

Using Grounded Action to Address Student Needs in the CIA/RLL Ed.D Doctoral Programs at Walden University

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ABSTRACT

The success of any university is its ability to retain and promote its students from student admission to graduation. A grounded theory (GT) study was conducted investigating the experiences of new doctoral students at Walden University in 2013. The purpose of this study was to understand the new student experience which resulted in a (GT) that accounted for the main concerns of the doctoral student participants. The emergent core variable for the study was weighing in, a process that includes orienting, equipping, considering, and jumping in. Grounded action (GA) was applied using the explanatory theory of weighing in for mitigating student related issues throughout the CIA/RLL programs. Several action initiatives and a strategic plan were developed to address these concerns using the theory of weighing in. The impact of this study will impact training and support of Walden's full and part-time contributing faculty and shape student services, instruction, and support.

PROBLEM

Student attrition in first-year doctoral programs has become a hot topic within many universities and colleges across the country (Noonan, Lundy, Russell, & Livingston, 2012; Heilbronner, Connell, Dobyns & Reis, 2010; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). A trend towards decreased enrollment has placed considerable strain upon the budgets and operations of universities and colleges across the country (Smith, 2006). In many institutions, more than 50% of all students do not even make it to completion (Bayley, Ellis, Abreu-Ellis, & O'Reilly, 2012; Gardner, 2009, 2008). In an attempt to resolve a persistent decline in enrollment and rising attrition among students, employed retention initiatives, specialized training, and leadership teams have been attempting to slow this trend.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

The only literature used initially in this study was in developing the interest area and grand-tour question. No subsequent literature was considered until the theory was almost fully developed. Literature has to earn its way into the theory just as interview data did, using the constant comparative analysis method for theory generation. The foundational literature for beginning this GA study began only the GT itself related to the core variable *weighing in* and emergent categories: *orienting*, *equipping*, *considering*, and *jumping-in*. Attrition and Retention literature was also considered relevant as they related to the core variable and categories. Surprisingly, increased attrition rates among students has often been the result of nonacademic reasons like "gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, availability of financial aid, type of institution attended, size of the student body, level of student engagement, and program commitment to student retention" (Noonan et al., 2011).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The original GT study began only with the selection of an area of interest (Raffanti, 2006, p. 23) and a grand tour question, not with a set of research questions. The area of interest for this GT study came from recent efforts of Walden University to implement retention programs and initiatives without any certainty that they are resolving the main concerns of the students. This prompted the single *grand-tour question* (Lafler, 2006; Maddy, 2008; Olson, 2006; Raffanti, 2005; Simmons & Gregory, 2003; Toscano, 2008):

"Would you talk about your experience in your Walden foundations course?"

PROCEDURES

- Grounded action (GA; Simmons & Gregory, 2003) is a research methodology that incorporates all stages of grounded theory (GT; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
- An explanatory theory is an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses and is the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method (Glaser, 1998).
- GA begins once an explanatory theory is generated and addresses emergent problems around the core variable. The "action" of GA is intended to generate a practical, workable, and modifiable intervention plan that itself emerges as the researcher addresses the problems uncovered while discovering the explanatory theory. "Once the explanatory theory has been fully developed by means of a grounded theory process, the operational theory is then generated" (Simmons & Gregory, 2003, para. 31). GA looks at the underlying core variable and seeks to address the emergently discovered action problems by generating actions that address discovered problems at each stage of the theory (Simmons, 2005, written communication).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data for the GA research were collected through surveys and participant interviews. As with GT, GA data analysis utilizes a constant comparative analysis process. The researcher must continuously ask how one set of data or information compares to other data already gathered. Surveys and face-to-face interviews were coded to get at the underlying meaning of the words and establish a relationship between the data and theory (Glaser, 1978). An operational theory and mitigating action emerge as analysis progressed.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to generate an operational theory and grounded action by addressing students' main concerns and challenges (as identified in the explanatory theory) while navigating the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (CIA) program at Walden University.

FINDINGS

Weighing-in was the core variable for a GT study which accounted for the main concerns of participants (candidates) in a Walden University foundations course. *Weighing-in* is a process that includes the following 4 categories: *Orienting*, *Equipping*, *Considering*, and *Jumping-in*.

Explanatory Theory	Operational Theory
<i>Weighing-in</i> was the core variable for the original GT study which accounted for the main concerns of participants (candidates) from a Walden University foundations course. <i>Weighing-in</i> is a process that includes <i>Orienting</i> , <i>Equipping</i> , <i>Considering</i> , and <i>Jumping-in</i> .	<i>Being-Responsive</i> is the operational core variable that accounts for action that guides the operational theory in the Grounded Action. When administration or faculty is being responsive, they are <i>Assessing Needs</i> , <i>Training</i> and <i>Resourcing</i> , <i>Listening</i> , and <i>Journeying with</i> .
Orienting – occurs as students embark into a program of study and begin to consider and sort out how they fit into the program. Students begin to realize their strengths and weaknesses and often at this stage make a decision to continue or not. This inventorying process often results in investing in further skill development. Many students begin to form impressions about their instructor, supportive resources, time management, and how or if they fit into the program.	Assessing Needs – occurs as administration and faculty begin to respond to the concerns of individual students. Many students at this stage are inventorying, evaluating, balancing time and resources, and forming impressions about their future with the university. Instructors, advisors, and administration can be most useful and supportive when they connect with students and take the time to really understanding what their needs and concerns are within an open and non-judgmental environment.
Equipping – some students chose to supplement or sharpen their skills and/or dispositions in order to promote program success. Students either take advantage of these resources, refuse participation, or become discouraged and suspend participating in the program. Other students experience the affirmation of knowing that they can succeed if they continue to invest in the program.	Training and Resourcing – as a student progresses through the program they may need special skill development, support, or training. Guiding a student to appropriate university support (like the writing center or an editor) may provide what is needed to help a student succeed and overcome shortcomings (like writing, APA concerns, or help organizing a paper). Resourcing may also include networking, tutoring, or encouragement.
Considering – students take inventory of their fears, time, resources, and fit within the program. This weighing-in process involves the consideration of positive and negative experiences and helps guide their decision about whether to continue or withdraw from the program.	Listening – many times students become weighed down with all the options and fears that they encounter as they navigate their program of study. Advisors, instructors, administration, family, councilors, a classmate, or even a friend can provide guidance and a listening ear until the student is ready to invest.
Jumping In – is how candidates weigh in on the final decision to either stay and invest or withdraw from the program while others continue even though they are not fully convinced they will succeed. Others enter the program of study only to discover that they have little interest in the program or that the timing wasn't right.	Journeying with – offering a non-judgmental hand and affirmation may provide students with place where they can decide whether to continue, reinvest, or leave the program of study. Administration and faculty who are available to students to listen and journey with them are more likely be supportive and provide understanding when students are in flux.

LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations to this study that may impact the ability to extrapolate these findings to a larger academic population. As was identified in the original explanatory theory, interviews were only conducted with candidates who had recently completed a Walden foundations course. These interviews were only conducted with students who made themselves available and accessible. Several students would not even respond to email inquiries or make themselves available at all. As a result, many lower-performing students would not make themselves available for the study. The surveys and interviews analyzed for the GA portion of the study included only 10 participants (3 administration and 7 professors). While the interview data were not coerced or forced, this sample size may not represent the practice of all Walden leadership and faculty.

CONCLUSIONS

Weighing-in was the core variable in a GT study that sought to understand the main concerns of students navigating their first course in the Walden University CIA foundations program and became the explanatory theory that was used in generating grounded action.

There are five properties of a well-developed grounded theory: relevance, fit, grab, modifiability, and workability (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), each of which are also applicable in GA (Simmons & Gregory, 2003). Since GA is not about time, person, place, or things, this study may be useful as a starting point for understanding and providing mitigating action within other specializations throughout the university.

This study is an important first step in providing meaningful and sustainable support to administration, advisors, faculty, students, or anyone who supports or works with Walden students.

SOCIAL CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

This GA study provides important insight and action initiatives for candidates, faculty, advisors, and administration within an educational context. The explanatory theory provides a voice for these candidates and illustrates many of the problems, concerns, and fears that new students may encounter as they navigate their foundations course. The grounded action produced in this study may provide practical and mitigating solutions to support and drive students to a place where they can make appropriate decisions to resolve many of the problems, fears, and struggles students experience while supporting their educational endeavors.