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# EDUCATION MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON LEAVING THE ACADEMY

By

AmyBeth Glass

A Dissertation

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Doctor of Education
at
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Dissertation Chair: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

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## Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, who provided love, patience, words of encouragement, and laughter throughout this educational voyage. To my spouse and best friend, and to my three amazing children, thank you for believing in me and for making personal sacrifices, so I could complete this journey. But most of all, thank you for always being the “rainbow in somebody else’s cloud” (Maya Angelou).

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## Abstract

AmyBeth Glass
EDUCATION MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES
ON LEAVING THE ACADEMY
2016 - 2017
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Doctor of Education

Graduate student attrition is arguably one of the most significant challenges facing the higher education community, and determining why master's students attrit is an important consideration for all universities. Despite the vast research on graduate education, little is known about master's student attrition. This dissertation explored why education master's students' depart from one institution and provides recommendations for future practice. Key finding of the study indicate that financial, personal, and dissatisfaction with course content were reasons that influenced education master's student attrition.

In-depth qualitative interviews with 12 former students challenged the notion that attrition is intrinsic. Participants' points of view were gathered, interpreted, and synthesized to achieve insight and knowledge into this important topic. This study utilized the Satisfaction-Retention Matrix along with well-known attrition theories, academic integration, social integration, academic and institutional attributes, and consumer behavior to create a conceptual framework to examine education master's student attrition. The key findings of this study provide a leadership perspective, ideas for future research, and suggestions that would enhance the lives of future graduate students.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction of the Study

In the fall of 2014, approximately three million students enrolled in graduate degree programs throughout the United States (U.S.), a 1% enrollment decline from the same time in 2010 (Kena et al., 2016). Specifically, enrollment declined in the field of education (Gonzales, Allum, & Sowell, 2013; Kena et al., 2014; Kena et al, 2016). However, although we know graduate enrollment declined, exact numbers regarding master's degree students are unavailable because there is no national data set that uniquely tracks master's degree student enrollment (Borchert, 1994; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Grasso, Barry, & Valentine, 2007).

### History of Graduate Education

Historically, graduate education has evolved since the first Master of Arts degree emerged at the University of Paris. These twelfth-century scholars completed degree requirements including defending a thesis within three years (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 1993). Similarly, Harvard College awarded the first American master's degree in the mid-seventeenth century, signifying the highest achievable degree in colonial times. Early master's education in the U.S. however, was perfunctory, and many institutions awarded master's degrees to alumni who simply waited several years and paid a diploma fee (Conrad et al., 1993; Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2005; Glazer, 1987; Katz & Hartnett, 1976; Pierson, 1983). These master's programs did not require a thesis or a comprehensive examination, and they were easy to obtain, causing the public to question the value and legitimacy of the master's degree (Conrad et al., 1993; Glazer, 1987). In an attempt to regain public trust, the University of Michigan responded to this quandary in

1859 by awarding the "first earned master's degree" (Conrad et al., 1993, p. 4). However, in 1861, Yale College awarded the first American Ph.D. (Conrad et al., 1993; Pierson, 1983), and this bold change moved the academic focus beyond the master's degree. With this change, the master's degree became a step on the path to a doctorate. By 1890, the earned master's degree was primarily a scholarly degree intended for prospective teaching professionals (Borchert, 1994; Glazer, 1986; Snell, 1965). As institutions of higher education grew, so did the enrollment in graduate schools. This growth exploded from the late 1940s through the 1970s (Association of American Universities [AAU], 1998a). Master's degree growth plateaued in the late 1970s because of economic inflation, reduced undergraduate enrollments, and cutbacks in federal funding for research and educational programs (Association of American Universities [AAU], 1998b). However, the economic crisis of the 1980s revived and stimulated the growth of practitioner-oriented career occupations, and further encouraged the expansion of master's and doctoral degree offerings, recognizing these credentials as an essential commodity (Bok, 2003; Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

Today, the master's degree signifies successful completion of academic coursework beyond the baccalaureate degree (CGS, 2005). The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) reports more than 424,000 students enrolled for the first time in a master's level program in the fall of 2015 (Okahana, Feaster, & Allum, 2016). A more precise figure is elusive, however, because these statistics include master's degree, certificate, and educational specialist enrollments in CGS member institutions; and because national data do not exist. Nationally, data reported for degrees conferred, disaggregated by discipline is easily obtained, whereas enrollment data is not. In 2013-

14, the U. S. conferred just over 754,000 master's degrees (Kena et al., 2016). This was a 1% decrease from the same time in 2012-13, and a 6.08% decrease in the number of master's degree conferred in the field of education during the same reporting period (Kena et al., 2015; Kena et al., 2016). This was the third consecutive decrease in over a decade, yet there is a lack of research available as to why this decline occurred. For this reason, this dissertation investigated master's degree student enrollment at one university in order to understand the process of enrollment and retention of master's degree students.

**Concerns for Quality**

In 1900, fourteen universities established the Association of American Universities (AAU) (Association of American Universities [AAU], 1910). This organization explored long-standing concerns regarding dissimilar master's degree program requirements (Conrad et al., 1993; Glazer-Raymo, 2005). These studies addressed the growing criticism surrounding graduate education and contributed to the development of academic standards and formal admissions requirements. The Flexner Report of 1910 also critiqued higher education and recommended a new hands-on curricular approach that encouraged the development of professional organizations and professional standards, which resulted in new academic requirements for entering professional practice (Duffy, 2011; Menand, 2010).

Over the next several decades, the AAU conducted three distinct studies concerning the master's degree. They broadly grouped multiple master's degrees' requirements into four different types of degree programs: vocational, professional, research-intensive, or cultural degrees (Conrad et al., 1993; Glazer, 1986). Each degree

type possessed different academic requirements making it impossible to standardize curricular requirements. However, the AAU established the first master's degree admission guidelines; they mandated a baccalaureate degree as prerequisite for graduate study and eliminated the student's ability to earn credits for correspondence courses (Association of American Universities [AAU], 1935; Chase et al., 1932). Despite the growing number of concerns about the quality of master's degree programs, graduate and university enrollment expanded in the Post-World War II Era.

Presently there are unique concerns about education master's degree students. Master's degree credentials provide a pathway to employment and are the primary incentive for enrollment (Stodt & Thielens, 1985; Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2009a, 2016). These credentials signify the holders' personal time invested in learning advanced skills and advanced teaching techniques (Galluzzo, Isenberg, White, & Fox, 2012; Leak & Farkas, 2011; Maier, 2012; Rapp & Golde, 2008). Currently, ten states require a master's degree as a professional endorsement for practicing teachers. An additional twelve states require a master's degree for advanced certifications (National Council on Teacher Quality [NCTQ], 2014). These include, but are not limited to supervisors, guidance counselors, or principal positions (NCTQ, 2014). Moreover, 23 states mandate additional graduate coursework, but do not specify the details of that coursework (NCTQ, 2014). In contrast, New Jersey does not require public school teachers to possess a master's degree or earn graduate credits (New Jersey Administrative Code, 2008). New Jersey teachers do receive salary increases upon earning 15 and 30 graduate credits respectively, and an additional increase upon conferral of the master's degree (New Jersey School Board Association [NJSBA], 2003a, 2003b, 2012). Since

there are incentives available for those who earn graduate credits, and additional monetary incentives for earning a master's degree, one wonders why students drop out of a master's program.

**Statement of the Problem**

Graduate student attrition is a silent, invisible problem that few administrators want to confront, and one that universities believe is intrinsic to the student (Lovitts, 2001). Thus, departments rarely look inward for reasons why students may leave the academy (Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Lovitts, 2001), despite the fact that prior research encourages institutions to hear the "voices of non-completers" (Willis & Carmichael, 2011, p. 193). Therefore, this study explored education master's program attrition at one institution and examines questions that are missing from the literature regarding education master's degree student attrition.

**Research Questions**

As higher education institutions become more responsible and publicly accountable for student outcomes, how does Ortley University (a pseudonym) account for why some graduate students leave the academy? The primary goal of this dissertation was to understand the education master's student attrition phenomena by answering the following research questions:

1. Why do some education master's students attrit?
2. How do attrited education master's students describe their experiences?
3. To what extent do attrited students enroll elsewhere?
4. How do institutional factors contribute to student attrition?

5. To what extent do personal educational goals influence a student's decision to leave the academy?

Specifically, this research study explored why these students attrit and encouraged former education master's students to provide voice for a seemingly invisible problem (Lovitts, 2001).

**Research Approach**

In order to obtain in-depth information about student attrition, phenomenological research allows researchers to explore the "lived experiences" (Creswell, 2013; Dawkins & May, 2002; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990) of education master's students who left the academy. Specifically, this qualitative study was important and needed for several reasons: First, much of the prior retention literature focuses on quantitative research methods. Next, qualitative studies provide rich descriptions of the phenomena, allowing researchers to discover why students leave the academy without relying on predetermined reasons (Bean, 1990a). By understanding the problem in the local context, a researcher gains insights that are not possible through quantitative means (Bean, 1990a). Qualitative inquiry allowed me to explore the history behind attrition through the participants' personal stories (Seidman, 2006). Additionally, the surprises that arise because of personal interaction allow the researcher further exploration of the findings (Giorgi, 2005; Van Manen, 1990; Weiss, 1994). The empirical approach of this study provided a clear picture of why education master's student departure occurred.

**The setting and participants.** This research study explored education master's student attrition at Ortley University, a regional master's mid-sized public university in the northeastern United States; specifically, I studied attrition of Masters of Arts students

who were pursuing a degree in the field of education. Data collection utilized one-on-one interviews, and the research sample included master's level education students. My connection to the institution as a researcher was extremely valuable, as it provided background and insider knowledge about the subject of graduate education. This setting was appropriate for this project considering graduate enrollment is extremely important, and the institution may be repeating behavior or practices that are unattractive to current and future students without understanding the true nature of attrition. As an insider, I wanted to know why attrition occurred and how the university could implement changes to assist students in achieving their academic goals.

**Rationale for the Study**

The rationale for this study begins with the need to identify and understand the factors that influence an education master's degree student to drop out of the academy. Through understanding this process, educators can determine whether changes need to occur. Understanding student disenchantment allows an opportunity for institutional growth. If not corrected, these shortcomings will become detrimental to education master's student recruitment and public perception, including alumni and community relations. All higher education institutions have potential shortcomings in their educational experiences. Although not implicitly noted, some institutions inquire as to why students are leaving (Nelson & Lovitts, 2001). If the student responds that he or she is leaving campus for personal reasons, seldom does anyone question the response because the institution cannot account for personal problems (Raisman, 2010). This research provides valuable insight into the attrition puzzle for the Graduate School, the School of Education, and the Master of Arts in Education program at Ortley University.

Lastly, this dissertation adds to the body of literature in the graduate enrollment management field and the graduate retention field. The following conceptual framework serves as the lens to guide my research during this investigative journey.

## Conceptual Framework

Master's student attrition exists in colleges and universities across the globe. Nevertheless, previous findings support the notion that personal and financial issues are the two main reasons students leave graduate school (Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2013; Lovitts, 2001; Malcom & Dowd, 2012; Millett, 2003). In order to explore the extent to which master's student retention may be affected by the higher education marketplace, this study utilized a conceptual framework that provided focus and shaped this investigative journey. More concretely, this study explored known retention, attrition, and student consumer theories in a quest to determine why education master's students leave the academy.

## Retention and Attrition Theories

This study considered factors from student retention and attrition theories. Former students have stated that they left the academy for personal and financial reasons (CGS, 2013; Lovitts, 2001), but after further questions, these former students have asserted that there have been other factors that influenced their decisions (Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2001). One attrition theory asserts that student departure occurs because of an unfavorable personal experience or dissatisfaction with an institutional attribute. These factors negatively affect the student's attitude and influence his or her perception, which, in turn, affect persistence to graduation (Bean, 2005). Considering institutional factors

moves researchers away from placing the blame on the student and encourages them to examine other factors that influence attrition (Bean 1990b).

In another example, four variables: background characteristics, academic outcomes, psychological factors, and environmental factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985) influence nontraditional students' decisions to drop out of the academy. The first variable pertains to the former student's personal background characteristics and includes age, gender, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, educational goals, prior educational experiences, and the educational attainment of the student's parents. The second category is academic variables; these include course availability, course enrollment, academic advising, attendance, study skills, and study habits. The next factor is the psychological outcomes; these account for the satisfaction, stress, personal goals, the value placed on the educational experiences, and commitment to continuing one's education. For adult students, the last variable, environmental factors, is critical and includes financial resources, employment responsibilities, family commitments, outside encouragement, and other nonacademic responsibilities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Fairchild, 2003). As stated prior, the student's perception influences her decision to attrit (Shepherd & Mullins-Nelson, 2012).

An additional explanation of why students may attrit is the lack of academic and social integration within their master's degree program. Academic integration is the student's ability to embrace the academic expectations and her ability to engage with the intellectual community. This includes attending meetings with faculty and advisors, utilizing academic resources (the library and writing center), participating in class discussions, and attending out-of-class academic activities. Similarly, social integration is

the student's ability to engage socially with her peers and other students who are pursuing similar interests. Students who do not engage in behaviors that lead to social and academic integration are less likely to persist and more likely to drop out of their master's program (Tinto, 2006, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). Additional research suggests that the extent to which an individual makes a personal connection to the institution and academic program is also an essential consideration to adult student retention (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Morehouse, & Ludwig, 2014; Sevier & Mahurin, 2014). These considerations are important to all students, especially graduate students who need academic and social support to achieve their goals (Lovitts, 2001). Moreover, effective student retention programs are an institutional commitment to students, the educational process, and the social and intellectual community at large (Tinto, 2012a). And finally, they are a commitment to the public good (Cohen, 2005; Kezar, 2004).

Therefore, this study explored what specifically influenced a student's intent to leave her master's program: Did graduate school enrollment increase a student's stress level? Did an environmental factor influence a student's decision to leave? Were courses available at a convenient time or location? Tied to the theories of attrition, student satisfaction impacts retention and also relates to a new student-as-customer paradigm. To illustrate, a student who is satisfied with her graduate school journey, and is not experiencing any personal or financial issues, is more likely to return the following semester (Raisman, 2008; St. John & Andrieu, 1995). Conversely, a student who is unhappy may find fault with an environmental factor and decide to leave the academy without further consideration. Assessing student satisfaction is an important consideration in a strategic enrollment and retention plan. Institutions benefit from increased student

satisfaction by positive word-of-mouth recommendations, which are especially important in today's competitive collegiate environment (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

**Student Consumer Behavior**

This competitive environment has created market-like forces in graduate student enrollment, referred to as marketization (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009). This competition increases the need to recruit students for educational programs, and encourages student choice and consumer behavior as well as encourages students to consider value and differential pricing (Dill, 2003; Giroux, 2002; Naidoo & Wu, 2011). Universities nationwide focus on creating inviting images of their academic programs in order to compete in the higher education market (Bontrager, 2008). These institutions understand that, although the student is the recipient of the education, the student has a choice to continue her education, drop out, or transfer to another institution (Lovitts, 2001). For this reason, students are not necessarily loyal to a college or university (Aitken & Campelo, 2011); they are more interested in obtaining their educational goals and, as consumers, they are a formidable force in the educational marketplace (Ali & Wisniesk, 2010).

Specifically, the marketplace for educational programs is vast, and, depending upon the student's criteria, he or she will have many institutions nationwide from which to choose. In contrast, at one time, colleges and universities had courses and degrees students wanted to pursue in a regional market. Currently, however, students have expanded choices; they can attend class online or in-person. Thus, it is the student, as a customer, who selects the program or institution she is interested in attending (Raisman, 2008, 2010; Scrabec, 2000). Identifying students as consumers is often a contentious

topic; referring to students as customers or consumers is controversial within the academic community because not everyone agrees with this assessment of students (Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011). The educational process is a journey, not a service or business (Vaill, 2000). It is also the case that education expands the intellectual capacity of the students, and encourages critical thinking and enlightenment, while typical consumer businesses do not.

Conversely, it has been boldly stated that:

> Customer satisfaction is the key to attracting and retaining adult students. "Customer" is exactly how adult learners think of themselves, and they hold our institutions of higher education accountable for providing paid-for results and educational experiences that make a difference in their lives. They pay for these experiences with precious resources, not the least of which is their time. They are perceptive demanding customers (Hadfield, 2003, p. 19).

I can see both schools of thought; nonetheless, I believe that if I do not consider consumer behavior as a reason for graduate student attrition, the graduate school will continue to be uninformed as to why master's students leave the academy.

To illustrate the conceptual framework, it was important to utilize known retention and attrition theories (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Butler, 2011; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b), and combine student consumer ideals in an attempt to determine why educational master's students leave the academy. Using this conceptual framework, I sought to understand student-as-consumer expectations to gain an understanding of how a university can compete in the higher education marketplace (Anctil, 2008; Butler, 2011; Elliott & Shin, 2002; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Morley, 2003; Noel-Levitz & NAGAP, 2012;

Raisman, 2010). Lastly, the conceptual framework was utilized to uncover possible environmental or academic variables that disappoint students' expectations, and further influenced student attrition.

## Chapter Summary

It is essential to understand why master's students leave the academy before achieving their academic goals because this information can provide valuable insight into student behavior and acumen into possible enrollment challenges. This dissertation provides qualitative insight into the reasons why education master's students leave the academy. By conducting this study, I illuminated challenges regarding graduate student persistence and attrition. The Graduate School can use the data for planning, program development, and marketing purposes. This research further explored and explained the ongoing ebb and flow of adult learner persistence and develop factors that play an important role in enrollment patterns.

Created to inform practice, this chapter provides a brief introduction to master's student attrition. Additionally, this chapter outlines my purpose and intentions for further exploring the lived experiences of former education master's students who drop out of the academy. The goal of my research was to uncover themes that explain why education master's student attrition occurred in one institution. It is important for colleges and universities to understand master's student attrition, as institutions cannot increase retention until they have an understanding of why attrition occurs (Wendler et al., 2010). Given the importance of educational master's student enrollment at the Ortley University, current and future enrollments depend upon this study.

## Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters; Chapter One presented the foundation for discovery, the statement of the problem, research questions, and significance of the study. Chapter Two presents a comprehensive review of the literature that is relevant to this study, exploring research into the vast body of graduate education. Next, I will explore the literature defining and debating student consumer behavior, and review retention and attrition literature. Then, I will discuss how the student persistence phenomenon differs when examining these theories through the lens of adult graduate students. Finally, I will examine how student-as-consumer theories, and the retention-satisfaction matrix, create a conceptual framework with which I explored the topic of education master's attrition. In Chapter Three, I present my research strategy, including the procedures used to gather data, and the necessary steps needed to implement an exploration of the phenomena of education master's student attrition. In the final two chapters, I present the data findings for this study, and interpret those finding, providing reflection and recommendations for practice.

# Chapter 2

# Literature Review

The master's degree, today, is an important personal investment (Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2008a, 2009a; Glazer-Raymo, 2005). However, criticism and misunderstanding proliferate historical accounts of the American master's degree (Association of American Universities [AAU], 1910, 1927, 1935, 1945, 1998a, 1998b). The first American master's degree, awarded in the seventeenth century, was informal and awarded to alumni who abided bureaucratic procedures (Conrad et al., 1993; CGS, 2005; Glazer, 1987; Katz & Hartnett, 1976; Pierson, 1983). Since the academic requirements were minimal, these master's degree programs were subjected to public speculation (Cassuto, 2015; Conrad et al., 1993; Glazer, 1987). However, to reclaim academic standards, the University of Michigan developed the "first earned master's degree" in 1859 (Conrad et al., 1993, p. 4). Academic advancement continued when Yale College awarded the first American Ph.D. in 1861 (Conrad et al., 1993; Pierson, 1983). With the Ph.D. degree established, the master's degree became a step on the path to a doctorate. Concern continued as critics questioned the quality and legitimacy of master's education. This criticism has been a historical theme that has permeated many decades of master's degree research. Because of these concerns, American universities realized the need to address the disparities between the different master's degree programs.

## Increase in University Enrollment

One cause of expansion was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill), which spurred an increase in collegiate enrollment and provided financial incentives for college students who returned from the war. These changes encouraged

students to pursue graduate degrees in the sciences and engineering (AAU, 1945). Additionally, educational master's degree programs also expanded. From 1945-1960, teachers and administrators in the elementary and secondary school systems were encouraged to pursue master's degrees for teacher certification and further career advancement (AAU, 1998b; Berelson, 1960; Cassuto, 2015; Conrad et al., 1993), which encouraged students to enroll (Glazer, 1986). As the number of master's degree awarded increased, the master's degree became a prerequisite requirement for doctoral admissions, in certain disciplines (Cassuto, 2015; Conrad et al., 1993; Posselt, 2016). In addition to the G.I. Bill, governmental funding and funding from the National Science Foundation supported graduate programs in the 1960s (Gumport, 1999; Katz & Hartnett, 1976). In the early 1970s, the master's degree became a recognized credential to ensure employment (Giordano, 2000). However, master's degree growth plateaued in the late 1970s because of cutbacks in federal funding for education, economic inflation, and reduced undergraduate enrollment (AAU, 1998a; Gumport, 1999). Approximately ten years later, the economic crisis of the 1980s stimulated the growth of practitioner-oriented career occupations that again expanded doctoral and master's degree offerings, recognizing these credentials as an essential commodity (Bok, 2003; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Freeman & Thomas, 2005; Van der Meer, 2011).

In the early 1980s, the American higher education system stressed accreditation and assessment. The expansive graduate curriculum and a lack of coherency encouraged The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) to sponsor research reexamining curricular requirements (Appleson, 1987). This research documented key differences and

similarities among programs (Glazer, 1986). Since requirements varied, CGS established minimum master's degree requirements: a master's degree must be a minimum of one year of full-time study and a minimum of 30 credits with upwards of 45-60 credits for a terminal degree (Glazer, 1986). These curricular distinctions substantiate the differences in master's degree programs, and illuminate some of the complications that could occur if one were to compare program requirements, time to degree completion, or graduation rates (Glazer, 1986). These new criteria addressed the concerns regarding the quality of master's degree programs. However, new concerns arose that required the development and documentation of new typologies.

**Master degree typologies.** Building upon new concerns expressed by The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), the Pew Charitable Trusts supported research that examined the variations and ambiguities among master's degree programs, and detailed different standards to further illustrate varied program outcomes (Conrad et al., 1993). This research occurred in the late 1980s, and created four master's degree typologies: the ancillary, the apprenticeship, the community-centered, and the career advancement programs (Conrad et al., 1993). An ancillary program is intended to foster academic skills needed to continue one's education and research, often considered a prerequisite or a pre-doctoral program. Students enroll for intellectual and personal enrichment rather than an immediate career focus. An example would be a Masters of Arts degree in English or History. Ancillary programs often culminated in a comprehensive examination or a thesis and provided scholarly training in a non-applied fashion, providing value, but not guaranteeing career advancement (Conrad et al., 1993). The second typology is the apprenticeship master's program that provides professionals with first-hand experiences

using realistic problems while instilling technical proficiency. These highly trained students model outcomes through programs that encourage strong faculty commitment and mentoring. An example would be a Master of Fine Arts program (Conrad et al., 1993).

***Community-centered.*** The final two typologies, community-centered and career advancement programs enhance the skills of working professionals. The Master of Science in Nursing or Master of Social Work Programs are community-centered exemplars. A community-centered program provided students with a more defined understanding of their respective fields while serving broad professional and social stakeholders. Community-centered programs provide skills and competencies that aid and transform agencies through leadership and research; they promote teamwork and collaboration. These programs have community ties through which students work beside professionals to gain valuable experience (Conrad et al., 1993).

***Career advancement.*** The last typology is the career advancement program, which includes the Master of Business Administration (MBA), and educational master's degree programs. Career advancement programs provide the credentials needed for advancing professional careers outside of academia. They meet external market demands, often culminating in capstone experiences rather than a thesis. Practitioners are often adjunct faculty and guest lecturers who enhance the classroom experience and provide hands-on examples and real life case studies. These experiences provide value, and allow student practitioners to move theory into practice (Conrad et al., 1993). A consumer-centric focus is another feature of a career advancement program because colleges and universities created graduate programs to meet the needs of the local businesses.

Additionally, university and business partnerships depended upon positive student experiences. Career advancement programs introduced nontraditional instructional delivery methods, and accounted for evening course offerings in which faculty and adjunct professors traveled to locations endorsed by the businesses they served. The career advancement typology is particularly appropriate given that this dissertation focuses on former education master's degree students (Conrad et al., 1993). Following 80 years of criticism, the documented typologies serve as a valuable resource, and embrace master's degree differences that support continued master's degree enrollment.

**Graduate enrollment trends.** By the late-1980s, the master's degree began to adapt to the needs of the labor market and society, further justifying the four typologies. Early distance education work began to attract students to nontraditional master's programs that, over time, would evolve into our present-day online coursework. Another important trend to consider is the number of master's degrees awarded to female and minority degree recipients. Early graduate schools conferred degrees to privileged White males. The early 1990s altered this trend when female master's degree recipients began to outpace their male counterparts (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). These changes occurred because women began pursuing master's degrees in education and nursing and began graduating at higher rates (Wendler et al., 2010).

As the master's degree became a coveted credential, essential to a student's future professional success, international and domestic enrollment increased (Brown & Bills, 2011; Giordano, 2000; Holdford, 2014). As enrollment increased, other countries began to develop programs to satisfy professional requirements. Worldwide competition for graduate students increased (Cole, 2009). By 2000, employer supported master's degrees

were incentives for employees to continue their education because many professions required a master's degree (Cole, 2009).

## Benefits of Graduate Credentials

Healthcare, law, education, and business are a few of the professions that rely on graduate credentials for access to employment and to structure compensation (Maier, 2012; Rivera, 2011; Stodt & Thielens, 1985). As a result, 30% of the largest growing occupations require an educational credential beyond the bachelor's degree (Baker, 2011). This adds value to the credentialing system, and allows the academy to market these educational opportunities to others (Hart & Rush, 2007; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2005). Prospective graduate students who desire to pursue a career in an area that requires specific credentials will enroll in an institution that offers that specific credential, recognizing education as a commodity (Bok, 2003; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Freeman & Thomas, 2005; Van der Meer, 2011). Specifically, these credentials place the power in the hands of the student (Morley, 2003) in three distinct ways: first, higher education cultivates vocational programs, so that students can compete according to labor market forces (Kezar, 2004). Next, credentialism creates a situation whereby socioeconomic attainment is the primary reason for attending collegiate institutions, shifting away from the self-exploration of the past. Lastly, students, parents, taxpayers, and employers consider the cost of master's degree tuition a substantial investment; thus, educational master's credentials provide numerous benefits, are essential for career advancement, and are often a prerequisite for professional practice.

**Master of education credentials.** Master's of Education students often enroll in programs that lead to new educational credentials that, in turn, are required for specific

educational endorsements. These educational endorsements provide a pathway to employment and career advancement, and are the primary incentive for enrollment (Stodt & Thielens, 1985). Moreover, educational master's degrees signal personal time invested in learning advanced skills and advanced teaching techniques (Galluzzo et al., 2012; Leak & Farkas, 2011; Maier, 2012). Several states require teachers to possess an advanced degree within five years of beginning teaching (NTCQ, 2014; Tom, 1999; Vandersall, Vruwink, & LaVenia, 2012). State statutes describe the professional standards and outline the opportunities for further professional development, along with general salary standards (Sindelar & Rosenberg, 2000). However, school districts negotiate compensation plans, creating inequalities among districts. Thus, in tight economic times, taxpayers and governmental officials question the tax burdens that educational master's degrees pass along to the local communities (Galluzzo et al., 2012).

**Compensation.** Historically, teachers who earned master's degrees received monetary increases on a predetermined salary schedule (Galluzzo et al., 2012; Tom, 1999). Currently, in states where an advanced degree is required, the compensation plans differ. Some school districts pay for graduate credits upfront, while in other school districts, reimbursement occurs based upon the receipt of a satisfactory grade. Yet for others, the compensation exists based upon a pool of funding that is dispersed evenly among applicants. In addition to reimbursement for satisfactory grades, some districts offer salary increases at specific intervals as compensation. For example, in New Jersey, districts provide compensation upon earning 15 credits and 30 credits above the baccalaureate degree; additional pay occurs upon receipt of a master's degree, and further compensation is available for graduate credits beyond the master's (NJSBA, 2003a,

2003b, 2012). Some educators consider compensation for career advancement programs a personal benefit of continuing one's graduate education. However, compensation and degree requirements are contentious issues. Currently, severe scrutiny is occurring as school districts look at the value of a teacher's educational achievement, and the impact that advanced training has on the classroom (Badgett, Decman, & Carman, 2013). There are also a few known controversies surrounding educational master's course offerings and career advancement programs. These controversies stem from the monetary investment that school districts spend for master's degree programs.

**Controversial issues.** Not everyone agrees that there is a correlation between the teachers' master's degree coursework and the academic achievements of the students in the classrooms (Miller & Roza, 2012). Deemed the age of accountability, in the 1990s the research centered on outcome driven education; accrediting and professional agencies looked for evidence that master's degrees lead to student success. As a result, in the mid - 2000s, Wisconsin's public school contract eliminated salary increases for master's level coursework- moving toward performance-based step increases (Richards & Thomas, 2012). Six other states, Florida, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, New Jersey, and Utah, have recently moved toward connecting performance pay initiatives with teacher compensation plans (Doherty & Jacobs, 2013). District taxpayers are questioning monetary incentives for advanced educational training and salary negotiations, and are reexamining and, often eliminating, tuition reimbursement benefits. These changes may directly influence graduate enrollment.

Yet, colleges and universities continue to recruit teachers for enrollment in their educational master's degree programs and numerous universities provide similar

educational programs; thus, universities must provide distinct opportunities (Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Tom, 1999). Therefore, understanding student consumer expectations is critical (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Morley, 2003; Noel-Levitz & NAGAP, 2012). When administrators are concerned about enrollment, they often seek a way to understand market factors as well as consumer values and behaviors. Understanding these factors allows administrators to forecast enrollment and implement strategic enrollment plans (Bontrager, 2008; Naidoo & Wu, 2011; Raisman, 2008, 2010; Sampaio, Perin, Simoes, & Kleinowski, 2012).

Criticism and a lack of understanding abound in historical accounts of the American master's degree. As history evolved, a newly found respect developed that encouraged an applicant to evaluate his or her program choices (AAU, 1910, 1927, 1935, 1945, 1998a). Despite the increasing importance placed on educational outcomes, and widespread interest in research on the efficacy of an advanced degree, new innovative approaches to graduate education encourage universities to expand their educational market beyond their regional boundaries (Conrad et al., 1993; Glazer-Raymo, 2005). In return, the students seek a return on their investment; this includes finding a job, receiving a monetary raise, and gaining valuable educational content. Competition is fierce, and retaining current students is even more important (Wendler et al., 2010). Thus, determining why student attrition occurs would enhance an institution's ability to gain valuable understanding as to why former students attrit in order to develop strategies to mitigate these occurrences (Lovitts, 2001).

**Understanding Retention, Attrition, and Persistence**

The higher education community has a long history of studying student retention, attrition, and persistence. Yet the literature addressing the subject of student retention, attrition, and persistence only addresses two types of students: 1) undergraduate students (Bean, 1990a, 1990b, 2005; Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1997, 2012a, 2012b) and 2) doctoral students (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Brailsford, 2010; CGS, 2008b, 2009b; Gardner, 2008, 2009; Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Kennedy, Terrell, & Lohle, 2015; Lovitts, 2000; 2001; Ploskonka, 1993; Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008; Tinto, 2012b; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). Much like other authors, Tinto (2012b) and Lovitts (2001) use the term graduate student when writing about doctoral students, leaving another gap in the master's student persistence literature. Given the limited scope of research on master's student attrition, retention, and persistence, it is appropriate to include the seminal study on master's attrition (CGS, 2013).

The *Completion and Attrition in STEM Master's Programs* pilot study outlined the top five issues contributing to attrition. They are: 1) pressure from outside employment, 2) the program structure, 3) absence of financial support, 4) lack of support from faculty, and 5) lack of institutional or program support (CGS, 2013). It is important to note that only one of these issues is personal in nature; the other four are institution specific concerns that impact a student's decision to return to campus the subsequent term. Results indicate that there are significant variations between and among programs, encouraging other researchers to continue investigating other master's programs (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Berelson, 1960; CGS, 2013). This dissertation focuses on former

education master's students in an attempt to understand and explore attrited behavior. Moreover, by understanding the factors that contribute to attrition, faculty and staff can address necessary concerns in the hope of preventing future attrition.

**Academic and Social Integration**

The only known graduate student retention theory asserts that social and academic integration, along with program and departmental norms, influence graduate student persistence (Tinto, 2012b). Vincent Tinto's theories examined the close relationship between the social and academic integration of graduate students; this is also the model various undergraduate scholars expanded upon because the model does not serve all needs, nor does it account well for diversity (Tinto, 2012b). Influenced by Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto (1975) created an analogy between theories of suicide and students dropping out of college. Specifically, he researched voluntary undergraduate student departure, and the complex academic and social systems students encounter, in an attempt to create a theory that would address student attrition (Tinto, 1975). Moreover, identifying interactions between the student and the education communities are an important component of the student's socialization process and it is the commitment a student makes to the institution, and to their academic and career goals, that defines this theory (Tinto, 1975; 2006, 2012b). Another component is academic integration, the way in which a student embraces her academic responsibilities. This includes the effort, knowledge, and skills needed for academic scholarship, as well as the connection one makes to receive faculty support and criticism. The student needs to want to become a part of the academic community, set goals, and work at achieving these academic goals. Broadly speaking, students who isolate themselves will dropout without seeking

assistance. In cases of severe isolation and nonconformance to the institution culture, interventions by university staff are imperative to prevent the departure (Tinto, 2012a). Students who depart are unwilling to partake in class and extracurricular activities. In summary, in order for students to persist, students need to commit to the institutional culture, values, and norms (Tinto, 2012b). Since academic and social integration are important to all students, Tinto (2012b) acknowledges the need for further research into graduate student persistence stating that personal and intellectual interactions are different in graduate school (Tinto, 2012b).

**Graduate student differences.** Departmental and program culture influence graduate student experiences, which are impacted by discipline and program norms (Braxton & Hargens, 1996; Golde, 2005; Jones, 2011; Lovitts, 2000, 2001; Tinto, 2012b). Additionally, it is possible for graduate students to be isolated from the rest of the institution, and solely focused on curricular requirements, as well as program related procedures, expectations, and commitments. It is important to consider the timing of the attrited action, as this is an important consideration of any research study (Austin et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2015; Tinto, 1988, 2012b). The question of why students leave the academy has caused much debate in the higher education community and although revered by many, Tinto's theories have critics. For instance, one criticism concerns Tinto's need to generalize his research (Tierney, 1992). Another criticism is that Tinto's theory lacks the consideration of minority students' cultural and ethnic values (Attinasi, 1989; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Tierney, 1992). In the case of this dissertation, Tinto did not examine master's student attrition. Nonetheless, Tinto's academic and social integration theory are an important consideration for this

dissertation, but they are not the only influence on persistence. Background characteristics and university culture are also known to influence persistence, thus other researchers applied and expanded upon Tinto's theories in their research on graduate student attrition (Lovitts, 2001).

Barbara Lovitts' (2001) research builds upon Tinto's exploration to explain doctoral student attrition. Her research identified three explanations for attrition; students leave the academy for "personal, financial, and academic" (Lovitts, 2001, p.167) reasons. In fact, 70% of the participants indicated that they left the academy for personal reasons. One theory is that, when the respondent stated they left for personal reasons, the researchers did not explore further (Lovitts, 2001). Upon further investigation, Lovitts (2001) discovered that the participants did not feel comfortable expressing the real reason they left the academy (Lovitts, 2001). Next, sufficient financial resources are needed to complete graduate school, and insufficient funding creates barriers to enrollment and these financial challenges negatively impact graduate school enrollment (Bair & Haworth, 1999; St. John & Andrieu, 1995). Lastly, academic concerns addressed a lack of integration (academic and social) into the departmental community and poor advising, along with the incongruences that occur when student intentions and academic expectations differ (Bair & Haworth, 1990; Lovitts, 2001). This final category stressed the importance of positive relationships between faculty and students. Positive relationships are known to encourage student persistence and are important considerations for this dissertation (Lovitts, 2001).

**Positive relationships.** In alignment with Tinto and Lovitts' research, many authors agree that positive relationships encourage academic and social integration. One

strategy that is known to enhance departmental relationships, is to develop a sense of community through promoting positive learning environments, meaningful mentoring experiences, and positive student-advisor relationships (CGS, 2009b, 2013; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Pontius & Harper, 2006; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Positive relationships provide a sense of connectedness to the program and one's peers (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). The first year is critical for student persistence; therefore, student engagement, student activities, and new student orientation events assist in the socialization process for all students (Poock, 2004, 2008; Sherman, 2013; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Creating a community of support (social integration) that is influenced by the academic program or profession is paramount to persistence because the focal point of activities and influence reside within the program of study (CGS, 2013; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Social integration also includes cohort formation (Chairs, McDonald, Shroyer, Urbanski, & Vertin, 2002), learning community development (Kraska, 2008; Tinto, 1997), and mentoring (Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2010; Mullen, 2007; Mullen, & Tuten, 2010; Rose, 2003; Trask, Marotz-Baden, Settles, Gentry, & Berke 2009). Moreover, advising is an integral part of academic life (Creighton et al., 2010; Mullen, 2006; Nettles & Millett, 2006). A graduate advisor fulfills four essential roles and functions: reliable information source, advocate, role model, and career advisor (Rose, 2005). These advising and mentoring relationships positively influence student retention and completion of doctoral dissertations (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Walker et al., 2008). Although several articles emphasize positive, collaborative, and transformational mentoring relationships

(Fletcher, 2007), authors also illustrate issues of neglect, power, and frustration (Freedman, 2009; Golde, 2010; Maher et al., 2004).

**Inadequate relationships.** Inadequate relationships hinder student persistence. These insufficient relationships also influence a student's integration into his or her program and create a disenchantment of one's learning experience that also impacts his or her feelings toward the program (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Poor relationships may cause issues that impact the student's academic progress; inadequate relationships and the absence of mentoring can lead to issues that encourage attrition, and attrition is an expense the university cannot afford (Lovitts, 2001). Lack of support and understanding from family and friends can also influence a student's decision to leave (Bean, 1990b; Seay, Lifton, Wuensch, Bradshaw, & McDowelle, 2008). In addition to relationships, individual personal attributes also influence persistence.

**Personal attributes.** Individual attributes such as family background, personal goals, and intentions influence academic and social integration. The educational and socioeconomic levels, along with the support systems available to the individual, further influence graduate student persistence (Lovitts, 2001; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Another important consideration for this study is the fact that approximately 60% of all master's degrees conferred in the United States in 2012-13 were awarded to female students (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). In the field of education, 77% of all degrees conferred were awarded to female students (Snyder et al., 2016). This data illustrates that the gender disparity within educational programs was a consideration for this study. In prior research, gender accounted for significant differences in the reasons why women left the academy (Lovitts, 2001). Female students

experienced greater emotional struggles than their male colleagues (Arric, Young, Harris, & Farrow, 2011). Likewise, stress, workload, family obligations, and financial issues were not the main barriers to retention and attrition; they were merely factors that may provide influence (Adamo, 2013; Grady, La Touche, Oslawski-Lopez, Powers, & Simacek, 2014). Surprisingly, the availability of job opportunities upon graduation (Adamo, 2013) and lack of research experiences (Maher et al., 2004) were the main barriers to continued enrollment. In addition to understanding gender differences, differences can also occur because of the student's age and life experience.

**Adult Persistence Theories**

One of the most significant discussions in graduate education is the literature regarding nontraditional adult persistence. Nontraditional students are defined as students who are 25 years of age or older, who commute, and who are enrolled part-time (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Authors challenge traditional undergraduate theories of persistence by stating that the concept of attrition is different in adults (Pappas & Loring, 1985). Adults have barriers to their educational experiences including balancing multiple priorities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chickering, 1981; Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003). It is common for graduate students to juggle various aspects of their lives in addition to work, parental responsibilities, and relationships. These competing priorities create stressors that impede graduate student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chickering, 1981; Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003; Grady, et al., 2014). Additional conflicts occur when the programs' expectations conflict with external demands, (i.e., marital or parental relationships, work commitments, or trouble with work-life balance), and these negative stressors can

discourage students (Brus, 2006; Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003; Shepherd & Mullins-Nelson, 2012).

**Student perceptions.** Attribution theory discusses the relationship between a student's perception of the situation and the motivation that occurs within educational settings (Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2001). Student attrition and a student's perception of educational factors influence academic motivation (Elliot & Shin, 2002). These include, but are not limited to, a student's perception of departmental issues, advising, financial support, faculty attrition, departmental politics, and lack of understandings between the faculty and the students (Gardner, 2008, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). These perceptions influence student behavior, which, in turn, affect persistence to graduation and influence one's decision to leave campus (Bean, 2005). In addition to perception, building trust is one element that positively influences a student's perception of her educational experience (Raisman, 2008). Examples of building trust include social integration techniques such as learning student's names, treating everyone with respect, and answering correspondences in a timely manner (Raisman, 2010).

**Loyalty.** Along with trust, authors compare student retention with customer loyalty, linking customer satisfaction and value to one's coursework (Sampaio et al., 2012). In one study, educational experience juxtaposed a doctor's visit (Raisman, 2008). People have preconceived expectations that shape personal experiences, especially when visiting a doctor's office. When visiting a doctor's office people expect a courteous, friendly receptionist, and they expect to see a doctor in a timely manner. In turn, the doctor treats his or her patients as clients, providing respect, and sometimes acknowledging unhealthy behavior. A doctor attempts to build patient-client loyalty

similar to how a university attempts to build student loyalty (Raisman, 2008). An academic customer service model encourages higher education personnel to treat students as professional clients rather than customers, utilizing excellent service and foregoing the old business adage that the customer is always right (Raisman, 2008). Comparing student retention to customer loyalty, and linking customer satisfaction and value to one's coursework are vital to student retention (Hadfield, 2003; Lovitts, 2001; Sampaio et al., 2012).

**The Higher Education Debate**

Referring to students as customers or consumers is a controversial topic debated among the academic community because not everyone agrees with this characterization (Bay & Daniel, 2001; George, 2007; Mark, 2013; Naidoo et al., 2011). The complex, multifaceted relationship between the student, the faculty, and the educational institution is recognized among scholars. One theory states that the student is the recipient as well as an active participant of the educational experience, which is not a product to consume (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Mark, 2013; Scrabec, 2000). More importantly, critics admonish the notation that a customer is always right, stating this thinking is offensive and results in unrealistic classroom expectations (George, 2007; Vaill, 2000). A harmful effect of the student consumerism paradigm is that students often voice their dissatisfaction or discontent with a negative student evaluation of the faculty teaching, providing an assessment that is often based on feelings and emotions (Mark, 2013). It is also believed that the higher education community is too commercialized and that administrators apply the label of customer to a student, a theory that many faculty members do not support (George, 2007).

Conversely, as graduate degrees become essential to many occupations, the consumers are students, families, employers, legislators, taxpayers, and citizens (Holdford, 2014). Once trained, the students leave the academy and become employed in society (Holdford, 2014; Weisinger, 1975). Leaders in enrollment management believe that student consumer behavior influences perceptions of the graduate school experiences that affect student persistence (Bontrager, 2008; Lovitts, 2001; Snowden, 2012). To compete, non-profit institutions may need to utilize business practices, specifically, the customer-oriented philosophies that deliver student services (DeShields, Ali, & Kaynak, 2005). In another example, the definition of customer satisfaction includes the overall buying experience of the program and educational coursework (Bolen, 2001; Polson, 2003). This includes the availability of the coursework, course scheduling, course logistics, program requirements, and financial arrangements (Bolen, 2001; Polson, 2003).

The debate over whether or not to consider students as consumers began in the 1970's (Naidoo et al., 2011), and is ongoing today. Adult students have a long list of expectations of their educational experience (DeShields et al., 2005; Hadfield, 2003; Spicuzza, 1992). It is the student, as a customer, who defines the attributes of the quality and value of the services they are interested in obtaining (Raisman, 2008, 2010; Scrabec, 2000). Student consumer behavior influences perceptions of graduate school experiences and these perceptions may impact student persistence (Lovitts, 2001). Understanding persistence, attrition, and retention themes provide a foundation from which higher education professionals can evaluate their campus environments, looking for factors that influence a student's intent to leave, specifically, evaluating how academic and social

integration influence student attrition. Likewise, the academic and institutional variables are the same attributes applicants review when choosing a graduate program.

In tough economic times, when universities are competing for the same students, and institutions are financially accountable, institutions may attempt to develop strategies to diversify their income that may move institutional values away from their mission to provide a quality education (Raisman, 2010). Whereas other universities are moving to developing strategic techniques to recruit and retain graduate students (Goff & Snowden, 2015). Yet, recruiting and retaining graduate students is challenging. Assessing and understanding former student's perceptions of her graduate school experience, both positive and negative, are an important consideration for graduate programs (Bontrager & Green, 2015). Therefore, this phenomenological study examines how Ortley University accounts for why master's degree students leave the academy.

**Building a Conceptual Framework**

Master's degree attrition is one of the most troublesome problems facing graduate schools nationwide (Wendler et al., 2010). Although a precise figure has proven elusive, retention and attrition rates are important considerations for universities. Low retention rates reflect poorly upon the quality and credibility of the academic program (Isaac, 1993; Wendler et al., 2010). Naturally, graduate enrollment matters (Snowden, 2012). Enrollment affects teaching assignments for faculty, the financial stability of institutions, and more importantly, the well-being of our students. If an enrollment decline occurs, identifying additional funding sources becomes challenging. Altering course offerings, terminating programs, or reducing the workforce could become options to correct declining enrollment. Fiscal uncertainty and lack of federal and state funding has

universities developing ways to sustain their budgets and on some campuses, graduate education is providing a viable way to offset budgetary constraints. Furthermore, former students encounter feelings of depression and guilt that are described as taking an "emotional toll" (Willis & Carmichael, 2011, p. 192) on individuals who leave the academy.

To investigate master's student attrition, this dissertation used a conceptual framework that encapsulated the Satisfaction-Retention Matrix (Butler, 2011; Maguire, Butler, & their Colleagues at Maguire Associates., 2008), a theory that illustrates the satisfaction and dissatisfaction phases related to undergraduate student persistence (Figure 1). Since this theory does not specify precise theories that impact each phase of the matrix, and because the matrix was not designed for graduate students (Butler, 2011; Maguire et al., 2008), this dissertation applied retention and attrition theories from many scholars (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b), as outlined in the center box of the matrix. Specifically, this conceptualization investigated four concepts: (a) academic integration, (b) social integration, (c) academic and institutional attributes, and (d) student consumer behavior (Anctil, 2008; Elliott & Shin, 2002; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Morley, 2003; Noel-Levitz & NAGAP, 2012; Raisman, 2010), in order to connect the conceptual framework design.

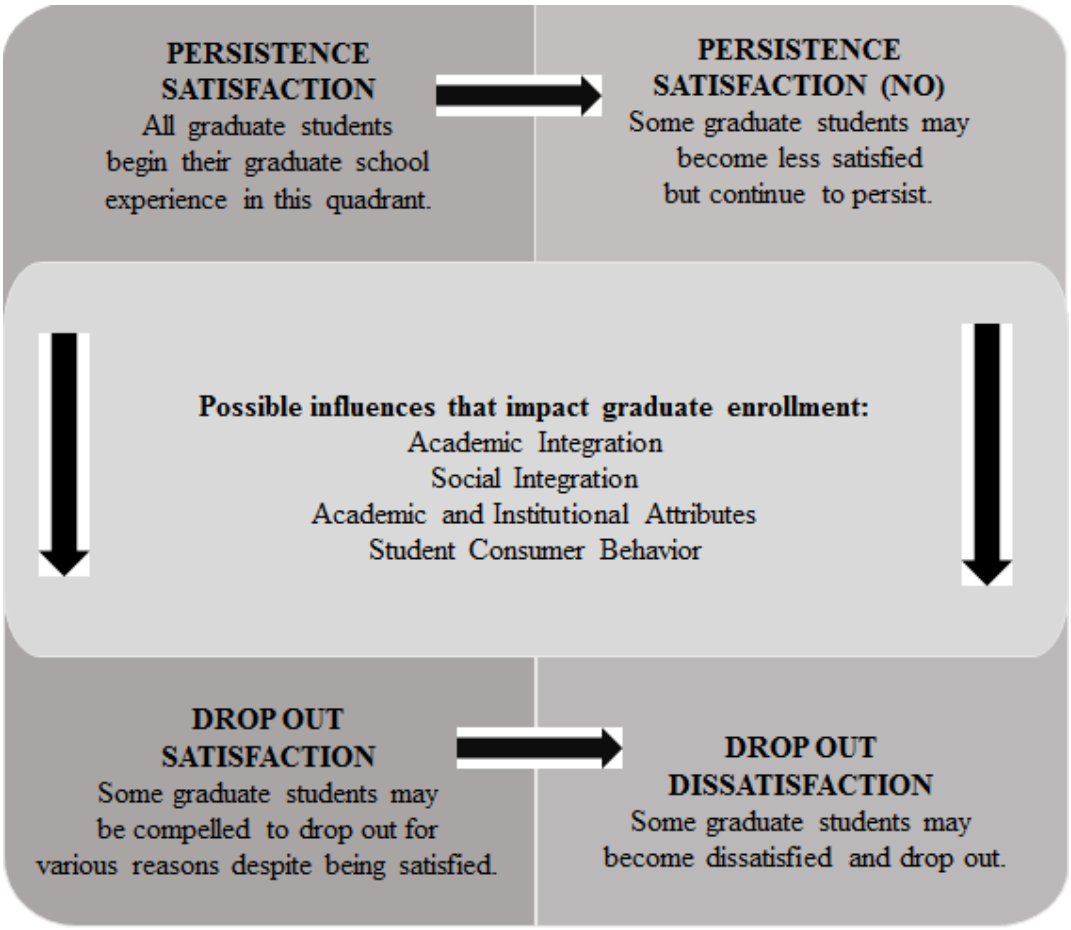



*Figure 1.* Master's Degree Persistence Matrix, adapted from the undergraduate Satisfaction-Retention Matrix provide the conceptual framework to explore master's degree student attrition. The "Satisfaction-Retention Matrix," *A New Formula for Enrollment Management* (p. 74), by J. Maguire, L. Butler, and their Colleagues at Maguire Associates 2008, Victoria, CA: Trafford. Copyright 2008 by Maguire Associates. Adapted with permission.

Figure 1 illustrates how all master's degree students begin their graduate work with the expectation of earning a master's degree (the upper left-hand square). They believe they will persist, and do not immediately consider dropping out of their academic program (Butler, 2011; Maguire et al., 2008). The extensive application process encourages self-reflection and a commitment to completion (Weisinger, 1975). The love of the discipline and the excitement of a new opportunity encourage a positive student

experience. Yet, at some point in their master's degree career, their satisfaction begins to increase or dissipate (Butler, 2011). If the student's satisfaction rate decreases, the student will move into the upper right square box and may begin to rethink her decision to continue her enrollment (Butler, 2011). If a student is so dissatisfied that she can no longer enroll in classes, the student will drop out of the academy (lower right square box). Is it possible that a student had a disappointing graduate school experience? If a student's key to success is to be academically and socially integrated into one's program, did that student feel embraced by the program? Conversely, did the student connect with the faculty or fellow students? This study examined prior students' experiences to ascertain how academic or social integration, academic and institutional attributes, and student consumer behavior impacted their experiences and their decisions to drop out of the academy.

This dissertation was designed to support a phenomenological approach to understanding master's degree student attrition. It is important to gain an understanding of how Ortley University can compete in the higher education marketplace by understanding the expectations that influence graduate student attrition (Anctil, 2008; Elliott & Shin, 2002; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Morley, 2003; Noel-Levitz & NAGAP, 2012; Raisman, 2010). Lastly, this conceptual framework will assist the institution in uncovering possible variables that disappoint student consumer expectations, further influencing master's degree student attrition.

## Chapter Summary

Scholars have explored student retention in the area of undergraduate students for the past 84 years and this persistence literature speaks volumes, yet there is only one

study conducted (2011-2013) that investigates master's student attrition (CGS, 2013). Master's students possess life experiences, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and conflicting priorities that influence their educational experiences, distinguishing themselves from traditional undergraduate students (Baird, 1993). The evidence presented in this section suggests that student consumerism may play a vital role in why education master's students fail to persist. Due to the limited scholarly discourse in the area of master's student attrition, I was compelled to listen to the stories of those masters' students who attrit. Overall, prior studies suggest the need for a qualitative investigation into student attrition (Attinasi, 1989; Kennedy et al., 2015; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2012b; & Tierney, 1992). The next chapter describes the qualitative research methods that ensured a sound, ethical exploration into the topic of master's student attrition.

# Chapter 3

## Research Methodology

Many authors suggest that more research is necessary to examine graduate student attrition (Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2013; Kennedy et al., 2015; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2012b; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). To unravel the complicated student departure puzzle, researchers suggest interviewing the attrited students (Braxton, 2000; Braxton et al., 1997; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Thus, many authors support using a qualitative, naturalistic approach to obtain detailed knowledge about student attrition (Attinasi, 1989; Kennedy et al., 2015; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2012a; Tierney, 1992). In order to obtain in-depth information about student attrition, this study utilized a phenomenological research approach that allowed me to explore the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Dawkins & May, 2002; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990) of education master's students who left the academy. Specifically, this qualitative study was important and needed for several reasons: First, much of the prior retention and attrition literature focuses on quantitative research methods. Next, qualitative studies provide rich descriptions of the phenomena, allowing researchers to discover why students leave the academy without relying on predetermined reasons (Bean, 1990a). Also, by understanding the problem in the local context, a researcher gains insights that are not possible through quantitative means (Bean, 1990b; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). Additionally, the surprises that evolve because of the nature of personal interviews allow the researcher to further explore the findings (Seidman, 2006; Van Manen, 1990; Weiss, 1994). Lastly, the empirical style provided a clear image of why education master's student departure occurred at Ortley University (a pseudonym).

Using a phenomenological research paradigm through the construct of qualitative research allowed me to become an integral part of the discovery while I recognized that a person is an historical being and that experiences are part of her formation as an individual (Giorgi, 2009). Specifically, individual face-to-face interviews explored the reasons the attrition occurred. The findings provided information that portrays an emic point of view of graduate student attrition. Utilizing an empirical research approach was essential to gaining a better understanding of one's research topic (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). This qualitative process brought the phenomenon to life and allowed the participant to become a co-researcher to discover her external and internal perceptions of graduate student attrition (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The participants as co-researchers became key informants; it is through their stories that the detailed descriptions regarding graduate student attrition evolved (Weiss, 1994).

To facilitate a rich description, the following research questions guided this study: how does Ortley University account for why some graduate students leave the academy? To understand the education master's student attrition phenomena, the following research questions guided this study:

1. Why do some education master's students attrit?
2. How do attrited education master's students describe their experiences?
3. To what extent do attrited students enroll elsewhere?
4. How do institutional factors contribute to student attrition?
5. To what extent do personal educational goals influence a student's decision to leave the academy?

Specifically, this research study explored why these students attrit, and encourage former education master's students to provide a voice for an invisible problem (Lovitts, 2001).

## Rationale for Qualitative Research

Conducting a qualitative study allowed me to explore why students left the academy and determine if there is something that will prevent students from dropping out in the future. More importantly, qualitative research methods assisted in uncovering the reasons why graduate students discontinued their course work. In a prior study, researchers found that finances influence a student's reason to leave (CGS, 2013). However, other authors state that there are often multiple reasons why graduate students leave the academy (Cross, 1981; Lovitts, 2001; Polson, 2003). Thus, a qualitative approach was necessary to facilitate the findings of this dissertation and probe further into master's degree student attrition.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is a research process as well as a method. The procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement. This process allows the researcher to better understand behavior and social relationships, while creating meaning and understanding from the data (Creswell, 2013, Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). In this process, the researcher sets aside personal experiences in order to understand the study's participants (Creswell, 2013, Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological techniques elicit the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the participants (Mari, 2008; Thompson, Lacander, & Pollio, 1989). These descriptive phenomenological techniques, inspired by Giorgi (1985), guided this dissertation and encouraged the discovery of a deeper understanding and meaning of everyday experiences (Giorgi, 2009). This phenomenological research paradigm also inspired the

search to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of master's degree students who left the academy (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 2009; Van Manen, 1990).

The philosophical assumptions of the phenomenological strategy are to use an investigative approach to studying the master's student attrition phenomena. Utilizing an approach that aims to identify the structure of experiences, as described by the research participants, was discovered by Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher who uncovered and described the fundamental structure of our life-world emphasizing the description of a person's lived experience (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi (1985) drew upon Husserl's principles and developed research methods that guided this study.

**Giorgi's influence.** There are numerous phenomenological research theories but Giorgi's (1985) descriptive phenomenological research method embodied techniques that aligned more with Carl Rogers' (1961) person-centered approach to learning and research (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). As a master's degree student, I was immersed in the Rogerian person-centered approach to learning and research that focused on a holistic approach to understanding "individual values, beliefs and attitudes, not a just few skills or actions" (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p. 249). This process encouraged developing a rapport and embracing reflective practice, and it was these proficiencies that resonated with me as a researcher. Although Englander (2012) advises against researchers making a connection between counseling and interviewing, I felt this was a personal attribute that assisted me in encouraging the participants' to fully describe their graduate school journey and their experience with attrition.

**Researcher context.** This study explored the lived experience of former students in order to understand the essence of a person's account of her experience with the

master's degree student attrition phenomena. Everyone has a story to tell and reflecting aloud encourages personal learning and growth, which was an important consideration of this study (Rogers, 1961). As the author of this dissertation, I was very interested in graduate enrollment management and determining why students leave the academy. Currently, at Ortley University, there is no follow up as to why master's degree students leave the academy and phenomenology provided the ability to gain rich, insightful details as to why graduate students drop out of the academy (Creswell, 2013).

The main philosophical reason for choosing a qualitative study, explicitly phenomenology, was that the counseling skills I learned during my master's program provide the necessary background to conduct a sound, ethical research project. My familiarity working with open-ended questions, and engaging an interviewee with the power to share her experiences, provided the tools needed for this dissertation (Seidman, 2006). These open-ended questions and active listening skills assisted in chronicling the research participant experiences to gain an interpretation of the master's degree student attrition phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, using the nondirective Rogerian counseling method allowed the interviewee to share her experiences without judgment (Rogers, 1961). Personal issues often develop when the concept of one's self is incongruent with one's expectations, causing perceptions to guide behavior (Rogers, 1961). Thus, probing into master's student attrition in this manner provides more opportunities to uncover the holistic reasons for student departure (Lovitts, 2001; Rogers, 1961). Utilizing phrases such as, "how does that make you feel?", allowed me to develop questions for this study congruent to my skill, ability, and training (McLeod, 2008). Therefore, discovering the lived experience of the participants allowed for an emerging

research paradigm and an ontological view of multiple realities (Creswell, 2003). Further, social constructivism seeks to understand everyday occurrences by addressing what the commonalities and differences are of these experiences and encourages further probing into the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

**Researcher's role.** My role in this study necessitated the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study. As the assistant dean of graduate studies for the past eight years, I was responsible and accountable for enrollment, retention, and persistence of graduate students. To ensure academic success, I created a campus-wide graduate student orientation event and a culminating research symposium. These events encouraged both academic and social integration (Poock, 2004; 2008) and are an excellent way to build a larger community of learners. Further, I understand the need to balance multiple priorities and the challenges that occur when pursuing an advanced degree. These experiences enhanced my awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to the issues being researched and assisted in working with the participants of this study. Although I made every effort to ensure that I approach the interviews from a neutral stance, objectivity and my personal bias may shape the way I view and interpret of findings (Hodder, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Therefore, I recognized the need to be open to the thoughts and opinions of others and to set aside my experiences in order to understand those of the participants in the study while capturing my subjectivity in my research journal.

I strongly believe that graduate education opens doors that were not possible prior to earning a master's degree (Glazer, 1986). Graduate education allows for exploration of oneself, one's passion, as well as provides the necessary credentials to pursue career

advancement (Wendler et al., 2010). Graduate education alters the way in which people think and solve problems; thus, master's degrees enhance society (Conrad et al., 1993; Snowden, 2012; Wendler et al., 2010). This dissertation explored the experiences of graduate students who, for various reasons, left the academy. As a proponent of graduate education, I often wonder if those who walk away would have stayed if Ortley University had done something to change the outcome of their situation. Could Ortley University have provided options for success or did these students leave the academy because they enrolled elsewhere? There are more questions than answers concerning master's student attrition and the qualitative research conducted thus far on doctoral student attrition indicated that there are many reasons why students leave their graduate programs (Lovitts, 2001).

**Research setting.** To investigate master's degree student attrition, the data collection took place at the Ortley University, a regional master's midsize public university in the northeastern United States. The institution primarily focuses on liberal arts and sciences majors, and the graduate school offers professional graduate programs. The two-thousand-acre campus is located in a small rural town and my connection with the institution was extremely valuable as it provided background and insider knowledge into the subject of graduate education. This setting was appropriate for this project because graduate enrollment is extremely important and without understanding the true nature of attrition, the institution may be repeating behavior or practices that are unattractive to the students. Inquiry into graduate student attrition is becoming more apparent as enrollment is becoming increasingly more difficult.

Ortley University is located in the Mid-Atlantic Region and is one of many universities that rely on graduate enrollment to meet their expenses (Chabotar, 2006). Graduate students' tuition pays many of the operational expenses of the university. Campus documents state that, following the review of the six-year retention and graduation data, the attrition rate for the Master of Art in Education program was 38.6% and 30.8% for the Master of Arts in Instructional Technology program. The attrited graduate students often walk away from their education, dropping out, without any one questioning why they are leaving (Lovitts, 2001). Retention rates are higher among Ortley University's fulltime healthcare programs, at 93%. Ortley's administrators believe this is due to the structure of the healthcare programs, the prescribed curriculum, the full-time status of the student, and the fact that there is strong competition for a seat in one of the healthcare graduate programs.

**Sampling.** A purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting participants based on specific criteria (Patton, 1990; Sandelowski, 1995). The participants for this study were purposefully chosen using the criteria appropriate for the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I selected participants based upon their experience with the graduate attrition phenomenon, provided they also met the following inclusion criteria:

1) Matriculated master's students who enrolled for a minimum of two consecutive terms in a program taught by the faculty in the School of Education.
2) The students were in good academic standings at time of departure.
3) The students drop out behavior occurred within the past three years.

4) The students were working full-time while enrolled in graduate school part-time.

These students are not eligible for federal funding, which adds an additional level of complexity to the attrition concerns, and is an integral part of this study. These participants are appropriate for this study because the educational programs are experiencing an attrition rate above 30%. Prior researchers have been encouraged to interview a variety of respondents to ensure a wide range of responses (Sandelowski, 1995). For this study, the research participant sample varied by age, race/ethnicity, baccalaureate degree, and initial educational endorsement. This research sample was important because it is the fastest growing segment of the higher education community (Veney, O'Geen, & Kowalik, 2012). As this adult population continues to grow, more may attrit. Lastly, there is a void in the available empirical research regarding part-time educational master's students and attrition.

My original methodological plan for this study was to interview students who enrolled in another graduate program after they dropped out of Ortley University. This consideration would have allowed the participants to explain and describe the how, what, and why of these phenomena (Giorgi, 1985, 2009). To determine the exact population that enrolled at another institution, the Office of Institutional Research through the National Student Clearinghouse database identified students enrolled in other graduate programs. In the end, none of these potential participants agreed to participant in my study. Thus the ability to gain a better understanding into master's student attrition was based on students who dropped out, but did not enroll in another institution.

**Sample size.** The need to collect rich and detailed data from each participant influences the sample size of a phenomenological study (Corney, 2008; Creswell, 2013). Therefore, smaller sample sizes were most common (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Dukes, 1984; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Three to ten (Cooper, Fleischer, & Cotton, 2012; Dawkins & May, 2002; Shepherd & Mullins-Nelson, 2012) participants were recommended in order to produce rich thick descriptions of the phenomenon and to limit redundancy of themes and ideas that occur from larger samples (Duke, 1984). Ultimately, the sample size depended upon how quickly participants began to share similar stories, also known as reaching data saturation (Nelson, Onwuegbuzie, Wines, & Frels, 2013). Data saturation was important because it ensured that an adequate sample of data was collected (Walker, 2012). Larger sample sizes tend to inhibit successful analysis in terms of time, reflection, and dialogue (Englander, 2012; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Numerous phenomenological studies utilized these guidelines and selected samples between two and ten participants (Corney, 2008; Dawkins & May, 2002; Hunter, 2008; Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Glazewski, Newby, & Ertmer, 2010; Rance & Arbon, 2008), thus, choosing four to ten semi-structured one-on-one interviews with former students was my target for this dissertation (Mason, 2010) and data saturation occurred following the twelfth interview.

## Data Collection

I sought to bring the phenomenon to life utilizing a naturalist-constructionist research paradigm to explain human behavior and experience (Giorgi, 2009). To achieve this goal, the data collection reflects the contextual meaning, thoughts, impressions, and interpretations of an experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As a qualitative researcher, I

understand that my work and the recollection of the research participants are subjective. The data collection for this dissertation was exploratory, and my search for contextual meaning was an important component of this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Thus, this naturalist approach included in-depth first-person interviews, document and artifact analysis, and a reflective field notebook.

**One-on-one interviews.** Once the Rowan University ethics board approved this project, a second review was sought at Ortley University. Once the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) granted approval, recruitment of the participants began. To recruit a purposeful sample, I reviewed the data of former students who fit the above criteria (Miles et al., 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Gatekeeper approval provided access to the former students. Since my goal was to understand the lived experience, I conducted in-depth interviews with participants who as co-researchers are an integral part of the research process (Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2006).

**Gauging consent to participate.** I emailed the participants introducing my dissertation study and myself. Two days following the email introduction, I called the participants to further gauge their desire to participate. When participants agreed to participate, I scheduled the one-hour interview at a location convenient to the participant and followed-up the phone call with an email. This email confirmed the interview details and provided the Informed Consent document for review prior to the interview (Van Manen, 1990).

**Interview protocol.** To facilitate the interviews, a semi-structured protocol of ten main questions, with several follow-up inquiries and probes, served as the key research instrument (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Maxwell, 2013) (see Appendix A). To determine

the questions, I modified the Doctoral Attrition Interview Protocol, used to interview former counselor education students (Willis & Carmichael, 2011). The protocol provided structure and encouraged responsive commentary during the 60 to 90-minute interview (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Weiss, 1994). Prior to using the protocol with the participants, the protocol was field tested with former MBA students to ensure that the questions provided deep insight into attrition (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

**Conducting the interviews.** Once I received IRB approvals, I scheduled the participant interviews. To accomplish this, I sent a detailed email explaining this research project (see Appendix B), and requested participant support. Every contact with my interviewees was professional, and I provided a copy of the informed consent for their review, ahead of time. I was certain to ensure that the participants were clear and informed about the nature of the research project, and that they provided voluntary consent to participant as outlined by Craig (2009) and Creswell (2013). I ensured that the former students, the interviewees, understood that I was a researcher and not in a position of power. Lastly, to ensure that the interviewees remain anonymous, I applied pseudonyms to my findings.

Each interview began with a request for permission to record the interview on an audio tape. Next, I read the informed consent to the interviewees and requested a signature on the necessary forms (see Appendix C). I made a conscious effort to be mindful of the personal feelings of the participants and explained, beforehand, that they had the right to ask me to stop the audio tape and skip a question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Weiss, 1994). Following the interviews, I combed through prior annual reports, self-study

documents, graduate application data, supplemental application materials (i.e. resume and university transcripts), school district employment contracts, and other artifacts.

**Document and artifacts.** There is significance in the collection and analysis of empirical field materials (Hodder, 1994). These artifacts provided verification and insight into personal experiences (Hodder, 1994). As part of my request to access the research site, I requested permission from the Deans of the Graduate School and the School of Education for permission to examine annual program review reports, program survey data, and accreditation documents. Additionally, it was important to examine participant admission artifacts including resumes and goal statements because this information provided insight from the time when the student began her graduate school journey, reducing the validity threat posed by retrospective interviews (Leavitt, Lombard, & Morris, 2011). However, to gain access to participant's archived admissions artifacts, I needed to add a Family and Educational Privacy Act (FERPA) disclosure statement to my informed consent form. The admission artifacts provided personal background and insight into the interviewees. These documents also assisted in the triangulation of data sources (Adami & Kiger, 2005; Casey & Murphy, 2009). These documents provided opportunities to find similarities, differences, emergent patterns, and themes. An important component of evaluating artifact materials was the documenting and recording of my thoughts and assumptions in a research journal (Rapley, 2007).

**Reflective field journal.** During all phases of inquiry, a research journal assisted in collecting field notes (Glesne, 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Researchers can find valuable data while studying the field and compiling descriptive and reflective field notes was critical (Glesne, 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). My descriptions and observations

were important to me, as this allowed for an insider view of the academic environment and the phenomena (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2013; Rapley, 2007). In addition to the field notebook, memoing captured the depth of my experiences, personal reactions, observations, and collection of artifacts (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008; Glaser 1978). The reflective field journal also became an excellent place to store judgments, understandings, biases, feelings, and perceptions from all data collection phases (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2013; Rapley, 2007). Lastly, this reflection increased the reflexivity and allowed for vigilant monitoring of potential researcher bias (Nelson et al., 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

**Creditability and validity.** Understanding the importance of creditability and validity, I engaged in establishing trustworthiness, accomplishing this through prolonged time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2003) in the field, member-checking (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013), peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and the triangulation and saturation of data sources. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, providing time to gather rich interview data. Employing a two-phase member-check; first, I asked the participants to review and critique the interview transcription for clarity (Haskins et al., 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Next, a second review occurred once my final report was written to verify that the identified themes resonated with the participants (Haskins et al., 2013; Lather, 1986; Miles et al., 2014). Lastly, triangulation occurred using multiple research techniques (interviews, document analysis, and journaling) to gather data for my dissertation and to corroborate my findings (Adami & Kiger, 2005; Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Berg & Lune, 2011; Casey & Murphy, 2009). A final consideration was to engage in peer debriefing. I asked a second

researcher to review my coding and findings to control for research bias and support the credibility of my dissertation (Haskins et al., 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014).

**Data Analysis**

As a qualitative researcher and to ensure the accuracy of my data, all interviews were recorded, transcribed, printed, and placed in a three-ring binder (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Employing the best practices in qualitative research, the first step in data analysis involved transcribing the recorded interviews. To ensure verbatim transcription, I transcribed the interviews myself; upon completion, I compared the transcription to the original recordings to ensure accuracy (Kennedy et al., 2015). I used a technique called member checking whereby I shared the transcripts of the interviews with the participants, and requested feedback (Creswell, 2003; Dawkins & May, 2002; Glense & Peshkin, 1992).

Next, I utilized a recursive process, I read the transcripts line-by-line several times to immerse myself into the data. This recursive process assisted in exploring the data, looking for emergent insight, patterns, themes, and to gain a sense of the data in entirety (Giorgi, 1985). Likewise, it was important to not only look at the line-by-line data but to visualize the data in a horizontal way, giving equal value to all statements (Moustakas, 1994). During this discovery phase, I reviewed the text for repetitions of expressions searching for subjects, themes, and topics that reoccur, while documenting my findings in a coding manual (Giorgi, 1985; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This coding manual contains descriptive words or phrases that allowed me to begin reducing the size of the data and

document my findings. When identifying phrases, it was important to update the coding manual (Saldana, 2009).

**Coding the data.** Next, I clustered the data, removing repetitive statements, and identifying patterns and categories while searching for significant statements that described the participants' experiences (Giorgi, 2009). During all phases of data collection, analytic memos become an important tool to document the heuristic coding and themes (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2009). The next step was to code and analyze the data. I chose to utilize a technique called in vivo coding (Glaser, 1978; Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2009). The in vivo coding is a manual coding technique that uses participant's jargon and expression to create a classification system used to identify key information (Glaser, 1978; Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2009). Since the codes emerge from the data, they captured the authenticity of the participant's expression, and enhanced the portrayal of the phenomena (Glaser, 1978; Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2009). This encouraged an intuitive understanding and allowed me to rely on my instincts to interpret the data (Creswell, 2013). This technique also encouraged me to capture the everyday meanings the data presented while I documented this exploration with analytic memos (Maxwell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

**Data mining, review, and analysis.** Mining the data during the analysis phase was an ongoing recursive process and one that occurred immediately following the first interview (Rapley, 2007; Saldana, 2009; Weiss, 1994). First, I used a phenomenological research technique, called epoche, the bracketing of my thoughts and prejudgments, in order to narrate the participants' stories (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Nickson & Henrickson, 2014). Bracketing and documenting personal thoughts and prejudgments in

research memos, strengthened the accuracy of my recollection of the participant's stories. These processes continued through all phases of the research study.

The second step in the data analysis process required that I ensure transcendental findings and produce textural descriptions, while eliminating repetitive and invariant statements (Giorgi, 1985, 2009). Next, to reduce the data, a second and third review of the data assists in identifying visible patterns and themes (Saldana, 2009). Scholars also recommend examining phenomenological data horizontally to create clusters of meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, imaginative variation, allowed me to express the essence of the experience looking for opposing viewpoints and deciphering which were essential and which were accidental (Giorgi, 2009). It was important to group similar statements into meaningful categories, drawing references and making thematic connections to the data (Giorgi, 2009; Nickson & Henrickson, 2014). Another important consideration was to triangulate the data using multiple sources of data in order to ensure accuracy, develop themes, witness patterns, and provide credibility to the research (Creswell, 2013). Lastly, inter-subjectivity ensured that I understood myself before I understood others.

**Researcher bias.** In an attempt to minimize researcher bias, I first examined my espoused beliefs regarding graduate education, goal setting, the professors, and the students. Using a field journal, I kept an account of these feelings and reflected upon my graduate school experience as well as my time in the field. I also examined my espoused beliefs, preceding all of my research; I initiated this process by way of journaling (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Next, I contrasted my espoused beliefs with practice and finally, examined my research findings in relation to theories, research, literature, and

best practices in graduate education. I also employed an "impartial debriefer" (Hail, Hurst, & Camp, 2011, p. 76), to provide an external review of the data to ensure that I was objectively reviewing my findings. In addition to research bias, ethical considerations were important.

## Ethical Considerations

To address ethical considerations early on, I understood the importance of applying to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both the Ortley University and Rowan University for an expedited review. As a researcher, I understood the importance of beginning this process prior to any field research at the University. I also understood that the purpose of an IRB was to ensure that the researcher carefully and ethically followed all rules and regulations, laws, and professional standards when conducting research (Craig, 2009, Sieber & Tolich, 2013).

**Gatekeeper approvals.** Understanding the importance of gatekeeper approval (Wiles, 2013), I sought and received approval from the Deans of Graduate School and the School of Education. I outlined my research intentions and sought the necessary permission to allow me to conduct my research study. Additionally, I discussed this project with several faculty members and the assistant provost to ensure that the institution supported my research efforts.

**Sensitivity to participants.** During the interview, I asked the participant to recommend a pseudonym that assisted me in concealing her identity (Kennedy et al., 2015). Using an ethic of care approach, I based my ethical decisions on care and compassion. I respected the participant's feelings and recognized the possibility that I might evoke an emotional response (Wiles, 2013). I had a strategy and referral process in

place to manage any distress. Fortunately, this was not needed. I monitored body language, and agreed to stop the interview process if the participants became emotional (Wiles, 2013). In addition to ensuring that the participants felt supported, I also made certain that the records, the data, and the transcripts were safely stored.

**Record retrieval and storage.** All interviews were audio-recorded and labeled with the participant's pseudonym. Once a code was assigned, all identifying data was stored on a password-protected computer that is backed up to the University computer system. Additionally, all research materials were stored in a locked cabinet in a private office, stored according to state guidelines and destroyed after five years.

## Chapter Summary

The Council of Graduate Schools (2009b) describes graduate education as the "jewel in the crown of higher education" (p. ix) in America. In the fall of 2014, approximately three million students enrolled in graduate degree programs throughout the United States (U.S.) (Kena et al., 2016). How many of these students will return the following year? As educators, we need to identify common empirical measures for assessing positive change and mitigating unnecessary graduate student attrition. Furthermore, I am confident my research and exploration into graduate student attrition can alter practice, policy and provide encouragement for others to complete their educational goals. Much like on the undergraduate level, institutional approaches to graduate student retention differ. Since all institutional settings differ, so do the characteristics and causal effects of student attrition. One size does not fit all and actions taken at one institution "may have little or no effect" (Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009) on reducing attrition because of the difference in student attributes, institutional

characteristics, and culture. Shedding light on these phenomena can and will inform practice.

# Chapter 4

## Research Findings

Rays of light in a kaleidoscope present color and design to those who look through the viewfinder. Similarly, my research findings provide a medley of color for understanding why education master's student attrition occurs at Ortley University. As a researcher and current student, I listened, documented, and portrayed each individual in a way that captured the essence of why these women left the academy. The data from the 12 interviews created the rays of light that narrate this chapter. This study was created to gain an understanding of education master's student attrition phenomena by answering the following research questions:

1. Why do some education master's students attrit?
2. How do attrited education master's students describe their experiences?
3. To what extent do attrited students enroll elsewhere?
4. How do institutional factors contribute to student attrition?
5. To what extend do personal educational goals influence a student's decision to leave the academy?

Qualitative research methods guided the data collection and discovery phase of this study utilizing participant interviews, artifact collection, and a reflective journal. To ensure that all identities remain confidential, pseudonyms conceal the identities of all participants, the University, faculty, and local school districts mentioned in this chapter (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008). In addition to participant interviews, document analysis was a crucial part of this study as these documents provided me with the ability determine the extent to which participants' statements aligned with state and local

contracts, participant admission artifacts, and University and program documents (Hodder, 1994; Rapley, 2007). Moreover, these artifacts served as evidence to validate participant stories (Yin, 2009).

To determine whether former students enrolled at another institution, the Office of Institutional Research submitted a data file to the National Student Clearinghouse database. The National Student Clearinghouse determined that 6.67% of the attrited students listed on the data file enrolled in another university. These former Ortley students were invited to participate in this study but only one responded to a request for an interview. After sending a follow-up email, Zelda (pseudonym) determined that she did not want to participate because she was busy completing a research project at another institution.

Prior research studies focused on doctoral student retention and attrition but rarely engaged with formerly enrolled master's students' (Sowell, Allum, & Okahana, 2015; Tinto, 2012b). Since these prior studies did not engage former students, I was determined to forge a different research path. It was my quest to interview attrited students who are often overlooked because they can be challenging to locate, and, even then, these former students do not always want to participate (D'Andrea, 2002; Rapley, 2007). However, I still felt compelled to interview former students, thus, the following paragraphs provide insight into why former educational master's students left Ortley University.

**Meet the Participants**

Twelve former female graduate student volunteers were interviewed. Table 1 provides summary data of participants who contributed to this study. These profiles are presented in alphabetical order according to the pseudonyms assigned to the participants.

Table 1

*Study Participants*

| Pseudonym | Age | Years of Teaching Experience | Credits Earned at Ortley | Graduate Education Concentration |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alexis | 29 | 6 | 9 | English as a Second Language |
| Barbara | 31 | 9 | 30 | Math |
| Ginny | 56 | 16 | 30 | Special Education |
| Helene | 50 | 10 | 21 | Reading |
| Janice | 48 | 7 | 18 | Special Education |
| Katie | 45 | 14 | 9 | Educational Leadership |
| Liz | 50 | 12 | 6 | Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant |
| Maddie | 37 | 5 | 6 | English as a Second Language |
| Nora | 45 | 20 | 24 | Language Arts Literacy |
| Pam | 35 | 3 | 15 | Curriculum, Content, & Assessment |
| Rose | 34 | 5 | 15 | English as a Second Language |
| Sara | 45 | 20 | 18 | Special Education |

This table is designed to serve as a visual representation and reference point for this study. Table 1 presents the participants' ages, teaching experience in years, the number of credits earned prior to attrition, and the Master of Art in Education concentration that the former students were enrolled in at Ortley University.

**Collecting and Analyzing the Data**

Eliciting responses from the former Ortley University student participants offers a deeper understanding of why these graduate students left the academy. The twelve participants all met the following criteria: all were former matriculated master's students who were enrolled for a minimum of two consecutive terms in a program taught by the faculty in the School of Education. All former students were in good academic standing at the time of departure, the drop out behavior occurred within the past three years, and

the students were working full-time while enrolled in their graduate programs. The selected participants varied by age (29-56 years), educational background, teaching experience (3-20 years), and all were former students who were enrolled in the same degree program at Ortley University but had differing concentrations.

**Data Collection**

Prior to collecting data for this study, all interview participants signed a consent form and a waiver so that I could review their admission application artifacts as another data source. The interviews generally took about 60 to 75 minutes each, although the students were given all the time they wanted. At the end of the scripted questions, each student was asked if there was anything that she would like to add that had not been brought up. On several occasions, once the digital recorder was turned off, the participants spoke about their experiences for an additional 30-40 minutes. These additional participant statements were collected as field notes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Following the interviews, the digital recordings were transcribed and drafts of the interview transcripts were shared with the participants along with a request for feedback as a form of member checking to verify the accuracy of the transcripts (Creswell, 2003; Dawkins & May, 2002; Glense & Peshkin, 1992). Later these verified participant transcripts were analyzed by marking them as described below.

A significant collection of admissions artifacts including student's applications, resumes, and essays added to the collection of empirical field materials (Hodder, 1994; Leavitt et al., 2011). In addition to these artifacts, University program documents, historical records, and local teaching contracts were procured. These materials provide background information, verified participant statements, and provided an opportunity to

further understand the phenomena. My research journal became a valuable data source for thoughts, feelings, and descriptions of these artifacts (Glesne, 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2003) providing me a way to recall and reflect on this research experience while allowing vigilant monitoring of potential researcher bias (Nelson, et al., 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

**Data Analysis**

In order to search for meaning, I immersed myself in the data, employing a recursive reflective process (Merriam, 1998). Notes and analytic memos captured impressions, thoughts, feelings, and reactions during all phases of the process (Strauss, 1987). Initial coding occurred using a line-by-line technique to illustrate the participant's words or phrases (Patton, 2002). Once this task was complete, I reviewed the data again looking for opinions, concepts, feelings, and other relevant codes. To identify themes, I marked similar words with different colored pencils, identifying repetitions of subjects and topics (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Saldana, 2009).

Once the 12 interviews were coded, a second coding cycle occurred and throughout coding cycles, verbatim codes were selected to ensure the accuracy of the participants' claims were reflected in the coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldana, 2009). Journal entries captured notes and reflections during all analytic stages. To gauge my objectivity, a fellow doctoral student acted as an "impartial debriefer" (Hail et al., 2011, p. 76), providing an external review of the data. Moreover, these peer debriefing sessions were vital, providing a level of verification to ensure an unbiased approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). Furthermore, these external audits assisted in delivering feedback, collecting alternate points of view, and serving to make me carefully

consider the identified themes. (Brandon, Cooper, & Lindberg, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996; Morse, 2015). More importantly, the peer debriefing sessions challenged my thoughts and further encouraged reflective practice (Moustakas, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Spall, 1998).

Following the completion of the peer debriefing sessions, I photocopied the printed copies and cut each color-coded excerpt into an individual slip of paper with the documented codes so I could move the data around to visualize the findings. Next, I entered each set of interview codes into an Excel spreadsheet, organized by the way the codes developed. Then I merged all of codes into one larger spreadsheet to view the totality of data in another format. This allowed me to search for meanings from the participant's experiences with ease. By chronicling these ideas, themes and subthemes began to emerge. Afterwards, I compared the emerged themes to the research questions that guided this study. I duplicated the spreadsheet again and began to group related codes into categories. I noted reactions, discoveries, first impressions, and frequencies in analytic memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A code manual was created to keep the data organized and ensure consistent coding of the text (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Lastly, I triangulated the data using multiple information sources to ensure accuracy, develop themes, identify patterns, and provide credibility to the research (Creswell, 2013). I reviewed all of the codes, again combining codes in an attempt to reduce the data and develop a list of significant categories and themes. These themes became the results below as they relate to notable student retention and attrition theories found during the literature review phase (Bean & Metzner, 1985; CGS, 2013; Gardner, 2008, 2009; Lovitts, 2001).

## Interview Outcomes

The purpose of the interviews was to gain further insights into education master's student attrition. Interviews encouraged these former students to provide details regarding their graduate school experiences as the primary source of data for this project. The interviews took place with the aid of a protocol that consisted of a series of open-ended questions. The questions were directed with four primary research goals: 1) developing rapport and introduction, 2) inquiry into graduate education, 3) inquiry into attrition, and 4) concluding ideas (Seidman, 2006).

The challenges surrounding our current educational system, the local community, and Ortley University required further review. Graduate student attrition is a silent, invisible problem that few administrators want to confront, and one that universities believe is intrinsic to the student (Lovitts, 2001). Academic departments rarely look inward for reasons as to why students may leave the academy (Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). However, prior research encourages institutions and researchers to speak to former students to gain an understanding of why former students attrit (CGS, 2013; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2016b; Willis & Carmichael, 2011).

## Uncovering Reasons for Leaving

Financial factors, dissatisfaction with academic course content, and personal challenges were three main themes that emerged from the data. In addition to the three main themes, subthemes were also identified that provide rich details to elaborate each of the themes. The number one reason why students do not complete their graduate degrees is the absence of financial support (CGS, 2013; Denecke, Feaster, Okahana, Allum, & Stone, 2016). This was stated by many of the participants, yet, many of the participants'

school districts provide tuition reimbursement or, in the case of two participants, a grant was available that would pay for their entire graduate school experience. Thus, the financial reasons for leaving piqued my curiosity to learn more about these unique circumstances former Ortley University students experienced.

### Theme 1: Financial Factors

Ten of the participant's school districts provided reimbursement for educational expenses. Nevertheless, many teachers do not receive a summer paycheck, which in turn makes paying tuition in early September a challenge. To keep teachers enrolled, Ortley University altered their payment plans. Nora stated, "The [University] created a payment plan where the first payment was not due until a month into the semester." This information was also verified by another participant. Maddie explained that many teachers "do not [earn a] paycheck in the summer so the first payment in the fall was tough. Dr. [Zabel] actually was able to arrange for our first payment to be due in October so we could save some money." Maddie appreciated the payment arrangements that are provided to off campus cohort students, but was shocked to find out that this was a cohort benefit only, an institutional secret, and information that is not publically published.

**Financial disappointments.** In addition to the challenges of making payments, two participants took part in a grant-funded program at no cost to the participants or the district. Barbara appeared disappointed when she explained, "I had the program paid for and gave it up." Barbara's reaction was in contrast to Helene's irritated response about how a math and science grant covered the cost of her tuition, "I really wanted to be a reading specialist but I would have had to pay out of pocket" for those courses. Finding alternate solutions to this challenge was something all participants understood. Dwindling

federal and state financial support in the 1990s reduced student funding and resulted in increased student loan indebtedness (Cassuto, 2015). Now, 26 years later, graduate students are often overwhelmed by their financial situations; they value student loan opportunities and understand how to apply for alternative funding sources.

**Student loan requirements.** As we know, students pursuing a master's degree already completed an undergraduate degree as a prerequisite for admission. Many of these students understood the financial resources that were available to them as undergraduates and often thought that the same federal student loans are available to graduate students (Chen & St. John, 2011; Gururaj, Heilig, & Somers, 2010; Shepherd & Mullins-Nelson, 2012). Many students who enroll as graduate students are only eligible for unsubsidized federal student loans or alternative private lender loans. This often occurs because subsidized student loans are based on financial need and all of the participants of this study were working full-time while enrolled in graduate school (Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, 2010). Thus, the participants of this study were only eligible for unsubsidized or alternative loans and only degree-seeking students can apply for these loans. Ten participants noted that they received some form of financial aid.

***Student classification*.** All of the interviewees (N=12) were classified as degree seeking students; this was the official student status at the University prior to the attrited action and verified by the participant's graduate school application artifacts. When applying to graduate school, an applicant must choose between the degree seeking option or the educational endorsement selection. Interestingly, three of these former students did not feel they attrited because they completed the coursework required to earn an

educational endorsement, which was their original goal; they indicated they were degree seeking to qualify for loans.

Rose captured the moment by stating, “I actually do not think I left my program. I just decided not to pursue the completion of my degree. I knew going in the only way to obtain [financial] aid was to be a degree seeking student.” This quote illustrates that Rose was savvy; she understood the financial aid process and knew only degree seeking students are eligible for federal financial aid (Shepherd & Mullins-Nelson, 2012). Rose was not alone in this matter; several other participants also sought a degree as a way of paying for their graduate coursework. Janice agreed with Rose saying, “I was [a] degree seeking [student] so I could obtain [student] loans.”

In another account, Maddie stated, “Once I completed the course for the endorsement I really needed to stop. It [the tuition and fees] was expensive and I did not want to travel to campus” to complete the degree. In the case of another participant, Sarah commented, “I only had to take seven classes and at the end I would have earned a special education endorsement.” Alexis further explained, “I am not certified for [my current] position. I do have an emergency certificate but I was told I would need to complete an endorsement program to ensure that the emergency certificate would transfer.” Later in the interview, Alexis also stated, “I applied as a degree seeking student to receive the financial aid benefits, but I only intended to complete enough classes to obtain my educational endorsement.” These participant responses prompted me to question the attrited behavior; because, if the student is not seeking a degree, then their student classification should reflect the educational endorsement they are seeking. The changes from endorsement seeking to degree seeking were verified through admission

artifacts and document analysis (Rapley, 2007). However, seeking only the endorsement, the student's financial aid disappears. Thus, incorrect student classifications may skew retention data. If these former students remain classified as degree seeking students, then this will have a negative impact on program retention and completion rates.

**Barriers to graduate enrollment.** For many years, K-12 educators were able to enroll in graduate courses, use their contractual benefits to aid in their professional growth, and offset the personal financial burden at will. Today, each school district has requirements for utilizing these funds, which are sometimes perceived as barriers. These include stringent district specific requirements including required paperwork, authorization, and extended contractual obligations (New Jersey School Board Association [NJSBA], 2016).

**Limited reimbursements.** Financial issues are not new to the graduate school community; however, several interviewees passionately expressed the desperate need of financial assistance for graduate students. School districts are no longer providing unlimited reimbursements for graduate courses and several school districts limit the reimbursement to what is identified as high need content areas (i.e. Special Education and English as a Second Language (ESL) coursework). Janice was outspoken and freely shared:

> I want to keep my job so I am looking for ways to keep my employment and I thought if I went back to school to obtain my LDTC [Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant], I would be able to serve the district in other capacities. I would also like to complete my Pre School-Grade 3 endorsement someday. But right now that is not something my district is looking for [or will approve].

**Advanced permission.** In order to obtain eligibility for these contracted benefits, two of the participants had to meet, in person, with their superintendents to obtain authorization as stated in their collective bargaining contract. These meetings are an opportunity for an open discussion to explain the benefits provided. However, Ginny voiced her displeasure with this process by stating, "I needed to obtain the superintendent's approval. This is a formal meeting where you outline your goals and why you want to take the classes; it can be overwhelming in the least and another hoop to jump through" to ensure reimbursement. Sara also shared her thoughts about obtaining permission:

> I had to obtain permission from the super [intendent] prior [to enrolling] and that was a process and half. I would have rather filled out a form. I needed to meet each time so we could discuss what I was taking and why. I appreciate the support, but in a way that was a hassle and one more meeting I needed to fit into my busy schedule.

***Additional years of service.*** In addition to required meetings, several school districts also require a specified number of years of service upon the completion of the graduate coursework. These years of service are obligated within the district before leaving or retiring. Rose shared, "if an employee resigns before the [repayment of] years of service, a reimbursement would be prorated for these educational expenses." This is similar in the healthcare sector, and several New Jersey negotiated agreements now designate a required three-to-four years of service following the completion of the graduate coursework (NJSBA, 2016).

Ginny explained:

> My husband and I sat down to discuss our finances and since I am approaching retirement age we took into account that although I was enjoying my studies I had to consider I am five years away from retirement. If I continue to take classes, I would have to extend my contract beyond the age we agreed upon [retirement age]. So, I decided it was better to stop now.

These statements illustrate a direct link between contractual benefits and graduate student attrition. In a recent NJSBA (2016) report, 32 school districts in the State of New Jersey ratified changes to the teacher's contract that included a change in the district's tuition reimbursement clause. This includes the suspension or elimination of tuition reimbursement, reducing the amount of contracted benefits, as well as adding an additional year on to the amount of time that an employee must complete to be eligible for tuition reimbursement (NJSBA, 2016). Education graduate students have increasingly been experiencing problems obtaining loans and financing their education. To offset the cost of their graduate educational expenses, students have been creatively looking for alternative ways to finance these expenses. Applying for scholarships and graduate assistantships is a shift from prior generations when reimbursements flourished.

**Creating cohorts for discounted tuition rates.** To offset challenges with reimbursements and to guarantee enrollment at the university, many higher education institutions are creating learning communities in the form of cohorts in partnership with local school districts (Manfra & Bolick, 2008; Tom, 1999). These cohorts provide powerful benefits for school districts because teachers pursuing a master's degree in this fashion creates learning communities in which fellow colleagues critique teaching lessons

and grow together in practice in a structured, faculty guided environment (Galluzzo, et al., 2012). Creation of off campus cohorts has increased and ten of the respondents stated they were recruited as part of an off campus cohort initiative within their school district. Monetary incentives were touted in the form of tuition discounts. The discounts were tiered and depended upon the number of students enrolled each semester.

Katie explained, “There was a monetary incentive, if we had 12 or more district employees taking these courses at the same time there would be a discount. I know if we had 15 or 18 more the discount increased.” Alexis also stated enthusiastically, “we were promised a discount on our tuition.” In another example, Nora stated, “if we [the cohort] completed the entire program [as a] cohort we would [earn a free course].” While Pam responded, “I did not comparison shop [when choosing my program],” she continued to explain that another district teacher, who was trying to form a cohort because of the tuition discount, recruited her. Rose voiced her displeasure, “We were promised a special price when we enrolled [but] it was like pulling teeth to obtain our discount. The discount was only about $60 per credit but it made a difference to me.” Rose did not appreciate the fact that her bill was never correct and felt that it was too much to handle each term so she also decided not to reenroll.

Despite the cohort pressure, Liz also departed from her cohort and expressed “it was tough in the beginning because many of my colleagues were in the cohort and their discount was altered when I decided not to return. Eventually we all moved on,” she said with relief. Financial challenges, however, were not the only reason why former students left Ortley University; some participants mentioned additional factors, related to course and academic requirements, that influenced former graduate students’ decisions to leave.

**Theme 2: Dissatisfaction with Academic Course Content**

The graduate school experience advances one's undergraduate degree with specialized academic coursework that add to one's professional experiences, but similarities between the two academic levels vary greatly. A graduate student is expected to interpret vague unfamiliar content in her own manner without the professor's guidance. This unguided pedagogy is often the cause for dissatisfaction for individuals who are expecting the graduate experience to mirror the undergraduate experience (Gentry & Whitley, 2014). Students enrolled in some academic disciplines understand the commitment necessary to complete an advanced degree. An example would be healthcare graduate students; these students understand that they enroll in courses for two to three years of intense training with additional clinical experiences. These students are not yet considered professionals, and often look to their faculty members for academic socialization opportunities that are an important professional rite of passage (Dawkins & May, 2002).

Yet, not all academic disciplines encompass the same academic cultures, rites of passage, or provide the same opportunities for academic and social integration. Graduate students who engage in program and academic activities, and are successful, are more integrated into their academic programs and more committed to persisting to graduation (Lovitts, 2001). Nevertheless, three participants cited dissatisfaction with the academic course content as their reason for leaving the academy, including academic content juxtaposed with undergraduate academic standards in two cases and unmet high expectations in another case.

**Academic rigor or lack of academic standards.** While listening to the stories of former students, Nora and Liz believed their graduate experience would be similar to their undergraduate experience. This determination is often apparent when a student arrives at a university with preconceived ideas or expectations (Sindelar & Rosenberg, 2000). Rigorous requirements, intense academic workload, and stress are synonymous with graduate school (Lunceford, 2011). Students must understand the complexities of the discipline and understand the investment of time and energy prior to embarking upon this journey (Offstein, Larson, McNeill, & Mwale, 2004). During Nora's interview, she stated:

> The professor sent us the syllabus two weeks before the term began. We had to read the first 15 chapters before the second-class meeting and write a 500-word commentary about our readings. I completed all of the assignments by the skin of my teeth. Fifteen chapters by week two, who does that? This was an elective on steroids. The hardest class by far. I walked in prepared and satisfied but I sat in total confusion and WAY out of my element.

Nora's frustration was palpable, the rapid pace and sizeable assignments overwhelmed her and she eventually dropped out of the class. Likewise, Liz expressed:

> The intensity of the curriculum shocked me. I fared well in my undergraduate coursework but this was more intense. I really had to be a master at time management and I had to concentrate on the readings. Since the classes were hybrid, I could not just sit in the back of the room and act like I completed the work. I spent hours reading and completing assignments.

In contrast to Nora's criticisms about the fast pace of her elective class, Pam did not feel that the content met her expectations either:

> I did not feel challenged in my last class [and] I felt I knew more about technology than my professor did. It was not a bad class but I did not think we had the time to get into the depth of the subject matter like I wanted to. The semesters were very short … I thought we just touched the surface in a lot of regard and I wanted more. So I guess you could say I was frustrated. The topics were glossed over and we did not have a chance to get in depth. We did not have textbooks. There were trade books [assigned] that we read but we never discussed the content. After a while, I stopped reading.

Research indicates that experienced teachers often look to increase their professional skills, but must experience a connection between the coursework and their professional work environments. These practitioners are not interested in busywork and are only satisfied when they leave the academic environment with skills and useful tools to employ in their classrooms (Manfra & Bolick, 2008).

**Dissatisfaction with academic course offerings.** Course content was not the only complaint expressed by the participants. Barbara was amazed that the research class she needed to graduate was only offered once a year. She explained:

> I had to take a semester off because I coach and I could not figure how I would manage my coaching responsibilities and taking classes. It was a dumb thing to do because I only had the research class and capstone left to complete. I was told that the research class was only offered in the fall and I really could not figure out how to balance all of my commitments.

Barbara continued bitterly with another example when she stated:

> I went to school to be a teacher not a researcher … Since the course was required [and] I needed some flexibility in the fall, I approached the professor to see if she would be flexible with me missing [an occasional] class or if I could receive an incomplete [grade] and complete the assignments once the semester was over but she was not receptive to the idea.

Performing research can be a new curricular experience for some students, and one that not all practitioners embrace; thus, mentoring is crucial to helping students overcome their research angst (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Barbara also expressed that she did not want to drop the required class, but she also did not seek alternatives or guidance. Dissatisfaction with academic content is not something new, but is identified as a reason why many doctoral students leave their programs (Lovitts, 2001). In addition to those participants' stories centered around course content, Janice provided, "I was getting tired of attending classes with a younger group of students." Ortley instituted a Direct Entry Program for high achieving undergraduate students, a program change Janice did not appreciate, she stated:

> I would encourage the University to reconsider the direct entry program and require the graduate students to have 2-3 years of teaching experience before they begin a master's program. I feel it provides for a more meaningful experience and provides great synergy in the classroom. The younger students do not have much to add to the discussion; at times they are really a pain to sit next to in class and reading their online posts are almost painful.

The statements above provide examples of personal dissatisfaction with one's academic program and are important concerns the academic programs should consider.

**Need for academic advising.** In addition to course content and offerings, it is important to note that participants' relationships with their academic advisors varied from person to person. Six of the participants were unaware of their academic advisor's identity, and Lisa expressed that she did not think she needed an advisor because her cohort curriculum was preset and she did not have any courses to choose. This may be the case for the cohort members who were retained. However, in Nora's case when she became academically challenged, rather than turn to an advisor for guidance, she dropped out. Nora stated, "I am not sure I had an advisor." In retrospect, Nora recognizes that her decision to take time away from her studies directly impacted her ability to continue. Nora expressed, "I am not sure if one [an advisor] was necessary because I was part of the cohort and all of my classes were picked out for me. I guess I could have used one when I stopped out and reenrolled." The relationships between faculty and students and students and advisors are critical to academic integration and can be a reason for attrition (Golde, 2000).

***Precepting as teaching*.** Campus documents state that one of the University's founding principles and most revered traditions is known as precepting as teaching. This principal requires that all faculty members engage in mentoring in the form of a preceptorial teaching system, which occurs on a regular basis. A preceptor (Latin word for teacher), is a mentor of sorts who establishes relationships and works with students individually and in small groups. According to campus documents, the preceptor counsels, supports, and provides career and academic guidance. The notion of precepting

derives from Ortley University's espousal that the preceptor is the source of information about activities, events, career pursuits, and provides a safe environment where the student can make decisions by challenging her assumptions and goals (Lowenstein 2005). In the early days of the University, preceptorial teaching was a weeklong event; today, the dedication to this system entails two days that occur in the middle of a semester, a week apart, and all students are required to participate (Tilley, 1971). Ortley University's precepting system is a distinct tradition, providing personalized attention; a connection to not only the institution, but also to the student's academic program and intellectual discipline (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Tilley, 1971).

An important component to retaining graduate students is the connection to one's academic program, especially because an academic department's culture differs from program to program and not all processes are the same for all programs (Golde, 1998; 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Moreover, academic advising increases student retention and time to degree completion since the student will not waste time enrolling in classes she does not need to graduate (Wiseman & Messitt, 2010). Although the University reveres the preceptorial advising system, six participants stated they were unaware that this experience pertained to them; furthermore, they were not aware that they also had an assigned program advisor.

In addition to not knowing their academic advisors, seven participants did not attend an orientation program. Ortley University's graduate student orientation program was another attempt to provide a path for educational master's students to become integrated into the academic community (Golde, 1998; Poock 2004, 2008; Sherman, 2013). However, this effort is, obviously, insufficient. Financial factors and

dissatisfaction with academic content are two themes that many of the participants voiced. The next section will outline the themes and subthemes that developed via the illumination of a subgroup of the participants. Personal challenges are common to everyday life; yet, the participants of this study shared heartfelt reasons why they were unable to continue their graduate school experience.

**Theme 3: Personal Challenges**

It is customary for adult learners to juggle various aspects of their lives in addition to work, parental responsibilities, and relationships (Fairchild, 2003; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). Fulltime responsibilities, coupled with limited financial support, work, and family responsibilities, are demanding; adding academic requirements can create emotional and psychological duress (Labosier, & Labosier, 2011; Grady et al, 2014; McKinzie, Altramura, Burgoon, & Bishop, 2006; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007; Robotham, 2008; Stevenson & Harper, 2006). Issues related to interpersonal relationships, family expectations, career advancement, caregiving responsibilities, financial situations, employment responsibilities, and health conditions, aggravate stressors and school related events (Liu & Umberson, 2015; Schilling & Diehl, 2014). Women experience higher levels of physical and emotional stress symptoms than their male counterparts (American Psychological Association, 2010; Hankin and Abramson, 2001; Liu & Umberson, 2015; Matud, 2004; Turner and Avison, 2003). These stressors provide a variety of outcomes. Katie stated:

> The first semester was ok. I felt stressed but it was manageable. But the second semester I was going to always miss a basketball practice and I felt awful. I really love being on the sidelines for them. I always want my boys to know I support

> them. The next term was a summer class and this was an intense either two week or a month course. Well I had to find somewhere for the boys to go and I could not take them to the community pool each day. I had family support but I did not want to miss them. I live for these summers off with them and this was torture.

Katie's struggle to balance her childcare responsibilities and her educational responsibilities began to affect her time in the classroom. As Katie stated, she felt guilty trying to balance both academic and non-academic roles. Personal relationships experience strain because academic priorities often interfere with personal life activities (Brus, 2006; Johnson, Batia, & Haun, 2008). It should be noted that peer and academic support are known to ameliorate stress (Dawkins & May, 2002); conversely, feelings of isolation increase one's need to leave the academy (Lovitts, 2001). In the end, Katie's family responsibilities were the reason she attrited.

**Balancing multiple responsibilities.** Personal challenges appear in all shapes and sizes, but one that is often cited in the literature is finding and accepting the balance of responsibilities. These are personal and every student experiences these differently. Some thrive having to balance multiple priorities, while others feel overwhelmed and need to make difficult choices (Brus, 2006; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Labosier, & Labosier, 2011; Liu, & Umberson, 2015). Managing how one uses the twenty-four hour a day period can be just as challenging as balancing multiple roles. Barbara stated she "could not figure out how to balance all of my commitments. I felt that a research class would be too tough to try and balance along with my coaching obligations."

In another example, Liz expressed:

> I spent hours reading and completing assignments. I was able to apply the content to my classroom, but with a fulltime job, family, and other commitments I often

> felt tired and overwhelmed. The first semester I was tired all of the time. As I said previously, I had to really work on managing my time and balancing the priorities. It was during the second term that my husband noticed I was cranky all the time and he approached me and asked how he could help. At that point I was just overwhelmed and we talked at length about a variety of options and it was determined maybe now was not my time.

Helene expressed, "I did not enjoy the homework because I had to choose between my son's games and projects and finding balance took time and energy." Time constraints and balancing multiple priorities is hard to accomplish, especially in a non-supportive environment (Brus, 2006; Lunceford, 2011; Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Perceived stress is a conflict between one's role as a graduate student and one's personal and professional roles; social support (social integration) can mitigate these issues (Johnson, Batia & Haun, 2008).

**Family influence.** Female first generation graduate students pose a higher risk of attrition because their families do not always understand the importance of the higher education system (Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Seay et al., 2008). This graduate school journey creates new experiences for both the graduate student and their families, who are less familiar with how to negotiate the academic landscape (Arbelo-Marrero, 2016; Lunceford, 2011; Seay et al., 2008). A prominent theme threading through Sara's account was her family's influences. She confided that she felt restricted and conflicted because of the family pressure she experienced:

> I am a first in my family to go to college so it was an emotional time for me. My family did not understand why this was an important application and when I

> received my acceptance letter they [the family] began asking all sorts of questions about why would I want to return to school. My mother's English is poor and she had trouble at first understanding the reasons why I wanted this so badly. … Returning to school was like the whole family was going with me.

While Sara's decision to leave graduate school was primarily rooted in her families' inabilities to adapt, it is Sara's hope to someday return, "I just need to be at home with my children right now and save a little money so I can return someday and be a role model for my children." Sara was not alone in her family responsibilities. Liz also replied, "After the second class I realized that this was too much for my family and I." Liz felt she was good at balancing multiple responsibilities, but the stress of graduate school was too much.

**Community economic impact.** Several of the participants are employed in a local urban school district that is experiencing grave financial problems. Janice and Helene were participants who openly described their employment insecurities surrounding their personal reasons for leaving their graduate programs. They felt that their job security would be in jeopardy if they continued to earn additional graduate credits. Janice spoke openly:

> I am really not sure what is going on in [the city] right now and how that will influence my future. I am going to take time off and really consider whether to return or not. I want a meaningful experience with academic credentials that mean something to myself and my district. And I do not want to lose my job if I am considered over qualified and over paid [for other employment opportunities].

While Helene shared:

> When word began to circulate about the potential problems in [the city], the first thing folks think about is the high salaries teachers earn. Girl, I do not have to tell you that my job is not easy. I see more crime and social issues that would make many people's heads spin. Anyway, our district began to cut back on the amount of tuition assistance they were providing and my supervisor told me to be careful not to price myself out of the market.

Janice, Helene, and two additional participants also expressed economic and employment concerns about their urban experience, yet only Janice and Helene agreed have their personal concerns digitally recorded. Since two participants were not willing to express their concerns while the digital recorder was on, I noted these two additional conversations in my field notebook. According to my field notes, the urban environment, described by four of the participants, is deeply impoverished, and has a 9% unemployment rate (United State Department of Labor, May 2016). The magnitude of this current climate added to their personal concerns about job security. Specifically, what would happen if they ended up on the unemployment line. Would school districts value their experiences or would they be overqualified by some standards? In the public school sector, "teaching has historically been a relatively secure occupation: Most teachers know there is a high probability that they can continue in their current position … and in most districts, they also know what salary they are likely to receive" (Goldhaber, 2015, p. 88). Yet, today, layoffs and terminations can occur if dire economic circumstances present themselves (Boyd, Lankfod, Loeb, & Wycoff, 2011; Goldhaber,

2015; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2011). These concerns may be specific to this urban community and a topic for future research.

**Summary of Findings**

In summary, the challenges surrounding our current educational system, the local community, and Ortley University required further review and this dissertation provided an opportunity for former educational master's students to contribute valuable responses. Pivotal in each interview was the complex lives graduate students live (Golde, 2000). Balancing multiple priorities is a norm and, as such, may be difficult for the university to address. As an adult learner, it is reassuring to know that others before me have succeeded; discussing the challenges, providing support, and understanding that it takes a village to accomplish one's academic goals is an important component to graduate students' success.

The findings presented in this chapter provide examples of the importance of interviewing former students to unveil the silent, invisible reasons attrition occurs. These issues are no longer intrinsic to the student and do impact the larger university community (Lovitts, 2001). This qualitative study illustrates the importance of examining all facets of the graduate school experience when a student leaves the academy; no longer can an academic department or university solely blame a former student for leaving the academy (CGS, 2013; Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2016b; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). By studying this topic at a deeper level, themes emerge that otherwise would have remained silent. Qualitative data, collectively, is uniquely suited to uncover different meaning in everyday conversations. What we often hold valid can be refuted;

qualitative inquiry supports both the iterative process of discovery and a researcher looking beyond the obvious (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

## Limitations, Biases, Assumptions, and Insights

This research study provides valuable information to the program and Ortley University, but is not without shortcomings. The former students who volunteered to participate in this research project shared important details about their graduate school journey. Yet, this collection of detailed stories does not represent all viewpoints and provides a limited account of why educational master's student attrition occurs.

**Limitations.** This study had several limitations that occurred during the research process. These included interviewing a small sample size of former students because not all attrited education master's students volunteered to partake in this research study. Therefore, the outcomes of this study are not generalizable, and, when duplicating this research study in the future, the identified themes may change because factors that influence a former student's decision to leave one's graduate program could vary from person to person. Personal recollection and lack of participant diversity were additional limitations to this study.

***Personal recollection.*** As a researcher embarking upon the first big study, I must consider the fact that these former students have had time to reflect upon their own personal experiences, and that the actual reasons that influenced their attrited behavior may have changed over time. Several of the former students were last enrolled three years ago and, over time, human beings alter personal stories in an attempt to make themselves feel more comfortable about sensitive situations (Schank & Abelson, 1995). It is also possible that recollection of what occurred could have been for entertainment or

for exploring what the participant thought I (as the researcher) wanted to hear (Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky, 2004). Other empirical studies acknowledge that research participants may repress negative or stressful events knowing they provoke too many undesirable feelings. Thus, telling stories helps individuals to cope and, over time, these stories become what individuals believe (Dudukovic et al., 2004; Schank & Abelson, 1995; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000).

***Lack of participant diversity.*** When identifying former students, I originally felt it was important to consider those former students who enrolled in another graduate program after they dropped out of Ortley University. This would allow the participants to explain and describe the how, what, and why of these phenomena (Giorgi, 2009). Interviewing former students who enrolled in other programs would have provided me with the ability to gain a better understanding of how consumer behavior and the marketization of higher education affect master's degree student retention. Unfortunately, another limit of this study was that the former graduate students who enrolled in other institutions, while a small percentage of the total attrition, did not wish to participate. Discussing student attrition is challenging because many of our former students no longer feel part of the college experience and these former students have no incentive to participate in this dissertation (Broscious, Darby, & Loftin, 2007). After two selected attempts to contact these individuals, only one agreed to participate. She later stated that, because of too many responsibilities, an interview would not be possible.

Not to be defeated by the lack of participants and, with the assistance of a trusted colleague, we mined the data to determine the next contact. In the end, 12 participants agreed to participate. Each participant received an e-mail correspondence approved by

both Institutional Review Boards. Another consideration is that Ortley University only has two master's degree programs that enroll certified teachers; the Master of Arts in Education and Master of Arts in Instructional Technology students, but only former Master of Arts in Education students participated, limiting the diversity of the participants. Another limitation of my study was that ten of the respondents were former off-campus cohort program students. Although the findings presented provide valuable information, these findings are specific to a limited student population and do not represent all former student viewpoints.

**Researcher Bias**

In an attempt to minimize researcher bias, I continually examined my espoused beliefs (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004) regarding graduate education, my research regarding doctoral attrition and retention, and stories provided by current and former students. Using my research journal kept an account of thoughts, feelings, while reflecting on my own educational experiences. I contrasted my espousals with practices while examining my research findings in relation to theories, research, literature, and best practices in graduate education. I acknowledge that it was important to address and reflect on the interview participants and my preconceived notions and attempt to bracket out these thoughts while interviewing and completing the write-up for this project (Creswell, 2013).

The goal of a qualitative research study is to minimize the impact of the researcher on the data collection, analysis, and final manuscript. Bracketing one's thoughts and feelings was a critical part of this project; without bracketing one's thoughts and feelings, research bias and validity could be questioned (Chan, Fung, & Chien,

2013). This became critically challenging during the later phase of data collection when a few of the participants began to explain similar stories. As this occurred, I documented thoughts, feelings, and assumptions in the margins of the protocol as a way to provide additional documentation and employed critical colleagues to review the data to ensure my biases were not employed, thus verifying or challenging the outcomes.

**Creditability and Validity**

As a researcher and insider, I often struggled with the issue of bias because I wanted to ensure I presented this phenomenon in the most trustworthy manner. I understood the importance of creditability and validity and I questioned the responses I received from my interview participants, often reflecting these thoughts and feelings in my research journal. I engaged in many hours of research combing through K-12 teaching contracts, program documents, annual reports, and other artifacts to see if what my interviewees stated was true. During one such member-checking (Creswell, 2003), I discovered that I needed to further pursue the district contracts to further investigate whether school districts are supporting advanced degrees and how possible financial assistance is allocated. To review external validity, I engaged in peer-debriefing sessions to receive critical feedback and collect alternate points of view (Brandon et al., 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). These peer-debriefing sessions challenged my thoughts and further encouraged reflective practice (Moustakas, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Spall, 1998). Lastly, I ensured that I triangulated participant responses with document data in an attempt to provide creditability, a significant component in determining the validity of any research project (Merriam, 2009). I had an obligation to represent the former participants' stories in their own words, while upholding

confidentially, and employing a strong ethical and moral code of conduct through the entire research process (Baez, 2002; Kaiser, 2009; Weiss, 1994).

## Chapter Summary

The themes in this chapter were presented by the frequency for which the data developed and, subsequently I transitioned to the more specific reasons that influenced why former Ortley University students withdrew from their graduate program. In the past, graduate student attrition was based solely upon doctoral student research. This study provides that master's student attrition does not need to be an invisible problem: academic departments and practitioners should be encouraged to speak to former students to gain an understanding of why former students attrit (CGS, 2013; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2016b; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). This chapter reports the results from data collected through participant interviews, artifact collection and researcher documentation. The goal of this study was to determine why educational master's students attrit from Ortley University and, although this does not represent all viewpoints, the data from this study provides a place to begin a discussion about developing methods to mitigate future graduate student attrition.

The general themes that emerged were that financial factors, dissatisfaction with academic course content, and personal challenges contribute to why former educational master's attrition occurs. These general themes are not new revelations. However, surprises developed as I moved further away from general themes into specific subthemes. Financial disappointments (Cohen, 2005); student loan requirements (Shepherd & Mullins-Nelson, 2012); barriers to graduate enrollment (Quarterman, 2008) including limited reimbursements, advanced permission, additional years of service

(NJSBA, 2016), and the creation of cohorts for discounted tuition rates (Chairs et al, 2002; Galluzzo et al., 2012; Manfra & Bolick, 2008; Tom, 1999) were identified as dominant financial factors. Academic rigor (Draeger, Del, & Mahler, 2015), academic challenges (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hine, 2013; Lovitts, 2001), dissatisfaction with academic course offerings (Lovitts, 2001), and the need for academic advising and mentoring (Golde, 2000) were other influential subthemes. While balancing multiple responsibilities (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Labosier & Labosier, 2011; Liu, & Umberson, 2015), family influence (Lunceford, 2011; Seay et al., 2008), and community economic impact were persuasive personal challenge subthemes. The next chapter answers the research questions for this study, situates these findings in the limited empirical literature available, details the insights and observations about master's student attrition, and provides recommendations for all University stakeholders.

# Chapter 5

## Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

Previous research supports the notion that master's degree student attrition exists in universities across the globe and that this topic should be examined in more detail (CGS, 2013; Lovitts, 2001; Malcom & Dowd, 2012; Millett, 2003). Thus, this qualitative research study explored education master's degree students' perceptions of why they left the academy. Through this research, participants' points of view were gathered, interpreted, and synthesized to answer the research questions. As stated previously, extensive research has been conducted on graduate student persistence, but much of the prior research focused only upon doctoral students. Moreover, the seminal research on master's degree students' persistence focused on former science, technology, engineering, math (STEM), and business (MBA) students (CGS, 2013).

Hence, this study contributes to the field of graduate education by examining education majors and supports the claims that master's degree student attrition occurs for multiple reasons (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Cross, 1981; Lovitts, 2001; Polson, 2003). As the key informant, I collected data through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with twelve volunteer research participants at Ortley University. In addition to interviews, admission artifacts, program documents, and district employment contracts added to the data collected for this study. This chapter reviews, analyzes, and discusses, in light of the relevant literature, the findings presented in Chapter Four. This chapter is organized in five sections: 1) discussion of findings, organized by the research questions and themes; 2) implications for practice; 3) implications for future research; 4) leadership reflections; and 5) the conclusion.

## Findings

The primary goal of this dissertation was to understand the education master's student attrition phenomena by answering the following research questions:

1. Why do some education master's students attrit?
2. How do attrited education master's students describe their experiences?
3. To what extent do attrited students enroll elsewhere?
4. How do institutional factors contribute to student attrition?
5. To what extent do personal educational goals influence a student's decision to leave the academy?

Specifically, this research study explored why these students attrited, giving voice to an invisible problem (Lovitts, 2001). A summary of the finding of my research, as it relates to the above research questions and to previous literature, are presented in each of the forthcoming sections.

### Reasons for Attrition

The conclusions drawn from these data answer the first research question: why do some education master's student attrit? The former students who participated in this study left Ortley University for three main reasons: (a) financial factors, (b) dissatisfaction with academic course content, and (c) personal challenges. In addition to the three main themes, subthemes also emerged from the data and are included in the analysis. It is through the identification of the subthemes that, this study adds to the larger body of literature.

**Attrition as a key term.** In order to proceed with a discussion of my finding, it is imperative that I first explore my definition of attrition. In this study, attrition is defined

as a student voluntarily leaving her graduate program for two or more consecutive terms. Following her departure and failure to reenroll, it was assumed that she was longer actively pursuing her educational goals at Ortley University. Nevertheless, what we think we know can be misleading. This was apparent when several of the former students indicated that they had not attrited because they completed the coursework required to earn an educational endorsement, which was their original educational goal. Utilizing admission file artifacts, I was able to confirm that the participants did, indeed, complete their educational goals, but this was not something that was apparent to me prior to beginning this study. These are unique finding and a potential contribution to the literature.

**Impact of student loan requirements.** As was clear in the study's findings; three graduate students who signed up for state issued educational endorsements were not aware that they needed to seek a graduate degree to qualify for alternate loans. The data in this study indicates that Alexis, Maddie, and Rose, openly expressed that they only intended to complete an educational endorsement. The data from this study affirm that these women edited their educational endorsement applications so they could pursue a graduate degree and be eligible for federal financial opportunities. This is an important consideration since these former students were considered non-completers and thus, the data challenge the prior definition of attrition. In summary, financial factors do impact graduate enrollment, yet all students who depart do not claim to be dropouts. In addition to student loans requirements, it is important to discuss other financial barriers that impact graduate student enrollment.

**Understanding financial motivation.** As stated prior, key findings from this study indicate that financial challenges impacted participants' decisions to remain enrolled in graduate school. Literature specifically points to the fact that inadequate funding provides motivation for attrition (CGS, 2013; Lovitts, 2001; Malcom & Dowd, 2012; Millett, 2003). Ginny, Janice, and Maddie expressed that the educational expenses were excessive. This was particularly true with adult learners, who have other financial responsibilities, such as prior student loans, mortgage payments, and childcare expenses (Morgenthaler, 2009). Additionally, the literature agrees that graduate students, regardless of their academic program, experience challenges paying their tuition bills (Cohen, 2005).

***Enrollment barriers.*** Ginny, Sarah, and Janice further identified barriers that impact reimbursement procedures. According to my data, these financial restrictions are new for some school districts (NJSBA, 2016). Janice explained that only courses and degrees in high need content areas were covered by her employment contract. In another example, Ginny and Rose voiced their displeasure concerning the limitations to the reimbursement policies and other contractual changes. Ginny explained that her employment contract states that teachers who participate in the district's tuition reimbursement program would be required to continue their employment within the school district for a specific number of years following the completion of coursework (NJSBA, 2016). These are not practical options for participants who were considering leaving their school districts. Yet, expecting employers to pay students' tuition is a practice of the past (NJSBA, 2016). Therefore, many graduate students rely on student loans or personal savings to pay for graduate coursework. Although many participants

expressed financial challenges, these were not the only themes that emerged. As noted in other studies, not everyone will be satisfied with a program's pedagogical content or instructional method, yet this was another theme that emerged from this study's findings (Lovitts, 2001).

**Curricular Dissatisfaction.** Several participants expressed dissatisfaction with course content (Gentry & Whitley, 2014; Lovitts, 2001; Lunceford, 2011), academic rigor or lack of academic standards (Manfra & Bolick, 2008), and the absence of academic advising (Golde, 2000), similar to previous doctoral student attrition research (Lovitts, 2001). For example, Nora was dissatisfied with the rapid pace and extensive syllabus she received and she felt her professor was requiring "too much coursework" for an elective class. Liz spoke about the intensity; the volume of class assignments made her feel overwhelmed. In contrast, Pam did not feel challenged by her course content and felt that the course lectures were not aligned to the readings. Prior research indicates that experienced teachers are not interested in busywork and are only satisfied when they leave the academic environment with skills and useful tools to employ in their own classrooms (Manfra & Bolick, 2008). Nevertheless, there are volumes of research that affirms that students benefit from academic advising (Creighton et al., 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Mullen, 2006; Nettles & Millett, 2006), and that the advisor serves an integral role in an advanced degree program (Noy & Ray, 2012; Rose, 2005).

***Need for academic advising.*** Another theme that emerged from the data had to do with advising. Six of the participants were not aware that they had an assigned academic advisor, yet all graduate students are assigned an advisor upon admission. In fact, Ortley University prides itself on advising as an integral part of the curriculum, as supported by

campus artifacts. For instance, if someone had interviewed Barbara and Nora prior to leaving there may have been a possibility that the attrited action could have been prevented. In light of this situation, Nora stated that she did not think cohort students needed an advisor, which highlights a disconnect between the data and a revered campus tradition of academic precepting. Nonetheless, the lack of advising could also contribute to a lack of academic and social integration, which is another topic that influences graduate student attrition (Lovitts, 2001; Noy & Ray, 2012; Seay et al., 2008; Tinto, 2006, 2012a, 2012b). In general, important interaction within the wider learning community of the University and one's academic community is essential (Walker et al., 2008). Lack of support, or a perceived lack of support, can have negative consequences that influence student attrition (Cockrell & Shelly, 2011; Leijen, Lepp, & Remmik, 2015).

**Personal Complications.** As we learned through the study's findings, a majority of the participants experienced personal complications that influenced attrition, which agrees with previous research (CGS, 2013; Fairchild, 2003; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Lovitts, 2001). Approximately a third of the former master's students acknowledged that they had concerns about time management and balancing multiple responsibilities. For instance, Helene actually stated she was enjoying her courses, but felt the time constraints took away from the time with her son. Another challenge outlined by Sara and Liz was that their families greatly influenced former students' decisions to leave their master's program (Seay et al., 2008; Shepherd & Mullins-Nelson, 2012). Sara and Liz expressed being torn by family responsibilities and that these duties influenced their decisions to leave their master's coursework behind. The literature and my data concur on this point,

and all former students were full-time educators with outside commitments, including family responsibilities. Therefore, coursework required the reallocation of time and energy (El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Labosier & Labosier, 2011; Liu, & Umberson, 2015).

Another topic that also appears to be consistent with the literature is that one's environment does impact one's ability to be retained (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Fairchild, 2003). Janice, Helene, and two additional participants expressed their concerns about their working environments and these concerns influenced their attrited actions. For the most part, rigorous requirements, intense academic workload, and stress are synonymous with graduate school. In summary, the participants of this study expressed several reasons why they left Ortley University. These include: financial factors, dissatisfaction with academic course content, and personal challenges. The next section of this paper will answer research question number two and examine how former students described their master's degree experience.

**Attrited Student Perceptions of Graduate School**

Most of the participants of this study communicated that their graduate school experience was positive and that they appreciated the practical nature of the classes. Specifically, five of the participants expressed that a favorite assignment was a project where the students videotaped themselves teaching a class lesson. Upon completion, the students had to critique themselves and share their experiences with the class. This was an ongoing project spanning the entire semester and many respondents stated that they saw great growth in their classroom instruction that they credited to this project. Notably, this was an important discovery, because the literature states a student who is unhappy

with her graduate school experience may find fault and decide to leave the academy without further consideration (Butler, 2011; Hirschman, 1970).

It is also important to note that, as previously stated, Nora, Pam, and Liz openly expressed their negative perceptions that influenced their decisions to attrit. In these cases, Nora, Pam, and Liz did leave their academic programs because they did not appreciate the course pedagogy; they dropped out of graduate school determined not to reenroll at Ortley University. Prior research indicates that dropping out of one's graduate program could be devastating for some former students (Burkholder, 2012; Lovitts, 2001; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). This may occur in specific disciplines, however, the participants of this study were practicing teachers and a master's degree would have been a personal accomplishment but not a required professional one.

Moreover, most of the participants accepted the reasons why they were no longer enrolled, presenting the fact that former students can also leave on positive terms (Golde, 1998). Prior research recommends assessing student satisfaction as an important consideration because institutions benefit from positive word-of-mouth recommendations, which are especially important in today's competitive collegiate environment (Bontrager & Green, 2015; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). While it was important to note that several satisfied students dropped out of Ortley University, I was still curious as to whether these students enrolled in another institution to complete their educational goals. The next section answers research question three and explores the extent to which attrited students transfer to another university.

**Do Attrited Students Enroll Elsewhere?**

Prior to this study, informal discussions at the university regarding attrition speculated that education master's students often drop out of one institution only to enroll in another institution. Since this study was conducted at my place of employment, this conjecture concerned me. These speculations implied that these occurrences took place because former students were dissatisfied with their graduate school experience. To determine whether former students enrolled at another institution, the Office of Institutional Research submitted a file to the National Student Clearinghouse database. The National Student Clearinghouse determined that 6.67% of the data sample enrolled in another university. This small percentage of students who enrolled elsewhere did not support the assumptions we had. This was a surprise to me, because, in addition to the stories about dissatisfaction, there are other stories that describe education students enrolling in other graduate programs to collect additional credits for financial incentives. It may be argued by some that education master's students leave the academy for several reasons including poor service or treatment or course scheduling issues. Nevertheless, our assumptions were erroneous, and it was only through speaking to those who attrit that the real reasons for leaving were shared. The next research question, question four, explored whether institutional factors were responsible for attrition.

**Institutional Factors and Attrition**

There is considerable evidence that institutional factors do impact student persistence. Recent studies found that one institutional factor that is important to student persistence is the extent to which the student feels embraced by her academic program and peers (Cockrell & Shelly, 2011; Golde & Dore, 2001). According to my data, six of

the participants acknowledged that they were unaware of having an assigned advisor and this could be one of the missing components that influenced the student's inability to integrate into her academic community. These data and my research agree because there was no evidence to support that the University communicated this information to students. As stated previously, academic integration is the student's ability to embrace academic expectations and her ability to engage with the intellectual community. The participants of this study did not voice any examples of being engaged with the intellectual community, nor did it appear that the institution attempted to engage the students outside of the classroom. Many departments provide activities in the form of program milestones that unite an academic department (Posselt, 2016; Walker et al., 2008). However, my research was unable to discern any discipline-based milestones. Nonetheless, the graduate school offered programs that welcomed new education master's students' and celebrated education master's student research but these were not discipline specific events. In addition to engagement, higher education professionals are well aware that faculty, advisors, and mentors are critical to academic success (Golde, 2000).

**Absence of social integration.** Similarly, social integration is the student's ability to engage socially with her peers and other students who are pursuing similar interests. Students who do not engage in behaviors that lead to social and academic integration are less likely to persist and more likely to drop out of their master's program (Tinto, 2006, 2012a, 2012b). These considerations are important to all students, especially graduate students who need academic and social support to achieve their goals (Lovitts, 2001). In another illustration, seven participants stated that they did not attend an orientation

session. This was a missed opportunity for Ortley University, a failed attempt to welcome and embrace new students. Orientation programs are known to improve retention rates, yet only five of the interviewees attended orientation (Cusworth, 2001; Sherman, 2013). Ortley University's orientation was based on prior empirical studies and modeled after the best practices in graduate education (Pontius & Harper, 2006; Poock, 2008). Regrettably, these students did not attend. In this example, it did not appear that the orientation program met all needs of all students and that should be a consideration for future planning. These are certainly not new developments, but ones that should be addressed, so that they can be mitigated in the future (Weinberg & Ayres, 2013). Prior research indicates that the student's educational goals influence student persistence. The graduate school application process can be overwhelming, thus, not everyone applies. If an applicant invests time and energy into applying and putting forth a professional portfolio, then she must have established goals prior to acceptance. Identifying these student goals should be an important consideration for a future study.

**Personal Educational Goals and Attrition**

In answering the final research question, another theme in the data that mirrored previous research was that prior educational goals do influence nontraditional students' decisions to drop out of the academy (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This was especially true of the participants who completed all requirements to earn an educational endorsement. As students in this study discussed, they were unaware that the graduate school considered them non-completers. This data confirms that personal educational goals do influence a student's decision to leave the academy, and provides an alternate way to examine education master's student departure.

In Maddie, Rose, and Alexis' examples, these former students completed their educational endorsement coursework and filed the necessary paperwork with a staff member at Ortley University. Thus, these former students felt they completed their academic goals. Furthermore, during Maddie's interview, it appeared as though she had forgotten about the alteration she made to her application, and was unaware of the fact that Ortley University considered her degree-seeking. In this type of situation, Rose suggested that the graduate school work with the certification office so future students do not appear as stop outs.

This study explains a variety of factors that influence an education master's students' decision to leave Ortley University. Therefore, it is important to revisit the Master's Degree Persistence Matrix, Figure 2, (Butler, 2011; Maguire et al., 2008) that guided this study and helped me research this important topic.

**Reconsidering the Conceptual Framework**

To understand variations in experiences across individuals, this dissertation considered a conceptual framework, Figure 2, that encapsulated the Satisfaction-Retention Matrix (Butler, 2011; Maguire et al., 2008), and well known retention and attrition theories (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Specifically, this conceptualization considered four philosophies: (a) academic integration, (b) social integration, (c) academic and institutional attributes, and (d) student consumer behavior (Anctil, 2008; Elliott & Shin, 2002; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Morley, 2003; Noel-Levitz & NAGAP, 2012; Raisman, 2010), and determined that three of the concepts have the ability to influence master's student retention. However, I was unable to locate any examples that would indicate that student consumer behavior influenced

student departure. It is also important to note that one's environment impacts one's ability to be retained (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Fairchild, 2003), yet this was not a consideration of the conceptual framework and should be a consideration for future research.

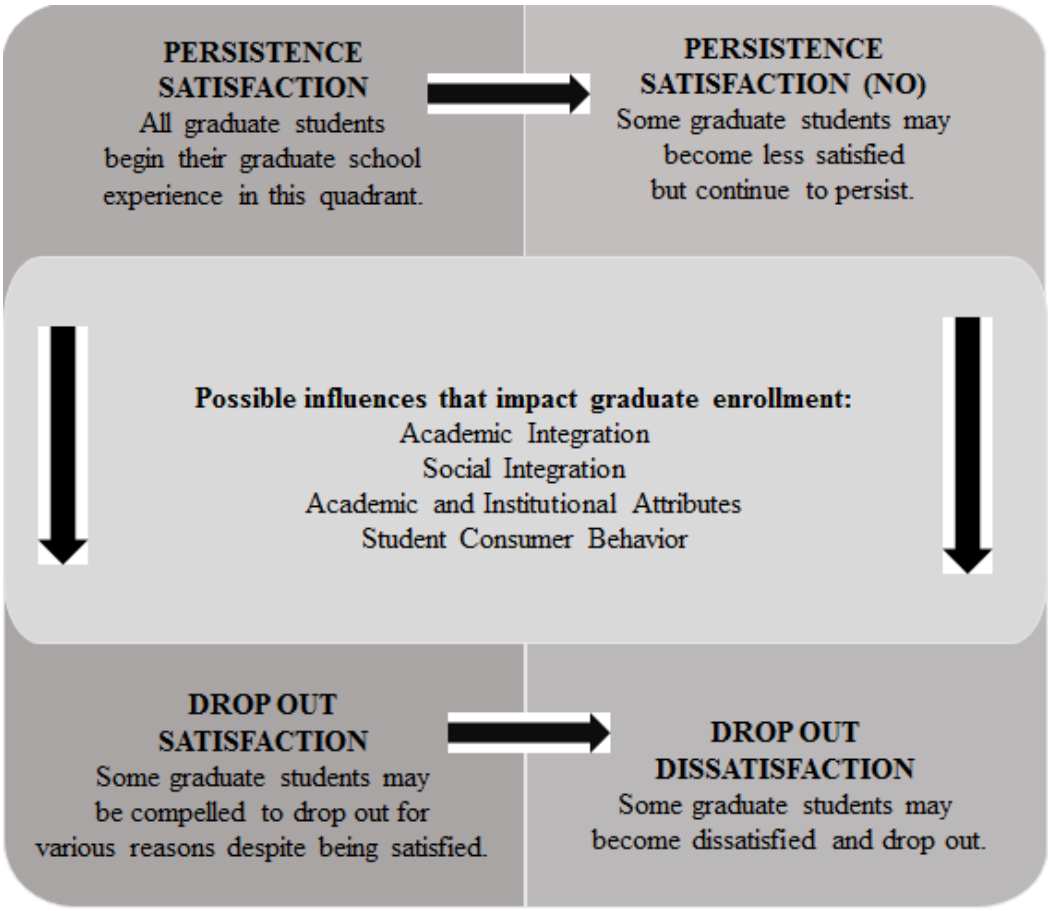



*Figure 2.* Master's Degree Persistence Matrix, revisited from Chapter 2. Adapted from the "Satisfaction-Retention Matrix," *A New Formula for Enrollment Management* (p. 74), by J. Maguire, L. Butler, and their Colleagues at Maguire Associates 2008, Victoria, CA: Trafford. Copyright 2008 by Maguire Associates. Adapted with permission.

Additionally, employing a qualitative research method provided an opportunity for an unanticipated phenomenon to develop. Therefore, an analysis of this study's data

concludes that former students' own explanations challenge campus assumptions and the term attrition, and support the claim that a qualitative phenomenological research approach can reveal why education master's degree students' are no longer enrolled. The Master's Degree Persistence Matrix was appropriate for this study because it illustrates that master's student leave universities for multiple reasons. It also clarifies that not all of the study's participants' were dissatisfied with their graduate school experience and since this matrix is not exclusive and does not account for environmental, psychological influences, and personal obstacles, this provides an opportunity to amend the matrix for a future research. Sharing this matrix could benefit many campus constituents who are impacted by master's student attrition. Thus, the recommendations in the next section are provided to address broad concerns.

**Implications for Practice**

More recent literature focuses on the fact that institutions are experiencing a relatively new challenge recruiting and retaining master's students, thus, it is necessary to develop strategies to mitigate future attrition (Bosco, 2012). The literature specifically points to the fact that there are no simple solutions to address attrition because it is often a multifaceted, complex dilemma (Fairchild, 2003; Lovitts, 2001). Therefore, the higher education community provides exemplars that are known to prevent attrition, and the recommendations below are created for all campus constituents (Bosco, 2012; Dennis, 2012; Henderson, 2005). In fact, the findings of this study present implications for future practice at Ortley University, and these implications have the potential to improve master's student experiences by addressing issues discovered as a result of the study.

**Financial awareness.** Perhaps the most fundamental implications of this study is the need for the campus community to be aware that graduate students entering advanced degree programs have multiple financial concerns that impact their abilities to remain enrolled (CGS, 2013; Denecke et al., 2016; Gururaj et al., 2010; Weinberg & Ayres, 2013). Specifically related to education master's students, this study can inform all campus constituents that K-12 teaching contracts do impact university enrollment (NJSBA, 2016) and gone are the days when marketing to public school teachers was an easy way to increase graduate enrollment (Conrad et al., 1993; White, Fox, & Isenberg, 2011).

Another consideration should be to offer financial literacy resources to master's students similar to those infused into K-12 classes. These resources could be in the form of a dedicated financial aid counselor, a website, or an online financial program that can provide graduate students with a better understanding of availability and terms of student loans, the actual costs of education, and the length of repayment (Boyer & Butner, 2011; Denecke et al., 2016). Additionally, these suggestions are supported by the Council of Graduate School's most recent publication, "Financial Education: Developing High Impact Programs for Graduate and Undergraduate Students" (Denecke et al., 2016). Denecke et al., (2016) recommends that administrators encourage collaboration with outside of campus offices because faculty members are often the first line of student contact and knowing where to refer student for financial information is important.

**Faculty cohort leader.** Several years ago, enrollment declines were foreshadowed by scholars (Toms, 1999), resulting in research recommending off-campus cohorts as a way to increase enrollment. If these collaborations are going to continue, I

would recommend that the dean consider appointing a faculty cohort leader (FCL) to help guide and mentor the cohort. This is important because my data suggest that many of the cohort students appeared to be disengaged with the University and only attended classes out of obligation. The FCL would serve as a resource person and team builder with similar academic interests to that of the cohort (Manfra & Bolick, 2008). These FCL positions are a way to provide ongoing academic and social integration to off campus cohorts. Research suggests that these FCL mentors increase student retention and envelope their students into the membership of the university. More importantly, the FCL's are members of the campus community who take time to get to know the cohort members and provide ongoing dialog (Manfra & Bolick, 2008). Another important consideration to successfully acculturating new students is to introduce one's advisor early on in the enrollment process.

**Increase academic advising visibility.** Since half of the participants of this study did not know their academic advisors, the graduate school community should consider how advisor assignment information is disseminated. Some suggestions from other studies include: an email introduction from the advisor, informal brown-bag dinners with advisors, required attendance at orientation, and obligatory once-a-semester meetings (Lovitts, 2001; Poock, 2004, 2008; Sherman, 2013). As mentioned earlier, quality academic advising increases student retention and decreases time to degree completion since the student will not waste time enrolling in classes she does not need (Wiseman & Messitt, 2010). In addition to increasing time to degree completion, advising is known to build lasting relationships that can ensure that the student receives the socialization that is needed to complete one's graduate degree (Walker et al., 2008). Ortley University's

precepting tradition is one that provides opportunities for students and faculty members to forge lasting professional relationships. This system should be embraced and promoted so that all graduate students have an opportunity to utilize these special opportunities.

**Assessment of advising services.** Another theme in the data revealed a lack of attention to advising and prior research indicates that the graduate school should embrace Ortley University's highly valued precepting model for all graduate students. This research supports the claim that an advisor who listens, supports, and encourages is the best service a campus can provide (Golde, 1998; 2005). In order to understand whether the lack of advising is really a concern, I would suggest a formal assessment of the graduate student academic advising process to ensure that both faculty and students are participating. If necessary, the university or graduate school should provide training for advisors to ensure the formation of positive and encouraging relationships occurs (Nelson & Lovitts, 2001). In addition to increasing the visibility of the academic advising process, an alternative form of orientation should be explored in an attempt to bridge necessary academic and social integration that is necessary for academic success (Nelson & Lovitts, 2001; Poock, 2004, 2008; Sherman, 2013; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b).

**Support and assistance.** Orientation sessions, workshops, and mentoring are other strategies that have been demonstrated to help students succeed, yet many adult students do not think they need these services (Alexander & Maher, 2008; CGS, 2013). As noted earlier, the graduate school experience is different from that of the undergraduate experience, and many students could use the encouragement and companionship that occurs through these opportunities. Since the data revealed high stress levels and issues surrounding time management, another consideration for Ortley

University is to have the graduate school host workshops that promote academic and personal success, including work-life balance and time management in an attempt to mitigate students withdrawing (CGS, 2013; Weinberg & Ayres, 2013). However, it is very important to remember that attrition happens; not all attrition is negative, some students leave because the additional coursework is not for them. Others leave because day-to-day stress is overwhelming (Labosier & Labosier, 2011). However, Ortley University's graduate school should encourage students to develop mentoring relationships with faculty colleagues (Trask et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2008). As noted in prior research these relationships are extremely valuable to degree completion and can promote teaching and learning (Lipschutz, 1993; Lovitts, 2001).

Finally, Ortley University could consider expanding their academic coaching sessions. These are forums in which fellow students, who are pursuing an advanced degree engage new students to assist in providing support. Currently, this program is offered to doctoral students, using the Circle of Life (McLean & Jahnke, 2000) coaching techniques that start with self-assessment and bridge to creating a "Blueprint for Success" (Zweir, Stevens, Galantino, & Frank, 2011, p. 30). The blueprint helps the student establish goals and acknowledge challenges and provides ways to lessen the stress of graduate school (Zweir et al., 2011). These coaching programs have had great success with doctoral cohorts and would be a useful addition to any graduate student support plan. The coaching can be done online, providing a level of accountability and a support system of people who understand the challenges of an advance degree program. Further, this program helps students to grow not only academically, but personally and professionally (Zweir et al., 2011).

**Collection and Dissemination of Data**

In addition to programs and services, this study demonstrates that it is essential to collect and analyze financial and enrollment data. Thus, it is suggested that the dean or her designee should disseminate program performance, enrollment, and budgetary information to all program faculty, so there is a clear understanding of how much students are paying for their master's program (Ehrenber & Kuh, 2009). In addition to financial data, it is important to create an open dialogue that is informed by data, and has the ability to enact and influence campus changes (Doerr, 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This data is important because prior to this study, informal conversations regarding attrition were based on an assumption that graduate school costs were too high. Graduate students do consider costs and have financial concerns that will continue to influence student enrollment. For this reason, I believe my role in the graduate education community is to foster relations and use my research to improve the lives of current and future graduate students. To accomplish and encourage an open dialogue, I will host round table discussions pertaining to graduate student issues. This group of individuals will be empowered to dispel campus conjecture about graduate education. Thus, identifying those individuals who are passionate about graduate education is not the issue, asking folks to devote time may be a consideration.

**Graduate student retention committee.** Because several students considered themselves as successfully completing educational endorsements, it is imperative that the university consider developing and defining specific persistence terms for graduate students including, but not limited to, retention, attrition, stop out, and readmission (Isaac, 1993; Tokuno, 2010). Once defined, these terms can assist with the creation of

standardized reporting that can aid in measuring master's degree student persistence. This report could then be shared with the certification office, so that students who complete an educational endorsement are identified and no longer defined as attrited students.

**Interpreting campus data.** Examining program data on an ongoing basis will assist with program assessment, academic planning, and provide a better understanding of master's student attrition (Isaac, 1993). Next, Ortley University should appoint someone to collect and analyze attrition and retention data of graduate students on a scheduled basis. These data points include "program level completion rates, attrition rates, time-to-degree, and time-to-withdrawal statistics" (Grasso et al., 2007, p. 11) as key performance indicators. It is important to develop a data driven system that creates key performance indicators to measure enrollment success. These include but are not limited to recruitment, retention, and graduation data (Seidman, 2012). Once the data are identified these data should be shared with the individual academic programs and the graduate school. By providing persistence data, academic programs will be more informed about student enrollment; they can determine if additional programming is needed and how many course to offer (Isaac, 1993). Using data to inform decisions provides credibility to decisions, and in order to reduce attrition rates, one must measure attrition rates to know where to begin (Perry, Boman, Care, Edwards, & Park, 2008). Furthermore, these data do not generalize to all academic programs, so the data collected needs to be program specific. Another consideration is to develop key performance data that allows for meaningful program comparisons (Grasso et al., 2007). The committee should discuss how to ameliorate future issues and identify topics that require future research.

## Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study demonstrate that master's degree attrition data is missing from the higher education community and more importantly from enrollment considerations at Ortley University. Since each graduate program differs in program standards, program requirements, and degree credits, the data collection and analysis should be program specific. Thus, my recommendations for future research at Ortley University would be to develop a larger database of information to gain a more comprehensive understanding of why some students leave their master's degree programs (CGS, 2013; Tokuno, 2010). So, if replicated in the future, I would also suggest adding an initial survey to a future research study. This survey would gather demographic information, gauge participant interest, and determine which students fulfilled their educational goals prior to leaving. Additionally, the survey should contain short answer questions that serve as a way to gather qualitative responses from participants' who may feel uncomfortable participating in an interview setting (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Future studies should expand this current study to former students in other disciplines (i.e. Business Studies or Criminal Justice), recognizing there could be considerable variation between disciplines as to why former students attrit. (CGS, 2013). Lastly, I would recommend that this master's degree study be conducted at other Universities because there can also be considerable variation among institutions. These differences add to the body of literature missing from the higher education community regarding master's degree programs (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Berelson, 1960; CGS, 2013; Tokuno, 2010).

## Reflection on Leadership

The writing of this dissertation was an unforgettable journey of discovery. I never knew when the next challenge would arise. Thus, this study may not present all views on the issues surrounding education master's student attrition. However, as stated in prior studies, hearing former students' stories moved me away from utilizing broad terms, conjecture, and generalities, and encouraged the collection of unique stories about attrition (Attinasi, 1989; Kennedy et al., 2015; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 2012b; Tierney, 1992; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). According to the 12 participants of this study, their reasons for leaving varied, thus, continued research is important to maintain an awareness of issues that influence student departure. Although the results of this study are not transferable to other institutions, the study's findings and recommendations offer numerous instances that influence master's student attrition. Moreover, graduate schools can encourage student persistence by listening to and assisting master's students, one student at a time. Since Ortley University emphasizes the importance of human resources, personal growth, and personal relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008; 2011; Bolman & Gallos, 2011), each graduate student makes a difference.

**Servant leadership.** Ortley University's primary focus is on undergraduate education and advocating for graduate student resources can be challenging. Depending upon the institutional culture various leadership styles may work. However, the finding of this study lend themselves to a servant leadership approach as a way to provide effective advocacy for graduate student resources (Benoit, Justice, & McAllister, 2013; Brus, 2006). This became specifically clear when assessing master's student attrition, because one must first understand the graduate school experience in order to provide graduate

students with the resources they need to accomplish their educational goals. Additionally, it is important to identify a supportive network of helpful individual who are genuinely interested in serving the needs of graduate students, and this is an important component to student success (Benoit et al., 2013; Bolman & Deal, 2011). The characteristics of servant leadership that align with supporting the enrollment and retention of graduate students are also the same considerations exercised when working with adult students. Listening, bestowing empathy, creating awareness, having foresight, being committed to personal growth and building a community of learners are servant leadership characteristics that are an integral part of a helping relationship (Spears, 2010). However, the descriptive details the participants provided did not describe a welcoming, embracing atmosphere related to servant leadership. Yet, I assert that Ortley University's graduate school would benefit from this model of leadership, and that it would promote graduate student enrollment and serve as a positive impact to meet all student needs (Wheeler, 2012). Thus, this personal reflection acknowledges that there is work that needs to be accomplished to reflect my leadership goals.

**One student at a time.** In order to prevent attrition, the graduate school team must assist students one student at a time, because the reasons for leaving vary from student to student and depend upon personal, institutional, and discipline specific factors (Fairchild, 2003; Lovitts, 2001). Once identified, professionals need to be empowered to provide necessary support and resources students need. Since leadership comes in all shapes and sizes, and from anyone, at any time, all personnel need to have the courage and authenticity to respond and to provide leadership when possible (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Leadership must take on many different forms to combat educational

master's student attrition and since different circumstances require different responses, all university personnel must be invested in trying to retain all students (Wheeler, 2012).

**Grassroots leadership.** All university personnel can make a difference in students' lives, one person at a time (Kezar & Lester, 2011). For example, grassroots leaders are members of the campus community who emerge from within, but possess no formal authority (Kezar & Lester, 2011). These individuals believe they can make a difference, they understand the power in developing relationships and allies who share similar passions. These leaders are self-motivated individuals who use their time, talents, and treasures to create connections between and among individuals on and off campus. Their success is in their abilities to advocate for services that impact all campus stakeholders (students, faculty, and staff) (Kezar & Lester, 2011). Perhaps finding ways to encourage more grassroots leadership would assist in preventing future attrition.

Additionally, cultivating and empowering grassroots leadership is a way to ensure that others, in addition to myself, advocate on behalf of graduate students (Benoit et al., 2013; Brus, 2006). This study validates that all campus personnel can make a difference, one individual at a time. It is my belief that to be successful in recruiting and retaining master's students, a servant leadership style is essential along with the assistance of grassroots advocates who can increase our outreach (Wheeler, 2012).

**Emotional intelligence.** With regards to master student attrition, Ortley University personnel must also embrace the four domains of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman et al., 2002). Being aware of one's limitations and making a referral when necessary, providing constructive feedback when appropriate while attempting to utilize self-

management skills, including self-control, adaptability, achievement, initiative and optimism are important attributes to all relationships. Thus, taking people's feeling into consideration and understanding how one's feelings may relate to different situations, will assist the team and I will gain an understanding the impact we have on master's student attrition (Goleman et al., 2002).

**Concluding Considerations**

Leading scholars state that doctoral attrition is "poorly understood" (Golde, 2005, p. 669). In a similar manner, this statement can also be used to describe master's students' attrition. But, a critical step to improving graduate enrollment is to understand the reasons why some students leave their master's degree programs. Identifying attrition reasons allows institutions to improve educational experiences for all graduate students. Despite the extensive research on undergraduate and doctoral student attrition, this research joins one other study outlining why master's students' attrit (CGS, 2013). It is important to remember that there are numerous factors that influence attrition and that generalizing to any one population should be avoided.

The purpose of this research study was to ascertain why education master's students' attrition occurs at Ortley University. This study yielded broad findings that were consistent with literature about doctoral student attrition. These broad themes: financial reasons, dissatisfaction with course content, and personal challenges emerged from the data and are not new to the higher education community (CGS, 2013; Lovitts, 2001). However, these findings are valuable to share with the Ortley University community, because all too often former students are blamed for the reasons they leave their graduate programs (CGS, 2013; Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto,

2016b; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). This study demonstrates that there are other factors that are just as important to consider when determining why master's students' depart. In response to the challenges outlined by the research participants, this study provides insight into education master's student attrition. Perhaps, the most fundamental implication of this study, is the contribution it provides to understanding the factors that influenced why these former students departed from Ortley University.

Finally, it is my job as educator and leader, to find viable solutions to reduce the above issues. Students are individuals who are caught between a growing sense that a graduate education is absolutely necessary for professional success, and a growing fear that increasing college tuitions and fees make graduate education unattainable. These convictions impact current and future enrollment (Immerwahr, Johnson, & Gasbarra, 2009; Kadlec & Friedman, 2010). A decline in graduate enrollment has effects on society and the future economics in the United States (Cohen, 2005) and growth has positive implications on the communities wherein current and former graduate students reside.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Protocol

(letters below indicate probes, if necessary)

Introduction and developing rapport

1) Do you have any questions of the project before we begin?

2) Opening- Tell me about yourself? What was your undergraduate major?

Inquiry into graduate education

3) Tell me about your graduate school journey.

   a) Describe your decision to begin a master's degree.

   b) Describe your master's degree experience.

   c) To what extent did visiting the campus influence your decision to enroll?

4) Tell me about your courses?

5) How did the program provide opportunities for you to engage with faculty outside of the classroom? With your academic advisor? With other students?

6) While enrolled, how did you finance your course work?

Inquiry into attrition

7) Tell me about your decision not to continue with your course work?

   a) When did you begin to think about not finishing?

   b) When did you determine you would not finish?

   c) Is there something that influenced these decisions?

Introduction and developing rapport

8) Do you have any questions of the project before we begin?

9) Opening- Tell me about yourself? What was your undergraduate major?

Inquiry into graduate education

10) Tell me about your graduate school journey.

    d) Describe your decision to begin a master's degree.

    e) Describe your master's degree experience.

    f) To what extent did visiting the campus influence your decision to enroll?

11) Tell me about your courses?

12) How did the program provide opportunities for you to engage with faculty outside of the classroom? With your academic advisor? With other students?

13) While enrolled, how did you finance your course work?

Inquiry into attrition

14) Tell me about your decision not to continue with your course work?

    d) When did you begin to think about not finishing?

    e) When did you determine you would not finish?

    f) Is there something that influenced these decisions?

15) Is there something Ortley College could have done to provide you with more support?

a) Are there services that are needed?

b) How should the program be modified to meet the need of adult student, like yourself?

Concluding ideas

16) Given what I am trying to do in this study, do you have any suggestions about what sorts of things we should be looking for?

17) If I need further clarification once I write up my interview notes, may I call upon you for clarification?

Upon the completion of this interview, your interview will be transcribed. As a follow up, a copy of the final transcript will be e-mailed for your review. To ensure accuracy, if there is anything you would like to add or change please let me know and I will amend the transcript from this session.

## Appendix B

## Participant Engagement Email

**Subject:** Leaving The Academy: Education Master's Students' Perspectives

Dear Ms./Mr. <insert last name>,

My name is AmyBeth Glass and I am a doctoral student at Rowan University. I am seeking former students to participate as co-researchers to gain insight into the lived experiences of former master's student's. The information shared by you, the co-researchers, will be used to complete a phenomenological dissertation study. I would like to ask you to consider participating in the research endeavor. This letter is purely informational and you are not being asked to sign an informed consent form at this time.

Should you meet the criteria for the study, your participation will be voluntary. Your time commitment will include an interview lasting approximately 60 -90 minutes during which you will share your experiences. In addition, I will be asking for your permission review your admission essay/personal statement that is archived as part of your admissions file at Ortley University. The study time frame will begin (INSERT DATE). If you meet the study criteria and are selected for inclusion in this endeavor, you will be provided more information about the study and a consent form.

This research will contribute to understanding former master's degree student's perspectives, and the potential benefit of this study is to improve Higher Education practice. This research study is to be submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey. The results of this study will be published as a dissertation. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation(s) and/or educational publication(s). Participation in this study carries the same amount of risk that individuals will encounter during a usual classroom activity. There is no financial remuneration for your participation in this study.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. Please email me with any questions or concerns glassa59@students.rowan.edu

Sincerely,
AmyBeth Glass

# Appendix C

## Participant Consent Forms

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Leaving The Academy: Education Master's Students' Perspectives
**PI:** Dr. MaryBeth Walpole
**SS:** AmyBeth Glass




**CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Leaving The Academy: Education Master's Students' Perspectives
**Principal Investigator:** Dr. MaryBeth Walpole
**Co-Investigator:** AmyBeth Glass

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you to decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study. It will help you to understand what the study is about and what will happen in the course of the study.

If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask them and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

AmyBeth Glass will also be asked to sign this informed consent, as the co-investigator.

You will be given a copy of the signed consent form to keep.

You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.

**FINANCIAL INTERESTS:**

There is no financial remuneration for your participation in this study.

**Why is this study being done?**

This research study is to be submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey. The results of this study will be published as a dissertation. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation(s) and/or educational publication(s).



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Version Date: 06/24/2015

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Leaving The Academy: Education Master's Students' Perspectives
**PI:** Dr. MaryBeth Walpole
**SS:** AmyBeth Glass

The primary goal of this dissertation is to understand the lived experiences of former education master's students by answering the following research questions:

1. Why do some education master's students leave their academic program?
2. In what ways do former master's degree students perceive and describe their experiences?
3. To what extent do former students enroll elsewhere?
4. How do institutional factors contribute to former student's experiences?
5. To what extent do personal educational goals influence a student's decision to leave the academy?

**Why have you been asked to take part in this study?**
**Who may take part in this study?**

You are invited to participate because you meet of the following selection criteria:

1. Matriculated master's students who enrolled for a minimum of two consecutive terms in a program taught by the faculty in the School of Education at Ortley University.
2. The students were in good academic standings at time of departure.
3. The students drop out behavior occurred within the past three years.
4. The students were working full-time while enrolled in graduate school part-time.

**How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?**

4-10 subjects will be enrolled in this study

**How long will my participation in this study take?**

The study will take place over a period of 6 months. As a participant, we ask you to spend 60-90 minutes of your time participating in this study. Each session will last approximately one hour. The interview will be undertaken at a time and location that is mutually suitable. Four to ten co-researchers will participate.

**Where will the study take place?**

The interview will be undertaken at a time and location that is mutually suitable.

**What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?**

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the reasons why former graduate students drop out of their master's degree program at Ortley University. Your participation in this study requires an interview during which you will be asked questions about your master's degree experiences. The duration of the interview will last approximately 60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio taped and transcribed, the purpose thereof being to



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capture and maintain an accurate record of the discussion. Your name will not be used at all. On all transcripts and data collected you will be referred to only by way of a pseudonym.

This study will be conducted by the researcher AmyBeth Glass, a doctoral candidate at Rowan University. The interview will be undertaken at a time and location that is mutually suitable.

**What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?**

This research will contribute to understanding former master's degree student's perspectives, and the potential benefit of this study is improvement of Higher Education practice. Participation in this study carries the same amount of risk that individuals will encounter during a usual classroom activity.

**Are there any benefits for you if you choose to take part in this research study?**

This research study is to be submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey. The results of this study will be published as a dissertation. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation(s) and/or educational publication(s).

**What are your alternatives if you don't want to take part in this study?**

There are no alternative treatments available. Your alternative is not to take part in this study.

**How will you know if new information is learned that may affect whether you are willing to stay in this research study?**

During the course of the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect you, you will be contacted.

**Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?**

There is no financial remuneration for your participation in this study. Therefore, you will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

**How will information about you be kept private or confidential?**

Under no circumstances whatsoever will you be identified by name in the course of this research study, or in any publication thereof. Every effort will be made that all information provided by you will be treated as strictly confidential. All date will be coded and securely stored, and will be



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used for professional purposes only. Presentations and publications to the public and at conferences and meetings will not use your name and other personal information.

**What will happen if you are injured during this study?**

Participation in this study carries the same amount of risk that individuals will encounter during a usual classroom activity.

**What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time and this decision will not have a negative impact on your relationship with Ortley University.

If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to Dr. MaryBeth Walpole, Rowan University, (856)-256-4706 or walpole@rowan.edu

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

**Who can you call if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can call the study doctor:

Dr. MaryBeth Walpole
Educational Leadership Department
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If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

*Office of Research*
*(856) 256-5150 – Glassboro/CMSRU*



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**TITLE OF STUDY:** Leaving The Academy: Education Master's Students' Perspectives
**PI:** Dr. MaryBeth Walpole
**SS:** AmyBeth Glass

**What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?**

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

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**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered.

Subject Name:_____

Subject Signature:_____ Date:_____

**Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent:_____

Signature:_____ Date: _____



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Version Date: 06/24/2015

ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM
Leaving The Academy: Education Master's Students' Perspectives

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by *Dr. MaryBeth Walpole and AmyBeth Glass.* We are asking for your permission to allow us to *audiotape (sound) your interview* as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the researchers. This research study is to be submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey. The results of this study will be published as a dissertation. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation(s) and/or educational publication(s).

The recording(s) will include a unique numerical code that will identify the interview session. Your identity will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. The researcher(s) retain(s) the right to use and publish *non-identifiable* data. When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. Your name will not be used at all. On all transcripts and data collected you will be referred to only by way of a pseudonym.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked cabinet in F-101f. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher(s). Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents (including audio tapes) with their answers will be destroyed.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

☐ Yes, I would like to participate.

☐ No, I would not like to participate.

Signature: _____ date: ____/____/_____

Name: (Please Print) _____



Version # 1
Version Date: 05/28/2015

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Creation/Revision Date: 02/10/2015

**ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**
**FAMILY EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS AND PRIVACY ACT OF 1974 (FERPA)**
**ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM**
Leaving The Academy: Education Master's Students' Perspectives

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by *Dr. MaryBeth Walpole and AmyBeth Glass.* We are asking for your permission to allow us to *view your graduate school admissions application and supporting materials* as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to release your admissions application and supporting materials in order to participate in this study.

The admissions application and supporting materials will be used for analysis by the researchers and this research study is to be submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey. The results of this study will be published as a dissertation. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation(s) and/or educational publication(s).

Your identity will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. The researcher(s) retain(s) the right to use and publish *non-identifiable* data. When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. Your name will not be used at all. On all transcripts and data collected you will be referred to only by way of a pseudonym.

The artifacts will be stored in a locked cabinet in F-101f. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher(s). Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents (including audio tapes) with their answers will be destroyed.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to access the above-referenced admissions application and supporting materials for this study. The investigator will not use these documents for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

☐ Yes, I would like to participate.

☐ No, I would not like to participate.

Signature: _____ date: ____/____/_____

Name: (Please Print) _____



Version # 1
Version Date: 05/28/2015

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