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Socialization and Retention of Part-Time Doctoral Students: A Review of Ten Years of Literature

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Abstract: The growing population of part-time doctoral students has created a need for research into the determining factors for part-time doctoral student success, especially related to retention and program completion. In order to gain a better understanding of the current literature and its importance, the researchers used purposive sampling and thematic analysis to compile emerging factors from over 20 recent articles. Three themes materialized: the growing part-time student population; the differing needs of part-time versus full-time students; and the need for specialized student support resources for part-timers. This article explains the analysis and present findings that indicate that the socialization process is particularly important for part-timers and is a key tool for student retention in doctoral programs.

Introduction

Presenting statistics covering the last four decades of doctoral candidates, Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) reveal 40% to 60% of doctoral candidates do not achieve their goal of earning a terminal degree. This trend is alarming given that “the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system—doctoral students—are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals. The attrition rate for doctoral students in education is an estimated 50% with some reporting even higher rates” (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012, p. 200).

There is the possibility that part-time student status makes obtaining a doctoral degree even more challenging. As observers of the attrition within our own program, we initially theorized that part-time students often face unique obstacles which make it more difficult to remain in a doctoral program. The literature suggests that part-time students face work/school/family challenges that create demands that are often overwhelming (Gardner & Gopual, 2012). Additionally, the literature points to a need for increased and enhanced student support systems from the institution and doctoral programs that will provide the sustenance needed part-time students to be successful.

As part-time non-traditional doctoral students ourselves, we found ourselves in agreement with fellow part-timers in the studies reviewed. As mothers and full-time working professionals, we too find the challenges of juggling work, graduate school, and family daunting. We believe that universities need to encourage research concerning the particular support needs of part-time graduate students.

The purpose of this study was to explore literature about attrition reasons for part-time students in particular, and why they do not persist in their quests to earn doctoral degrees. This topic is important because part-time doctoral students should be a central demographic for current research, however, they are not. The culture and organization of higher education does not seem equipped to facilitate the transition needed to address the changing needs of part-time doctoral students.
Data Collection and Analysis

The research method utilized for this study was thematic analysis. According to Jones (2013), this method is not widely used, but is conducive to a search for themes that are coded from readings. Coding allows the researcher to identify patterns and drive the research toward a focus.

Initially, a broad topic of focus was determined, and then a library search conducted from a university library database of peer-reviewed journals using an advanced search method. The preliminary search was based on the keywords: cohorts, doctoral education, and socialization, all considered during discussion of the topic of research. A careful review of the material and data culminated in the collection of themes, categories, and keywords that provided a narrower focus around part-time doctoral students. These themes, categories and keywords are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Search string themes, categories and keywords

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Socialization &amp; Retention of Part-Time Doctoral Students</td>
<td>Socialization, Cohorts, Attrition</td>
<td>Growing Demographic, Part-Timers are not Traditional Students</td>
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<td>Doctoral Education</td>
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<td>Doctoral Candidates</td>
<td>Community, Social Network</td>
<td>Part-Time Doctoral Student Program Resources</td>
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<td>Part-Time Students</td>
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The Google Scholar search engine was used for additional peer-reviewed articles that met the criteria for the research. Twenty articles were located and reviewed for relevance. After analyzing articles, a spreadsheet was created by the reviewers that included keywords, emerging themes, and topic considerations. The criteria used purposive, or selective, sampling as the criteria for reading materials included for potential use in the study. This method of critical case sampling allows the researcher to investigate materials chosen because of their inference to the topic of interest, with the purpose of focusing on the topic in depth. Critical case sampling is useful because of its exploratory qualities that will lead the researcher to find out if the topic is worth investigating further (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Discussion among the researchers ended with a topic that was narrower in depth and could be feasible for this study. A thematic map was produced showing themes that became apparent from the readings.

Invisibility of Part-Timers

Sample (2010) asserted that one of the major problems part-time graduate students faced was that of invisibility. “Because part-time grad students are so diverse and so diffuse, performing delicate balancing acts between work, home, and school, they often fall off of our academic radar. In the popular imagination part-time grad students are marginalized—or worse, absent—in the same way adjunct or contingent faculty are” (Sample, 2010, para. 2). While Sample’s assertion resonated as we sought to explore literature on part-time doctoral students, it revealed the challenge we encountered: in the scarce number of studies specifically addressing part-time graduate students, all tended to lump these students, whether seeking master’s degrees, professional certificates, or doctorates.

As we dug further into the literature about part-time doctoral students, we found ourselves asking several questions. What are the socialization and support challenges of part-time doctoral students? How
do part-time students manage the balance of school, work and family? Are the challenges of maintaining this balance a significant contributor to attrition and students that are “all but dissertation?” Do cohort models positively influence students by providing student support and socialization needs? We looked at the growing population of part-time doctoral students, their difference from traditional full-time doctoral students, and current support systems for part-timers.

A Growing Demographic

It is difficult to find statistical information concerning the number of part-time doctoral students in the United States. Amongst most statistical reports, full-time and part-time students are not distinguished from one another. Another challenge is presented by the question of what constitutes part-time status? Because different institutions define “part-time” in a variety of ways, it presents difficulties in classifying graduate students as one status or the other. In 2012, Gardner and Gopual reported that “. . . rough estimates of these part-time doctoral students have ranged from 6% (Golde & Dore, 2011) to 10% (Syverson, 1999) and even as high as 12% (Nettles & Millett, 2006)” (p. 64). Other researchers place the percentage of part-time doctoral students much higher. Offerman (2011) states that today at least half of all student in doctoral programs are part time with a median age of 33.3 years (p. 23).

Both the shared and variety of demographic characteristics of part-time, non-traditional students are an added challenge faced by this growing university population. According to Offerman (2011), part-time students are much more affected by external influences than the traditional students. They live off campus, study part-time, and are more often than not, older. Part-time students come from diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and professions and are already employed in the management levels of their workplace. Additionally, they are many times raising children and maybe even caring for parents that are aging. Part-time students, especially women, have demands that are contradictory to full-time study, and thus require flexibility and expanded resources from their doctoral programs of choice. It is interesting to note that in recent studies it has been found that married students complete at higher rates than single students (Gardner, 2009).

According to Biegel, Hokenstad, Singer, and Guo (2006), doctoral program graduates have not increased in number; however, differences in the students’ full-time and part-time status indicate that any increases are in the percentage of students that are part-time rather than full-time. While full-time doctoral education was traditionally the norm, the reality is that there is a continuing need for and growing trend toward part-time doctoral programs. These part-time programs are challenged to be the highest quality possible, consistent with the education received by a full-time doctoral student.

Regardless of the exact percentage, the consensus among the researchers in the field is that the number of part-time graduate students will continue to grow, and that they are a unique population different from full-time doctoral students. Therefore, research focused specifically on part-time doctoral students, their challenges, needs, and possible support mechanisms is merited. Offerman (2011) goes as far to say that “as the doctoral student demographic has shifted so too has the intended purpose for the doctoral degree” (p. 23).

Part-Time Students are not Full-Time Traditional Students

Completing a doctoral degree is a challenging endeavor to undertake for the traditional full-time doctoral student. The challenges increase exponentially when the doctoral seeking student is an employed, full-time professional taking one or two courses over a series of semesters as a part-time student.

“There is an underlying assumption that research students are young and enrolled full-time” (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009, p. 56). However, this trend is in direct contrast with the argument that
research pursuits no longer take a linear movement from undergraduate to postgraduate and then the workforce. In fact, most doctoral students are actually in the workforce much sooner in the progression, and often not taking graduate work until much later.

The part-time doctoral student experience is not the same as the full-time doctoral student experience. In their study of the experience of part-time doctoral students, Gardner and Gopaul (2012) asserted that much of the scholarly work concerning doctoral education is focused on the experience of the full-time graduate student. The researchers pointed out that although there is some similarity between the experiences of the two types of doctoral students, “the experiences of part-time doctoral students are more complicated and required sustained and flexible efforts to adequately address” (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 63). While the fact that part-time students are not full-time students seems obvious enough, at times that does not seem to register fully with some faculty in various fields, and within many institutions. Several of the researchers stated that more study needs to be done specifically on part-timers, and that more resources and support mechanisms be made available to part-timers (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Twale & Kochan, 2000), and yet it is not. Given the growth of part-time graduate students in the United States, there are implications that more research is needed to address the particular experiences of part-time students.

Not “Fitting the Mold”

Gardner and Gopaul (2012) found part-time graduate students often had perceptions of not “fitting the mold” so to speak, in terms of what it meant to be a graduate student. Not fitting the mold meant different things to different participants. Part-time students compared themselves to the more conventional image of a traditional full-time doctoral student. Some students felt their age a factor in feeling different. For others, it was the lack of graduate financial support, which is tied to primarily full-time graduate work. For others not fitting the mold was simply the lack of time to think, process, and reflect upon their studies. Some part-time students did not feel they had an opportunity to digest what they were learning (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

Walsh (2010) studied students’ perception during the doctoral process that results in one of two conditions; students that become integrated and students that become isolated. One contributor to integration is faculty-advisor relationships that could include group meetings and consistent interaction with faculty. A formal discussion with faculty and peers, and for the part-time students, the availability of faculty, has a nurturing impact on part-time students. The problem with availability stems from the fact that part-time students typically attend class at times that conflict with a full-time faculty schedule, therefore, faculty availability is not as likely. Additionally, quite often, part-time students attend classes that are taught by adjunct faculty rather than full-time faculty who are more integrated into the department. Academic drive or “lack of fit” within the discipline’s environment results in feelings of discontent for the student (Gardner, 2010, p. 672). One misperception from faculty in general, according to Gardner (2009), is that “doctoral student departure fall entirely on the shoulders of the students who left, rather than attributing any responsibility to the program or institution” (p. 100). Thus, it is apparent that this is an obvious link between faculty perception and doctoral student attrition. Gardner explained further that students “were quick to point to programmatic, departmental, and even institutional issues related to student departure” (2009, p. 108).

Full-Time Students are More Traditional Doctoral Students

Walsh (2010) indicates that full-time students can engage in friend-group activities leading to a more inclusive microclimate. In contrast, without positive student experiences, part-time students often find themselves becoming invisible—“academic tourists” who remain marginalized throughout their doctoral experience (Walsh, 2010, p. 550). Walsh also contends that meaningful relationships with peers can be more important to some students than any other relationship within the doctoral program. Biegel et al.’s (2006) study of the assessment of a pilot, part-time doctoral education cohort revealed that part-time students, with less time on campus than their full-time classmates, have limited opportunities for interactions with faculty outside of the class.
Watts (2008) asserted that in addition to differing work and family obstacles, part-time students have varying psychological needs that are different from the full-time student. Part-time students often suffer from isolation, boredom, and frustration. Part-time students also struggle with time management and easily tire of the process given the extended duration of doctoral completion. The expected completion time for a part-time student may be up to six years. Due to the differing needs of part-time students, it is becoming increasingly apparent that doctoral program processes and faculty supervision need to be “tailor-made” for the part-time students. (Watts, 2008, p. 370).

Lack of Financial Resources and External Demands

Biegel et al. (2006) stated that financial support for doctoral students has by and large disappeared. This lack of funding affects all levels of students but has a significant effect on doctoral programs due to labor intensity and length of a doctoral degree program. Additionally, Fountaine (2012) suggested that lack of funding for research can have a negative impact on faculty-student relationships. Negative engagement can occur when faculty are perceived by the doctoral student to be more concerned with their own research and students begin to feel like a labor source, whose purpose is to advance the university or the faculty member.

Funding and resources are essential for doctoral student success. Gardner (2009) suggested that educational departments lack the funding to support students through assistantships and the part-time student is highly affected by this financial hardship. Furthermore, Offerman (2011) added that the traditional student of the past was male and did not have a family. The typical part-time student presently has an existing career and a family. Full-time students often receive tuition waivers or stipends while they serve as assistants, graduate instructors and researchers. On the contrary, part-time students do not have the same access to this type of arrangement and struggle to find a way to finance their education. Offerman contended that “the relative proportion of doctoral students who study full-time and work in the various assistant roles has declined as more part-time students have careers already in place” (2011, p. 27). As a result, many students are barred from educational opportunity based on lack of financial funding and the expense of continuing their studies and lack of institutional funding support.

External Influences on Learning and Program Progress

The juggling of the demands of full-time jobs, part-time graduate work, and family responsibilities all work together to make support for the student all the more critical. Part-time doctoral students tend to be older and have obligations that impact their study behaviors (Watts, 2008). According to Offerman (2011), older female students base their institutional and program choices on the institution’s credentials, the location of the institution and most importantly the cost. This decision path is based primarily on the balance between family, work, and educational pursuits. The contemporary student of today seeks flexibility in their study, programs that offer “flexibility in how, when, and where they participate” (Offerman, 2011, p. 27).

Part-time doctoral students often have full-time employment outside of the university that hinders them from participating in educational pursuits that occur inside of the classroom. According to Biegel et al., (2006), part-time students “worked on a full-time basis, came to campus for their classes, and then quickly returned to their workplace: thus, they had little interaction with other doctoral students or with faculty outside of the classroom” (p. 233). As a result, many part-timers have found it more difficult to keep up with the weekly assignments and readings, and to complete the coursework within the designated timeframe. More and more, part-time students end up getting incomplete grades due to their outside obligations because they may lack focus or energy that is required of a doctoral student (Biegel et al., 2006).
Part-Time Doctoral Program Resources

What exactly does a part-time doctoral student consider as “support?” Gardner and Gopaul (2012) proposed, “In general, offering more targeted support for these students may also, in the end, open more opportunities for this growing demographic in graduate education” (p. 74).

Part-Time Student Needs for Success

Gardner and Gopaul (2012) found part-time students felt they had to strike a complicated balance between their academic, professional and family lives that full-time students did not. Students commented upon the many sacrifices they had to make. This constant search for balance was a source of stress.

Research has shown most full-time graduate students find support from their academic advisors. Participants in the Gardner and Gopaul (2012) study rarely cited academic advisors, but instead discussed family members and their workplaces as the most supportive entities for part-time students.

In their study of an alternative cohort model for part-time students in an educational leadership program, Twale and Kochan (2000) cautioned, “We must work to facilitate a greater transfer of learning and support for part-time students as they address issues they face in an increasingly complex environment” (p. 204). But exactly what are those needs and how should they be addressed? Watts (2008) added that universities need to proactively plan for the part-time student because their needs are not as uniform as those of the typical full-time student. Part-time students require “enhanced communications increased planning, and empathy” (Watts, 2008, p. 370).

Part-time students pursue their education one or two courses per semester and thus have little contact with their peers with the exception of the classroom. This type of interaction is not considered adequate to meet the needs of an “essential component of learning—intensive interaction with one’s peers” (Biegel et al., 2006, p. 234). In response to this need, many doctoral programs are creating collaborative learning environments to address the additional hardships of traditional part-time students.

Developing a Sense of Community

Most of the researchers in the literature reviewed stated the importance of a sense of community to the success of the part-time graduate student (Biegel et al., 2006 Bista & Cox, 2014; Boden, Borrego, & Newswander, 2011; Conrad, 2005; Fountain, 2012; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Twale & Kochan, 2000; Walsh, 2010). In his study of building and maintaining community in cohort-based online learning, Conrad (2005) used a variety of means to explore ways in which graduate students in a Master’s program developed an online sense of community. He was interested in the question, “How does a sense of community develop, and who develops it? Does every online group find its sense of community?” (Conrad, 2005, p. 2). According to Conrad, the concept of community was important because many studies support the idea that “community is important to the success of online learners” (p. 2).

As universities offer more web-based learning, the idea of community becomes even more important. Although the importance of community is recognized, both faculty and students often have difficulty articulating exactly what community is or means to the individual. Conrad (2005) posed the question, “Who is responsible for the creation of community? Is it created or is it built? Or does it merely grow?” (p. 3). Over the course of their involvement in the program, students’ perception of what community was changed. It evolved from a more technical/goal oriented concept of a work group to more of a relationship based concept. Students believed that the onus of building a community was upon them as cohort members (Conrad, 2005).

Another interesting finding in Conrad’s (2005) work that could have potentially large implications was that “distance learners who have the opportunity to meet each other face to face, even once, report an enormous surge in connectedness and satisfaction with the program design” (p. 9). As more universities move to online instruction, is the opportunity to meet face to face even possible? Would meeting face to face online via Skype result in the same sense of increased connectedness? This concern with instructional delivery and its impact on part-time graduate students was echoed in the work of Twale and Kochan (2000), “As we design programs to incorporate technological wizardry, down-size faculty to
match shrinking budgets, and entertain new modes of instructional delivery (e.g., distance learning formats), we must continually address their impact on part-time students” (Twale & Kochan, 2000, p. 204). They studied and found, “We must work to facilitate a greater transfer of learning and support for part-time students as they address issues they face in an increasingly complex environment” (Twale & Kochan, 2000, p. 204).

In their study of socialization as the process through which students learn norms, values, and culture in the interest of interdisciplinary education, the researchers discovered doctoral student attrition is often linked to feelings of isolation. Watts (2008) suggests that a sense of disconnection from the research departments is followed by feelings of isolation and can ultimately be an impediment to student success (p. 370).

According to Boden et al. (2011), a sense of community can be created by something as simple as the creation of a shared student workspace. Shared workspace with amenities encourages formal and informal interactions among students. This space allows provides a place for student discussions. The atmosphere can play a critical role in enhancing peer interaction and promotion of student socialization. Neumann and Rodwell (2009) also supported the need for working space, technical facilities and off-hours support as a means to promote research infrastructure that meets the needs of part-time students. In addition to the infrastructure changes, part-time students desire social communications and intellectual assimilation into the research departments. Meaningful faculty-student and student-student active engagement are critical for the doctoral student experience and the resulting predictors for persistence.

The Role of Cohorts in Community Building and Socialization

Tied to the importance of developing communities is the role of cohorts for part-time students. Research has shown that placing students in cohorts aids in successful doctoral completion in a variety of ways, including socialization (Gardner & Gopal, 2012). Researchers of doctoral education have long realized the importance of the socialization process (Twale & Kochan, 2000). In their study of cohort-based doctoral programs, Bista and Cox (2014) found students were supportive of the cohort model in general, concluding, “The cohort structure provides students with not only support from professors, but also support from their peers” (p. 17).

In their study of the part-time doctoral student experience, Gardner and Gopal (2012) found students in fields such as education where part-time work is the norm, reported greater satisfaction than students in other fields. “The students who were in part-time cohort programs (or those programs with a normative expectation that students would be part-time) discussed a tremendously different experience from those students who were one of the few to pursue their degrees part-time” (Gardner & Gopal, 2012, p. 73). Part-time doctoral students who were part of a cohort expressed the value of peer support. Part-timers not assigned cohorts expressed wishing that they had been for supportive purposes. Some students without cohorts expressed feelings of isolation.

The work of Twale and Kochan (2000) also supported the vital roles cohorts play in student socialization. These authors developed an alternate cohort system from part-time students across three different strands within an Ed. D. program. A cohort system was not being provided by the university for these part-time students. They formed a seminar system to provide these students a support system that a cohort would normally supply. To gather information about student perceptions of the newly developed system, Twale and Kochan (2000) conducted a survey and focus groups with groups of students. They collected survey data (58% return rate) from five years of students that evaluated the seminar experience. Although respondents generally found participating in the seminar worthwhile, female respondents ranked the experience as more rewarding and beneficial than male respondents did. Twale and Kochan (2000) concluded, “Especially among part-time students, the women in this study appeared to cherish the camaraderie and support the seminar provided even after the seminar ended and they reentered their work environments” (p. 202). Similarly, Biegel et al. (2006) described the implementation of a part-time summer doctoral cohort program designed to focus on the shortcomings of traditional part-time doctoral education. In another study of socialization in interdisciplinary doctoral education, Boden et al. (2011) found that collectively oriented students performed better than students who worked individually.
Gardner (2009) believed that cohorts can enable students to learn from one another over an extended time which helps to enhance their knowledge and understanding by working together. “These cohorts mix students whose career span different settings, responsibilities, disciplines, and roles…and promotes peer learning that is broad and deep, prepares students to conduct action research-based dissertations, and encourages doctoral students to consider and perform research from perspectives other than their own” (Gardner, 2009, p. 28). The premise of this model allows for the recognition of knowledge that older, part-time students bring to the discipline, as well as the challenges these students face when they become a doctoral student. Most of the programs that offer cohorts have discovered the value in special student services geared to the part-time working doctoral student “with a structured course sequence and continuous enrollment…designed to create a clear path to success” (Gardner, 2009, p. 29).

The lack of a complete body of research on the experiences of socialization for part-time doctoral students enrolled in several universities means that “the concept of socialization is one that deserves fuller attention in understanding their experience and how these experiences may translate to their socialization outcomes” (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 66).

Socialization Support by Gender

As mentioned earlier, finding “good” statistical data for current part-time doctoral students, broken down by gender and discipline is difficult. The primary challenge is that masters and doctoral student statistical information is frequently combined together in research and is only occasionally separated into either masters or doctoral categories, discipline, and enrollment status in the data analysis. The Council of Graduate Schools study of years 2003-2013 graduate enrollment and degrees (Allum, 2014) provided one of the few statistical resources that offers a breakdown.

At the doctoral level, women earned the majority of the degrees awarded in seven of the eleven broad fields. Women earned the highest percentages of the degrees awarded in health sciences (71.7%), education (67.7%), and public administration and services (64.2%). Collectively, these three broad fields represented 41.2% of all doctoral degrees earned by women. Men earned the highest percentages of the doctoral degrees in engineering (76.9%), mathematics and computer sciences (74.2%), physical and earth sciences (65.3%), and business (55.0%). These four broad fields accounted for 45.2% of all doctoral degrees earned by men. (p. 18)

Additionally Allum reported (2014), for fall 2013, for first-time graduate enrollment in doctoral/research universities, there were 57, 605 doctoral students, with 36.7% male and 64.3% females. Full-time students represented 58.3% and part-time students were 41.7%, but that status is not divided into male and female. Are more females enrolled as part-time doctoral students? If one uses the entire first-time graduate enrollment for fall 2013 (masters, certifications, doctoral) as any type of broad prognosticator for doctoral gender divisions, males had a 135,661 full time enrollment, with a 51, 993 part-time enrollment. Females had 167, 930 full time enrollment with an 87,226 part-time enrollment. Does that increased percentage of female part-time graduate students carry over to doctoral programs, as well as masters? If so, what special challenges might female part-time doctoral students face?

Sallee (2011) studied gender in doctoral student socialization and found that socialization for doctoral students begins before graduate school with the interactions between faculty, friends, and family. Socialization into some departments often can be dependent upon competition and hierarchy. Cultural norms and behavioral expectations contribute to attrition when the student expectations are not met or vary from the student’s perceptions at the beginning of the program. During the initial induction into the department, doctoral students learn the behaviors that are expected from the department to the point that the students begin to change their values to match those of the organization. New students look for clues on how to behave from their faculty and peers by making note of their language, their customs, and their behaviors. Sallee (2011) discovered that socialization to a discipline could be a gendered process. Department values convey messages about gender and they differ based upon the historical culture of the discipline.
The experiences of men and women in some subjects vary; specifically in male dominated disciplines. One key reason for this difference is competition. Sallee (2011) found that males “described how they compete to be the leader, both in academic and social contexts” (p. 202). This struggle to compete are likely to influence some students’ perceptions and sense of well-being. For example, Sallee (2011) identified female faculty and students who felt marginalized within their research departments. Among other things, they felt they were not wanted or were held to differing expectations, and they did not receive the same amount of respect from faculty members as their male counterparts. Furthermore, they were “expected to adjust their behaviors to succeed” (Sallee, 2011, p. 209).

Attribution theory helps to explain the impact of the cultural environments within disciplines. Gardner (2009) contended that according to attribution theory, the understanding of the behavior of others may serve to reinforce or discourage one’s own behavior. Thus, students may end up leaving a program based on the differing cultural expectations of the discipline and their understanding of “what others in similar situations have done” (Gardner, 2009, p. 109). When the cultural narrative is understood, that there is a differentiation between genders, these misconceptions are passed along to students and may “contribute to higher student departure when viewed through the lens of attribution theory” (Gardner, 2009, p. 109)

Suggestions for Universities

Attrition rates and recorded statistics vary widely, but all rates of part-time students who fail to complete doctoral degrees are high—we would argue, too high. Therefore, universities would seem to have a vested interested in raising their part-time doctoral student graduate rates if they were conducting dedicated research, and yet such large scale research is not being done. Research could illuminate what types of support are most important to part-time graduate students, and facilitate universities in supporting these particular needs.

Universities cannot rely upon data from the much studied full-time doctoral students. Change in the attrition rates with part-time students will only come from comprehensive research of part-time doctoral students, and their unique needs and particular challenges, which are different from those of the much studied full-time doctoral students. Gardner and Gopaul (2012) asserted that the research on part-time doctoral students is small scale, often anecdotal and sparse. “Taken together, while part-time doctoral students constitute a growing population of graduate students in the U.S., relatively little empirical research has been conducted to examine their experiences” (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 65).

The central issue of the lack of research on part-time doctoral students cannot be overstated. While the demographic of part-time doctoral graduate students continues to grow, it is not matched by corresponding research concerning the population. Gardner (2009) spoke of a need for universities to deliver content in new innovate ways—weekends, evenings, and online. Also, she suggested the need for flexibility in faculty hours as well.

Gardner and Gopaul (2012) summarized, and many researchers echoed the sentiment, “Given this growing body of the doctoral student population in the U.S., more research is warranted that better assists faculty, administrators, and policy makers in understanding the distinct needs and experiences of part-time doctoral students” (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 64).

Fountaine (2012) asserted that the doctoral experience is a process to a professional role. Therefore, there is a need for revisiting the doctoral student development programs and persistence strategies that help to meet the needed socialization requirements for all doctoral students. External university relationships, professional and social, are necessary for graduate socialization. According to specialization theory, “graduate students need to engage with their peers, supervisors, other professors, and professionals in order to become competent professionals themselves” (Boden et al., 2011, p. 752).

Furthermore, institutional context and culture need to adapt to the changing need of a new demographic of students. For example, faculty interaction with doctoral students has been determined to be a key to success for doctoral students, yet part-time students do not have the opportunities for
interaction afforded to full-time, traditional students. The traditional faculty perception is that students should be engrossed in their academics, but this idea is being challenged as faculty are meeting new students who have full-time work and family responsibilities. However, the need for faculty interaction has not gone away. In fact, faculty “must act as facilitator, coach, and colleague much more than the traditional faculty member” (Gardner, 2009, pp. 26-27).

Gardner and Gopaul (2012) recommended that programs should address the types of services and support that part-time students need. The authors discussed the need to “move beyond the level of benign neglect that many of the students in the study discussed experiencing” (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 73). “Similarly, on-campus resources such as writing centers, counseling centers, and childcare centers might consider holding evening and weekend hours for the part-time contingent” (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 74). They asserted that colleges should explore opportunities for online support such as blogs, groups, and forums. Students could access those avenues when it best suited their schedules. Additionally Gardner (2009) suggested that “more support be offered through campus offices like childcare center, counseling services, and peer support groups that may support students through these life changes” (p. 110).

Placing students in cohorts does help provide support and a sense of comradery amongst students. Socialization is vital to the success of doctoral students who are often under more stress than full-time students because of other obligations outside of the doctoral program.

There are, however, more support systems beyond the cohort model that universities can, and should develop to assist the part-time student.

### Conclusion and Areas for Further Research

The lack of research on part-time, doctoral students is surprising given the sheer number of part-time doctoral students enrolled in graduate schools across the United States. More comprehensive research is needed to understand and address the particular challenges faced by the part-time doctoral student. While there are numerous studies focused on the undergraduate student, there is little research attention placed on students at the doctoral level (Offerman, 2011, p. 24).

While many researchers recommended future study, perhaps Bista and Cox (2014) offered the best detailed explanation of vital work that needs to be done in the field.

First, a comparative study that uses the perceptions of doctoral students and their faculty would strengthen the study of future research that includes participants from multiple universities as well as multiple discipline would offer a significant direction to assess the experiences and perceptions of graduates in doctoral programs . . . the use of demographic information . . . so that inferential statistics could be used to explore further relations and association of components. (p. 17)

In addition to Bista and Cox (2014), Gardner and Gopaul (2012) also advocated for more research. They asserted that part-time graduate student demographic is rapidly growing and more comprehensive research is needed. Furthermore, targeted research is needed based on discipline, cohort program, demographics, those with children and without, etc. “In short, while the part-time doctoral student contingent continues to grow so should our understanding” (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012, p. 74).

Twale and Kochan (2000) added their voices to the chorus calling for more research, “We also need to further study part time students and how best to minimize their personal, professional, social, and academic frustrations and capitalize on their strengths as an experimental learning tool” (p. 203).

Additionally, Gardner (2009) added that research in regard to departmental influences of faculty and administrators should be conducted to understand the misunderstood interpretations of doctoral student attrition, and the responsibility of faculty and institutions to determine actual causes. It is more apparent than ever that faculty do not understand the reasons that students leave and this can contribute to attrition. Also, research should include minority groups such as women and students of color in order to reveal the different experiences of these students in relation to particular departments and disciplines.
Fountaine (2012) supported a need for further research and study in regard to external engagement for doctoral students and the impact on persistence and socialization. Walsh (2010) suggested that further research on cohort environments that support the pedagogy of peer learning is needed to understand the positive impact of socialization through collaborative learning and increased socialization.

Due to the lack of research concerning part-time doctoral students, we found ourselves asking the same questions as we did in the beginning. Under what circumstances does doctoral students’ part-time status become an obstacle toward completing the degree? What is happening in terms of part-time doctoral students, socialization, and support? Why? Alternatively, perhaps more specifically, why does the current typical doctoral system work as it does? What unique challenges does it pose for the part-time student and under what conditions?

Future research could result in additional support mechanisms beyond simply placing students in cohorts. There is a noticeable lack of research drilling down into the role of cohorts and socialization. Perhaps as more part-time students are entering, and exiting, the doctoral program, more pre-and post-surveys are needed. Surveys could help to provide support for the hypothesis that cohort models are a valuable tool for retention. Further research into this topic may help graduate schools minimize frustrations and capitalize on institutional strengths to increase retention and decrease attrition for part-time doctoral students. It seems inevitable that in the near future new exciting research will be done on the important growing demographic of part-time doctoral students, and this research will provide insight into their unique needs. With future research, universities will be able to adapt existing support structures, and to develop new support mechanisms specifically designed to assist part-time graduate students.

Research highlighting the specific needs and socialization of part-time graduate students will serve a truly altruistic goal: helping more full-time working adults achieve their advanced educational goals.
References


