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 grounded theory 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 mitigation of 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.

Relevant Literature

The only literature used initially in this study was in developing the first area and grand-theory 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).

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 events 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 initiatives that addresses main concerns and challenges (as identified in the explanatory theory) while navigating the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (CIA) program at Walden University.

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

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ABSTRACT

The original GT study began only with the selection of an area of interest (Raffanti, 2006, p. 23) and a grand theory 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-theory question (Laffer, 2006, Maddy, 2008; Olson, 2008; 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 solution (Glaser, 1978) to the core variable; this may be the same GA or an emergent GA.

• An explanatory theory is generated by developing the interest area and grand tour (Glaser, 1998). In an operational theory and mitigating action emerge 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 new emergent problems at each stage of the theory (Simmons, 2005, written communication).

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.

Explaining Theory

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

Orienting – occurs as students embark into a program of study and begin to 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 inventoring process often results in further skill development. Many students begin to form impressions about their instructor, supportive resources, time management, and how or if their instructor is approachable.

Equipping – some students choose to supplement or sharpen their skill 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 affirming, nonjudgmental environment that they can succeed if they continue to invest in the program.

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 not gained anything in the program or that the timing wasn’t right.

Operational Theory

Being responsive is the operational core variable that accounts for action that guides the operational theory in the Grounded Action (GA) research. An administration or faculty is being responsive, they are Assessing Needs, Training and Resourcing, Listening, and Journeying with.

Assessing Needs – occurs as administration and faculty begin to respond to the concerns of individual students. Many students at this stage are inventoring, 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 nonjudgmental environment.

Training and Resourcing – as students progress 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, reading, APA concerns, or help organizing a paper). Resourcing may also include networking, tutoring, or encouragement.

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, family, councilors, a classmate, or even a friend can provide guidance and a listening ear when they need to talk about their concerns. 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 identified within 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 completely 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 mitigation action within other specializations throughout the university.

This study is an important first step in providing meaningful and sustainable support to administrators, advisory 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.

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