of class. In this study, the students' experiences in the program offer them the experience of having professional interaction within a classroom environment. Their experiences showed their desire for personal interactions with faculty and peers, in order to experience academia. A cohort compels the students to interact with one another, thus building professional learning communities and professional networks. Their experiences within a cohort contributed to their academic success.

The students were able to experience the opportunity to make educational choices. These students felt that their career choices required them to pursue a doctoral degree, which exemplifies their achievement during their changing roles in the organization. The students' experiences also suggest other opportunities aside from seeking a doctorate

degree. The program provides professional and personal reflection, which gives them an option for their future career. When adults can assimilate their new knowledge to experiences, they are better able to retain meaningful information. Through reflection, the adult learner is able to assimilate their learning experiences to their present knowledge, adding to their learning experiences (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

The experiences within their cohort also contributed to each student's success. Cohort members bond to individuals with similar interests and occupations, which in turn motivated them to pursue and finish the program. The cohort provided an instrument for these professionals to form a professional network where they continued to rely on one another's expertise in their field. Research has documented that individuals learn best when they go through a program with other individuals, sharing knowledge and experiences (Unzueta, Moores-Abdool, & Donet, 2008). These individuals develop a support system that plays a major role in their success rates. The experiences of the participants further imply that the program at Rowan University augmented the knowledge and skills of the participants, encouraged students to pursue and complete the course, provided future opportunities and personal satisfaction, assisted students in building professional learning community/professional networks, and developed camaraderie because of classroom interaction.

The program provides the knowledge and skills that were required to make their careers more successful. Rowan's doctoral program utilizes cohorts to increase students' success rates and meet their socialization needs. An important part of this development depends on the students forming supportive networks with their peers. These social

networks are impeded by the adult students' roles outside of the institution (Baird, 1990). A cohort is an open society where individuals communicate in order to discover each other in the development of the cohort personality (Unzueta et al., 2008). As the individuals in a cohort become aligned, they develop a shared vision and purpose (Senge, 2006).

In this context, the cohort program provided the opportunity for the participants to experience the program with other individuals with similar demands for their time and attention, which contributed to long-term relationships between participants. These relationships provided the support, encouragement, and confidence that participants considered as a success factor. Bonds of friendship and professional relationships emerged while enrolled in the program. The relationships that develop because of interactions between group members have a direct effect on learning (Duemer, Christopher, Hardin, Olibas, Rodgers, & Smith, 2004). Thus, the doctoral student requires relationships with faculty staff and fellow students to foster their development (Lovitts, 2001).

### **Research Question 2:**

What are the life changes encountered by Ed.D program students in Rowan University?

Knowles (1984) contended that adults learn from their personal experiences, which makes teaching more relevant when teaching techniques are anchored to students' experiences. However, the study found that students encountered difficulty in completing the program particularly in the area of research. The program requires competency of

students in doing research prior to the enrollment of the Ed.D program. Thus, more than personal experiences acquired through years of work guarantee their completion of the program. The students imply that the program constitutes an interrelationship of core courses to the dissertation process, which uses a systematic process. Using the data regarding the rate of program completion in Rowan University, the study implies that the program succeeded in offering life changing competency for these doctoral graduates, particularly the values of perseverance and hard work.

Using the Knowles (1984) theory of andragogy, the students in the program must have a good professional understanding of research and the research process. Although many students struggled to complete the course requirement due to research demands, the program ensures that students develop competence in academic research. Andragogy concentrates on getting the adult active in the learning process. The adult learner provides feedback and becomes an active participant. Pedagogy is a teacher- lead instruction, where students' involvement is limited to the presented instruction (Knowles, 1984). According to the participants, the faculty at Rowan University offers their valuable time to accommodate learners to discuss his or her uncertainties in the instruction. In this process, the students are involved in the learning process

Moreover, the program is found to be more difficult, since all core courses are attached to a dissertation research project. However, the students understand the expectations of the program. The students believed that Rowan University has the curriculum in place to direct them and provide the tools to be successful.

### **Research Question 3:**

How do graduate students respond to the life changes encountered while enrolled in the Ed.D program?

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) supported Knowles' (1984) contention that adults learn from their personal experiences, which makes teaching more relevant when teaching techniques are anchored to students' experiences. The study found that the program environment and students' motivational factors aid students in coping with program challenges. Adults' life experiences are vast, and if appropriately processed, they would generate knowledge unknown from the mainstream knowledge (Knowles, 1998).

Students struggle with the demands of their personal, academic, and professional careers, making decisions for one at the expense of another (James, 1985). In the present study, the experiences of the students imply that the faculty and staff of the program offer their valuable time for either personal or professional discussion. Professional teaching staff at Rowan University took personal interest in the students' successes.

Students gained positive experiences from the individual faculty of the institution and the assistance they provided to them. With these program challenges, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2006) contended that graduate students must be motivated. Adults will commit to learning when they believe the information is relevant and attainable. Adults seek constant, structured, and helpful feedback. Adults do not want to experience learning activities, as an attack on their competence (Knowles, 1984). The study found that the achievement of personal and professional goals is an important motivational factor that helps them in coping with program challenges. In addition, self-



satisfaction was also identified as a motivational factor in dealing with changes while enrolled in the Ed.D program. The students view themselves in a new light and acknowledge the responsibilities of their degree. They believed that their expectations of professional growth/promotion have motivated them in coping with program challenges. Their experiences throughout the program caused them to reflect on their understanding of the profession and doubt their abilities to achieve such honor.

**Research Question 4:**

How do students describe their satisfaction with the Rowan Ed.D program?

Understanding the doctoral students' experiences and expectations will lead to increased student satisfaction and retention. The students are satisfied because of the experience they have gained, as they acknowledged that the program's impact on their degree completion is vast. The participants described that they remain in contact with faculty and cohort members through professional networks, as a result of their satisfaction. The cohort provided an instrument for these professionals to form a professional network where they continued to rely on one another's expertise in their field. As such, a one-to-one relation was formed outside the cohort. Many institutions are turning to the cohort method of instruction, with the aim of boasting socialization of students at the graduate level of education (Unzueta, Moores-Abdool & Donet, 2008). Research has documented that individuals learn best when they go through a program with other individuals, sharing knowledge and experiences. These individuals develop a support system that plays a major role in their success rates (Unzueta et al., 2008). Hence, a cohort has the

potential of increasing student retention rates and satisfaction rates for doctoral students (Senge, 2006).

Graduate students are motivated by their studies when they can apply the classroom work to their profession. The stress of work and school is diminished with an increase in productivity, both inside and outside of the classroom. This further suggests that the overall satisfaction of the participants increased when they experienced coursework that they were able to utilize in their everyday working environment. Moreover, the program is also described as a coursework that meets the students' needs. The students acknowledged that they brought knowledge received in the classroom directly into their work environments. The program also prepares students to professionally journey through the rigors of academic requirements as it imbued students with the value of determination to complete the program.

In summary, the current study revealed that the graduate program contributed to the students' personal and professional growth, as it was revealed that their experiences changed them both personally and professionally. This implies that the achievement of personal and professional goals is important. As such, the completion of a rigorous program design is a challenge of students enrolled in the program. The cohort model forces individuals to interact with one another, and provides the mechanism for the individuals to discover each other's strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, Rowan University's faculty and staff provided a nurturing environment, which proved to be a major contributing factor to these individuals' successes. The findings of the study further imply that there is a need to recognize that the graduate student has unique needs

and that these needs must be studied and analyzed to develop student retention and satisfaction.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The purpose of this study is to explain the lived experiences of Rowan Ed.D doctoral student, as well as to understand their experiences, their satisfaction with the program, and how their needs were met as experienced throughout the program. The Knowles (1984) theory of andragogy and the relationship to the experiences of Rowan Ed.D doctoral students has the following implications for future research and social change:

The deliberation of students' experiences is important to developing student retention and satisfaction, due to the rapid expansion of the program, the changing demographics associated with this expansion, and the lack of information available that details the factors that contribute to the success rate of a doctoral student. The findings of the study contributes to the literature regarding the needs of students who do not fit within the traditional student model, to provide valuable data that could assist the university in shaping the future of the program at Rowan University.

This new data might continue to affect social change, because this study could be useful in designing programs, support groups, and curriculums to meet the needs of the Rowan Ed.D student. The information will be available to students anticipating entering the doctoral program, outlining the difficulties they may experience; examples include time constraints, family obligations, and work related priorities. This research aimed to provide information to assist administrators, faculty, and staff of the needs of these non-

traditional students. The results of the study have the potential to help the administration, faculty, and staff to create new programs designed to enhance student satisfaction and success rates, reducing the high attrition rates among doctoral students. The present study further contributes to the administrations' responsiveness to the needs of the future doctoral students to establish a culture of collaboration between the student and the institution, giving a voice to the students who do not fit into the mold of the traditional undergraduate student.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study has several limitations. The study is limited to the lived experiences of ten working professionals who graduated the Ed.D program at Rowan University. The study is also limited to the participants who were graduates of the Rowan Doctoral program, from its inception in 1997 to its most recent graduating class of 2011. In this study, transferability is limited to the specific institution and program studied.

The results of the present study are not generalizable to groups of individuals, since the study describes the phenomenon as it naturally occurs in a specific case. Further research is needed to develop a depth of understanding in this curricular area. Further research into this topic may contribute to the body of knowledge to evaluate student retention and satisfaction among graduate students. While a dearth of research exists about why students do or do not succeed in obtaining the degree, the present study recommends further research on a large population of higher education institutions located in multiple states to explain the impact on a working practitioner in a doctoral program. The subsequent results could then be compared to the findings of the current

study. As the demographics of doctoral students change with the population shifts in the United States, additional information is required to explain the personal and professional changes that take place within the students who have completed a Doctoral Program.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to explain the lived experiences of Rowan Ed.D doctoral students, as well as to understand their experiences, their satisfaction with the program, and how their needs were met as experienced throughout the program. The study documents the experiences of doctoral students who have successfully navigated the Rowan University doctoral program. The results showed that the graduate program contributed to the graduate students' personal and professional growth. They believed that the completion of a rigorous program design is a challenge to all students enrolled in the program. Thus, the achievement of personal and professional goals is crucial to their overall development.

The students' experiences suggest that the program has changed them both personally and professionally. Rowan University's faculty and staff provided a nurturing environment, which proved to be a major contributing factor to these individuals' success. The cohort model forces individuals to interact with one another, and provides the mechanism for the individuals to discover each other's strengths and weaknesses. The participants' stories speak affectionately about their educational journey when requested to reflect upon it. The findings of the study suggest that there is a need to recognize that the graduate student has unique needs and these needs must be studied and analyzed, with the aim to develop student retention and satisfaction.

The findings of the study could be useful in designing programs, support groups, and curriculums to meet the needs of the Rowan Ed.D student. The study will provide information to students anticipating entering the doctoral program, the difficulties that they may experience. The results of the study could assist administrators, faculty, and staff to understand the needs of these non-traditional students. With this information, faculty and staff might have the ability to create new programs designed to enhance student satisfaction and success rates, reducing the high attrition rates among doctoral students.

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## Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

### Participant Consent Form Graduate Student Experiences

I, \_\_\_\_\_, consent to participate in the research conducted by Mark T. Zorzi, a graduate student at Rowan University located in Glassboro New Jersey on the date of \_\_\_\_\_. I have been fully informed of the nature of the research and the uses of any personal information I will be asked to disclose. I am aware that the interviews will last approximately one hour during which time I will be answering questions about my experience as a doctoral student. I am also aware that I may decline to participate in the study at any point during the study, even if I have already begun to participate. I will not be penalized in any way should I choose to withdraw from the study. I am aware that my responses will be made in confidence and no one will have access to my responses except the researcher and his advisor, Dr. Robert Campbell. I have been informed that the discussion will be audio taped; that the tapes will be transcribed; that the respondents will be referred to by pseudonym; and that the tapes will be destroyed upon transcription.

During the interview session you may refer to me as \_\_\_\_\_.

I sign below that I consent to participate freely, without coercion, having completely read this document.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Investigator Signature)

Mark T. Zorzi  
856-863-8676

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Robert Campbell

(Faculty Advisor)

campbell@rowan.edu  
856-256-3817

## **Appendix B: Participant Questioner**

1. What motivated you to return to academia to seek a doctoral degree?
2. Describe your decision to begin doctoral studies.
3. What did you feel was lacking in your education that compelled you to go to the "next level" in your personal identity? Professional Identity?
4. What emotions did you experience as you began the program?
5. What rewards are you receiving as a result of this degree?
6. How did the achievement of your Ed.D impact your personal and professional career?
7. Has this leadership program resulted in your decision to seek a larger leadership role in your organization?
8. How will you utilize your degree?
9. How did you juggle school and family?
10. Did you feel you were supported by the faculty and staff of the institution?
11. Did you feel you were supported by family, friends, community, non-school peers?
12. What was your relationship like with your peers in the doctoral program?
13. Did the interactions between faculty and yourself add to the satisfaction of the program?
14. What motivated you to enroll in this institution?
15. What aspect of the Ed.D process did you find most appealing?
16. What recommendations would you make to a student contemplating doctoral studies?
17. What do you think contributes most to your degree completion?
18. What obstacle was the most difficult to overcome while you were enrolled in the doctoral program?

19. How were these obstacles overcome?
20. Describe your experiences in the doctoral program.
21. Do you feel you were prepared for the research aspect of the doctoral work?
22. Has your perception of the Ed.D changed from your perspective? Explain
23. Please tell me your story of success in the completion of the Ed.D Program.