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Higher Education Leader Perceptions on Increasing Doctoral Program Completion Rates

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Higher Education Leader Perceptions on Increasing Doctoral Program Completion Rates

by

Leila Abouzaki

MS, California State University East Bay, 2021

BA, University of Illinois at Springfield, 2020

Dissertation Submitted in Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2024

Abstract

The problem addressed through this study is that the completion rates of doctoral

programs in the United States range as low as 40%. The purpose of this qualitative study

was to explore the perceptions of higher education leaders (HELs) on their successes and

challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. The list of values

model by Hanson et al. provided a conceptual framework to describe and seek to

understand the different factors related to retention and time to degree and suggests

interventions to increase candidates' likelihood of degree completion. The key research

questions explored HELs' perceptions of their successes and challenges to increase the

completion rates in their doctoral programs. The basic qualitative approach included

semistructured, open-ended interviews with HELs. I analyzed the data using Saldaña's

(2021) coding methods including open codes, axial codes, and emerging themes. The

findings of the study indicated that HELs' insights on program strengths and weaknesses

can be harnessed to improve doctoral student completion rates, fostering positive social

change. This study is significant in that the findings could contribute to suitable solutions

to address low completion rates through HELs' perspectives. HELs might have the

knowledge, background, or experience in dealing with completion rates of doctoral

programs that can suggest solutions or suitable recommendations to the problem of low

completion rates. The social benefits of addressing low completion rates could improve

doctoral programs and the completion rates of doctoral students. Increased doctoral

program completion, informed by leaders' experiences, can drive social change through

knowledge creation, workforce development, and inclusivity.

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Dedication

Dedicated to Rabih Temraz, who supported and inspired me throughout my doctoral studies and academic journeys; I could not ask for a better partner and husband. I started as a community college student with big hopes and dreams and you believed in me every step of the way. I love you with every fiber of my being.

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A special thank you to Dr. Raja Abouzaki and Dr. Najwa Abouzaki for your encouragement; I am grateful to have you as my parents. You are my role models; your kindness and love have crafted the individual I am today, and I am proud to have accomplished this milestone because of your support. I love you both very much.

Thank you to my editor, Kristin Domville, you have saved me countless times before, and I am glad to have you as a friend. Thank you to Dr. Stacy Wahl, Dr. Belinda Mcfeeters, Dr. Heidi Crocker, Dr. Jen Oullette-schramm, Dr. Jamie Patterson, and everyone part of the Walden University doctoral committee, editors, and staff who assisted with the revision and review of my doctoral study.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

U.S. doctoral programs are facing a problem with students enrolling in a program but never completing the degree (Roberts et al., 2019). The completion rates of doctoral programs are low nationwide with respect to accrediting bodies' standards. A Council of Graduate Schools' study showed that 41% of students completed the humanities doctoral program after 7 years, and other studies indicated that Doctor of Education (EdD) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs reported completion rates of 50% (Roberts et al., 2019).

Higher education leaders (HELs), including deans, directors, associate deans, presidents, and chief academic officers, are challenged with increasing the completion rates of doctoral programs that other studies have shown can range as low as 40% across the United States (Hanson et al., 2022). Program administrators can use frameworks and models that can help doctoral students complete their programs (Hanson et al., 2022).

The potential social benefits of addressing low completion rates are improving doctoral programs and the completion rates of doctoral students. Improving doctoral programs and increasing completion rates can lead to positive social change by fostering knowledge creation, workforce development, diversity, and inclusivity, as well as economic growth (Sanchez et al., 2023).

In Chapter 1, I present the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, and nature of this basic qualitative study. In the first chapter, I also include a discussion of the assumptions, scope and delimitations,

limitations, significance of the study, and maintaining confidentiality. The conclusion section comprises the main ideas of the chapter and the study's impact on social change.

Background

Lehan et al. (2021) posited that doctoral students majoring in different fields have a lower persistence rate than undergraduates and these rates have remained the same for 50 years. Attrition is a problem in higher education institutions that affects doctoral programs and current rates range from 40% to 60% (Breitenbach, 2019). Ali and Pandya (2021) found that a lack of structure in doctoral programs' design may lead to increased attrition and noncompletion rates.

If a doctoral program's design contributes to increasing completion rates, students will have higher chances of overcoming obstacles in the program. Ali and Pandya (2021) suggested improving the constructs used in the design of a doctoral program to focus on factors that could contribute to increasing completion rates and graduation goals. The results of a successful program redesign can enhance student satisfaction, completion, and retention (Friesen & Jacobsen, 2021).

Denis et al. (2019) also found that graduate programs' completion rates to be about 50% and the main issue to be behind the quality of administrative doctoral support and supervision. To address this problem, Fanguy et al. (2022) suggested that universities adopt an advanced institutional standard, so they can identify retention problems and suggestions and determine initiatives to help doctoral students succeed to degree completion.

The role of HELs is to support the institution's mission and values, faculty members, and make sure that students are retained and completing their degrees. HELs are developing equitable techniques in the design of doctoral programs and within their institutional policies and procedures, which can impact communication and promote trust for students (Hanson et al., 2022), but there is a gap in practice on efforts to improve retention and doctoral student persistence.

As institutions work to implement strategies to improve graduate student retention, there is a gap in knowledge related to the perceptions of higher education administration on the successes and challenges related to these efforts. The literature includes a lack of social integration of students in doctoral programs, pressure to adopt curriculum reform, and limited opportunities for leaders to have professional development in strategies relative to change management on this problem, which has resulted in major findings such as developing a scholarly identity in doctoral programs and self-studying (Ha Choi et al., 2021; Gregory & Burbage, 2022; Miller & Harrington, 2023; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021; Tarker, 2019). However, there is limited research on HELs' perspectives found in the literature and more research was found on students', mentors', and faculty's perspectives of doctoral programs. The study was needed because HELs can develop and offer training and strategies to overcome the various challenges arising in policies and practices. If HELs can improve their strategies and management techniques, their role to support the overall institution and students it serves could positively influence the completion rates of doctoral students.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed through this study is the approximately 40% completion rate in U.S. doctoral programs nationwide (Hanson et al., 2022). Groman and Paquette (2023) reported that doctoral students of about 50% were not able to complete their programs successfully because of personal, professional, or institution-based barriers.

The completion rates of doctoral programs are below the accreditation standard due to the challenges that doctoral students experience throughout their programs. The Higher Learning Commission (2019) accreditation benchmark of graduation rates for doctoral programs with financial aid is about 80% over a 5-year period. Out of graduate programs, doctoral programs have the highest attrition (McBrayer et al., 2021).

HELs "face an unprecedented number of challenges including increased accountability, changing government funding models, and pressure to adopt significant curriculum reform to improve student completion and success rates" (Tarker, 2019, p. 672). The U.S. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) report defined the standard measure of graduation rates for higher education institutions, but the report did not show HELs the numbers of graduates and dropouts, making it challenging to assess the cause of low graduation rates. A recommendation from researchers was to evolve the IPEDS report to focus on completion rates so that it will become easier for HELs to navigate the process of strategizing and increasing those rates (Fanguy et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a meaningful gap in practice regarding the efforts to improve completion on doctoral noncompletion and low graduation rates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. The information gained from this study could be used to help other HELs improve doctoral program completion rates and success.

Research Questions

In this study, I explored HELs' perceptions related to increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs. This study addressed the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the perceptions of HELs on their successes in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of HELs on their challenges in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework I used for this study was Hanson's (2017) list of values (LOVS) model. The LOVS model offers a framework focused on retention factors and time to degree (TTD) and offers suggestions for successful doctoral degree completion. The LOVS model structures equity factors relative to doctoral education into four elements: vital leadership, informal open systems, flexible structures, and individual integration (Hanson et al., 2022). The term *vital* refers to the essential qualities of leaders in higher education that rely on student input for program improvement (Hanson et al., 2022). Vital leaders include dissertation chairs, administrators, mentors, and committee

members (Hanson et al., 2022). Ha Choi et al. (2021) recommended that HELs openly acknowledge the identity development of students and include development opportunities and reflection in the doctoral program's curriculum.

Informal open systems are structures of learning that enable doctoral students to observe their peers and to reflect on their learning to complete the doctoral program (Hanson et al., 2022). Self-authorship is when a student reflects on their own thinking, feelings, and social connections to advance through the doctoral program successfully (Hanson et al., 2022). An example of self-authorship is when a student performs doctoral tasks on their own and subsequently becomes more confident and develops personal agency to complete the dissertation (Baxter-Magolda & King, 1951). Informal open systems can influence self-authorship and allow doctoral students to think and study for themselves, which may enhance dissertation completion. Lee et al. (2020) showed that success in student learning is closely related to persistence, self-efficacy, and the building of social connections. A doctoral student who thinks for themselves and asks questions can self-study and build strong connections, which are important aspects of a doctoral program.

HELs who develop flexible structures of doctoral programs can take into consideration students' interests and backgrounds while aligning students' goals to the program's objectives to support completion (Hanson et al., 2022). On the other hand, individual integration is about the alignment of the student's goals with the institution's mission, vision, and values. Therefore, the four elements of the LOVS model share the

same aim of developing the candidate's self-motivation and self-authorship that contribute to program completion and retention rates (Hanson et al., 2022).

This study used the LOVS model as a framework that seeks to understand and enhance doctoral students' completion and TTD (see Hanson et al., 2022). The study's approach to qualitative data collection methods relates to the LOVS model framework that aims at collecting data relative to vital leadership, informal open systems, flexible structures, and individual integration that can be obtained through interviewing HELs.

Nature of the Study

This study used a basic qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. The nature of qualitative research is to explore the experiences or perspectives of individuals or groups rather than to find numeric data (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). A qualitative method was suitable for this study because it explores a topic from the perceptions of a few individuals having relevant experience by asking them questions and listening to their answers. I conducted semistructured interviews that allowed me to talk to participants who have the knowledge and experience relative to the problem of interest. For the present study, the interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions framed by the LOVS model. After institutional review board (IRB) approval, I started the recruiting process and interviewing the participants. For my planned research design, the basic qualitative approach involved semistructured, open-ended interviews and consisted of six current or former HELs. After the interviews, I analyzed the data and coded it

through the first and second rounds of coding following the qualitative coding method.

The methodology process used for the study is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Definitions

All but dissertation: A term identifying a stage in obtaining a research doctorate, commonly used in the United States, where students have completed all required doctorate coursework but have not written and defended the dissertation (Breitenbach, 2019).

Completion rate: The proportion of students who enroll in a program and successfully complete it (Cidlinska et al., 2023).

Graduation rate: The number of students who begin studying in the same cohort and expect to graduate in 6 to 7 years of their doctoral programs (McBrayer et al., 2021). This measure shows the number of students that will complete the programs promptly upon enrolling (McBrayer et al., 2021).

Self-authorship: Self-authorship is the action of authoring one's own thinking, feelings, and social connections to function successfully (Hanson et al., 2022).

Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy involves students' motivation and productivity to develop professional skills and self-confidence (Gillani et al., 2023).

Assumptions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. There were four assumptions in this study. The first assumption was ontological, which relates to the participants' responses to accurately represent their honest perceptions and

different perspectives (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Furthermore, I assumed there

would be different perspectives and answers because of differences in the participants'

leadership and management capabilities and skills. The second assumption was

epistemological, that within qualitative research, the researcher must distance themselves

from what is being researched so that the evidence obtained from the participants'

perspectives is subjective (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The third assumption was

axiological, and the researcher acknowledges the present biases in relation to their role in

the context of the study (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was important to acknowledge

any biases influenced by the researchers' values, personal experiences, and perceptions.

The fourth assumption was methodological because the nature of qualitative research is

inductive, and the researcher must follow a certain theory or analyze from the

perspectives of participants (see Hoddy, 2019). These assumptions were necessary for my

study because assuming that HELs' perspectives would be different is important for the

trustworthiness of data. Therefore, I wrote honestly and truthfully about the responses of

the participants in this study.

Scope and Delimitations

I chose delimitations deliberately to define the area the researcher is investigating

(see Lambert, 2012). The scope and delimitations of this basic qualitative research study

were six to eight current and former HELs in the United States. Excluded participants

would have roles that are not at the leadership or managerial level in a higher education

setting. This study's interview questions were created based on the participants which

were HELs who met the criteria and were based on the conceptual framework. The

conceptual framework of the LOVS model focuses on four elements including: vital leadership, informal open systems, flexible structures, and individual integration (Hanson et al., 2022). However, the conceptual frameworks most related to the area of this study were vital leadership and individual integration because they focused on HELs' support and how well aligned the student's goals are with the doctoral program's and institution's goal. The conceptual frameworks that also relate to this study but were not investigated are informal open systems and flexible structures because they focus on the students' integration and progress in the program and the focus of this study is to gain the perspectives of HELs.

Although the sample size of six participants might impact the study's transferability, Lambert (2012) noted that adding rich descriptions during the data analysis phase can benefit the application of findings in other contexts.

Limitations

This study had three potential limitations that relate to the factors contributing to low doctoral completion rates. The first limitation of this study was using HELs instead of other participants, such as students or faculty, and the number of responses in the interviews would be limited. To address this potential limitation, the participants were leaders from higher education institutions across the United States. The second limitation was my potential bias as a researcher, which included making assumptions or relying on my opinions when analyzing the interviews (see Rubin & Rubin, 2011). To address this potential limitation, I kept a researcher's notebook to help me to identify and control bias. The third limitation was that HELs are busy individuals, and it could have been a

challenge to setup an interview or find willing participants. To address this potential limitation, I offered email, virtual interviews, and flexible scheduling. I also included former and current HELs from across the United States. The three anticipated limitations were mitigated successfully and were not experienced in data collection.

Significance

This study is significant because the findings have the potential implications for positive social change that affects the lives of doctoral candidates by identifying HELs' perceptions and strategies to achieve and support doctoral program completion. This study may provide suitable suggestions to address the low completion rates of doctoral programs. HELs have the knowledge, background, and experience in doctoral programs, and they can contribute their perceptions on the successes and challenges to address the problem of low completion rates. Consequently, doctoral students may complete more successfully in the dissertation journey by understanding HELs' perceptions and expectations of the process.

The findings of this study could advance practice by providing HELs, managers, and students with suggestions that can be implemented in doctoral programs to increase completion rates. The resources that doctoral students invest as they progress through their doctoral studies justify institutional support through the dissertation process, defense, and graduation (Groman & Paquette, 2023). Through HELs' support, networking and degree completion are factors that can make the doctoral journey worthwhile for students' academic journey and careers. Finally, advantages to doctoral

programs may also be garnered from this study by determining areas of success and challenges for continuous program evaluation and improvement.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided background information regarding the problem of the study, its nature, and the conceptual framework. The problem to be addressed is the approximately 40% completion rate in U.S. doctoral programs nationwide (Hanson et al., 2022). Understanding the perceptions of HELs' perceptions of their successes and challenges will help identify ways to increase the completion rates in their doctoral programs. The findings of this study may help HELs to increase the completion rates of their doctoral programs.

In Chapter 2, I review recent and seminal literature on the research problem. Specifically, I review the literature in-depth on both the conceptual framework and the problem of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was addressed through this study is the approximately 40% completion rate in U.S. doctoral programs nationwide (see Hanson et al., 2022). This rate is low in comparison to the Higher Learning Commission accreditation benchmark of graduation rates for student financial aid, which is about 80% over a 5-year period (Higher Learning Commission, 2019). Out of graduate programs, doctorate degrees have the highest attrition rates with half of students completing their programs in 6 to 7 years (McBrayer et al., 2021). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs.

In this chapter, I describe the literature search strategy for library databases and search engines. I also address the conceptual framework and review literature related to key concepts. The chapter ends with a summary and conclusions.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted a literature review about higher education leadership in relation to completion rates of doctoral programs. I used Walden University's library resources to obtain scholarly journals using the databases Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ProQuest Central, and SAGE Journals. Additionally, I studied additional sources such as dissertations and journals.

Although most of the literature reviewed was published between 2019 and 2023, I reviewed older literature considered seminal, which was cited in most of the literature that I reviewed while conducting research on this study. Additionally, older literature was

included to provide a robust review of the conceptual framework as well as of the research methodology.

I searched databases using the following keywords and phrases: *higher education or college or university, graduation or completion, doctoral or PhD or EdD or doctorate, United States,* and *leadership or dean or director or president*. The search included references from books, journals, websites, and related articles addressing higher education leadership and completion rates, but only peer-reviewed sources are included in this review. I used Google Scholar and signed up for email alerts to receive informative updates on current topics and literature relative to the study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is the LOVS model by Hanson et al. (2022), which pertains to retention factors and TTD and offers suggestions for successful doctoral degree completion. The LOVS model focuses on the doctoral candidate's well-being through self-motivation and self-authorship to program completion (Hanson et al., 2022). The model's structure is made up of four elements: vital leadership, informal open systems, flexible structures, and individual integration. I described these elements in detail in the subsections that follow.

Vital Leadership

Leadership in the LOVS model is a necessary element within systems to provide structure in doctoral programs for students during their formative years of education (Cox, 2018). Vital leadership builds informal and formal systems of a higher education institution. The term *vital* refers to the essential qualities of leaders in higher education

that rely on student input for program improvement (Hanson et al., 2022). Vital leaders include dissertation chairs, mentors, administrators, and committee members (Hanson et al., 2022).

If vital leaders work and collaborate to overcome challenges, then they more easily adapt to change. Skills and competencies of effective leadership include increasing staff engagement and satisfaction (Yeboah et al., 2019). Yeboah et al. (2019) found that a leader or manager who focuses on being a strategic individual and works with other stakeholders instead of alone helps to bring all constituents onboard toward productive strategy and outcomes.

Vital leaders engage staff and increase communication, allowing informal open and formal systems to establish support for doctoral students in their programs. If a HEL effectively communicates the rules and processes of a doctoral program, then students may be more motivated to participate in the program. This was confirmed by Lee et al. (2020), who suggested that administrators facilitate communication using technology and timely responses to students during all stages of the doctorate degree.

Informal Open Systems

The second element in the LOV model is informal open systems. Informal open systems are informal structures of learning that allow students to watch and observe their peers as they complete the program and dissertation process, which promotes student integration (Hanson et al., 2022). For example, informal open systems can include the university site's informal meeting times that clarify program expectations, enhance relationship development, and sharing of progress on the dissertation with peers (Hanson

et al., 2022). An informal open system provides a supportive and safe environment for doctoral students within the LOVS framework to foster socialization (Cox, 2018). A supportive environment can enhance the productivity of doctoral students and encourage them to complete their program.

Hanson et al. (2022) found that student participation in socialization and intellectuality is another important element of the LOVS model. This was supported by Schneider et al. (2020), who contended that joining committees or research groups enhances their socialization. A doctoral program requires socialization with peers, mentors, and faculty, and programs that focus on socialization can increase completion rates. Socialization helps determine doctoral students' success in meeting their graduation goals and impacts their academic performance (Cox, 2018).

Yeboah et al. (2019) found that the top motivators of overall productivity are respect, value, and trust that doctoral students feel through adequate supervision. Conversely, the negative factors of an unsafe environment increase students' feelings of detachment and isolation, which are associated with a higher rate of leaving the program (Hanson et al., 2022). Velasquez (2018) concluded that a lack of trust can lead to less support and accountability of the administration.

Flexible Structures

The third element in the LOV model is flexible structures. Flexible structures are systems within doctoral programs that respond to the unique characteristics and backgrounds of students and align the program's goals with students' goals (Hanson et al., 2022). Flexible structures of doctoral programs cultivate an environment of flexible

learning and skills (Cox, 2018). One way of responding to the unique characteristics of doctoral students can be following Boone et al.'s (2020) suggestion that doctoral-degree-granting institutions structure flexible, small cadres of faculty for the support and development of interpersonal relationships with doctoral students. Such structures engage doctoral students socially and teach them to act independently (Cox, 2018).

HELs can create programs that address and contribute to the diverse needs of students (Hanson et al., 2022). For example, Schneider et al. (2020) found that international students who associate with the culture and requirements of their academic environment, can contribute diverse perspectives that increase PhD education quality and learning. When diverse learners' goals are aligned with the program goals, more students will be motivated to complete them. Therefore, HELs can be central in promoting and increasing doctoral programs' completion rates.

Individual Integration

The fourth and final element in the LOV model is individual integration. Individual integration is how well aligned the student's goals are with the program and institution's goal (Hanson et al., 2022). Strong integration can lead to personal development, autonomy, and self-authorship. Through personal development, doctoral students can communicate more effectively with their peers and improve their test results (van der Kleij & Eggen, 2013). Meanwhile, autonomy in doctoral coursework allows students to feel secure and confident about their studies and learning decisions (Frans et al., 2020), promoting completion through trust and self-agency. Self-authorship, the skill to author one's own mindset and societal connections to successfully function, can

promote autonomy in doctoral coursework because it allows the student to build self-study skills and social relationships throughout the program (Hanson et al., 2022). Consequently, self-authorship can help doctoral students to independently perform their doctoral tasks, become more confident, and develop personal agency to complete their dissertation (Baxter-Magolda & King, 1951).

Past Applications of the Leadership Within Open Vital Systems Model

The LOVS model was applied in previous research by Cox (2018), who explored the characteristics of public-school students of low socioeconomic status (SES) and the factors contributing to their educational decisions and academic success. The LOVS model allowed Cox to identify the structure of the school within this framework to support the development of students' skills. In addition, Velasquez (2018) used the LOVS model in exploring the values and procedures of secondary school principals that lead professional learning communities (PLCs) to increase student achievement. The aspects of the LOVS model that informed my study involved increasing the completion rates of doctoral programs.

To increase doctoral program completion rates, it is important for HELs to focus on the design of the doctoral programs to support students and foster positive relationships in the learning environment. The LOVS model by Hanson (2017) led to the design of a dissertation program that enhanced the development of doctoral students' personal agency and their self-authorship to finish the dissertation. Cox (2018) perceived that school administrators and teachers can support students to reach another academic level in their studies. Velasquez (2018) suggested that teachers become inspired and more

determined after their responsibilities are supported and accountable through the administrators. In addition, PLCs are unsuccessful when there is a lack of trust, especially in building relationships. Principals show effective leadership styles when they are supportive, achievement-oriented, participative, and directive.

Alternative Frameworks

Other frameworks that I considered for this study included transformational leadership theory and the five-factor model. These frameworks primarily focus on the skills and traits that leaders and presidents should possess when dealing with significant change (Tarker, 2019). Tarker (2019) stated that presidents of higher education institutions are pressured to change their curriculum to increase student completion rates. These frameworks were not used for my study because they focus solely on the skills and behaviors of leaders, whereas my study focused on understanding the successes and challenges of HELs.

Another model that I considered was the leadership development model by Artis and Bartel (2021). The authors described community college presidents and how they navigate their daily tasks, their challenges, efficient leadership practices, and the skills to be a leader at an Illinois community college. The authors tried to find the necessary leadership skills that the leadership development model can help with, for emerging leaders such as community college boards and administrators. This model was not used for my study because it focuses on the effective leadership practices and competencies needed to become a leader, whereas my study focuses on the successes and challenges of higher education leadership in the context of doctoral program completion.

Rationale for the Selection of the Leadership Within Open Vital Systems Model

The LOVS model by Hanson (2017) was best for my study because it focuses specifically on increasing doctoral programs' completion rates and doctoral students' needs for completion. The model explains doctoral student retention, completion, and TTD (Hanson et al., 2022). First, student retention was explained by Lee et al. (2023), who indicated that retention and recruitment strategies are needed to enhance the diverse body of PhD students. Second, student completion was addressed by Geesa et al. (2020), who suggested that EdD programs provide mentors with access and resources to enhance degree completion in 5 years or less. Third, TTD was described by Torres et al. (2021), who signified building and having effective relationships and connections throughout doctoral programs to ensure timely completion. The retention, completion, and TTD of doctoral programs are factors that are considered by the LOVS model and focus on the problem of low completion rates of doctoral programs. Hanson developed the model for at-risk-for-completion students and their perceptions in relation to values, cultures of doctoral programs, and factors that influence completion rates positively and negatively. The values can align the students' goals with the program's goals.

Completion Rates in Doctoral Programs

The completion rates in doctoral programs are 40% nationwide (Hanson et al., 2022). Accrediting bodies provide standards for colleges and universities to follow to keep their completion rates high. Factors related to completion rates in doctoral programs include accreditation, modality, curriculum, mentorship, and the successes and challenges of students completing in doctoral programs.

Doctoral programs offered by various colleges and universities in the United States have different accreditors and accreditation standards to follow. One accrediting body was explored for this study across different doctoral programs: the Higher Learning Commission. The use of Higher Learning Commission's Assessment Culture Matrix to build and maintain the continuous quality improvement (CQI) of programs can happen through leadership, faculty, and the shared mission, vision, and resources of institutions (Genereaux et al., 2021). Leaders such as program directors can manage these assessment efforts to build a team from relevant stakeholders. Leadership's support is critical to assess doctoral programs because administrators understand and value resources towards assessment efforts (Genereaux et al., 2021). Leaders follow the CQI of programs to maintain their commitment to assessment.

Delivery methods of doctoral programs are both face-to-face and online learning methods. Traditional and online doctoral programs are facing challenges with student persistence and completion.

Online Doctoral Programs

There is a continuous increase in the demand for online doctoral programs, and the student completion rates in those online programs are decreasing (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). Studebaker and Curtis (2021) found that the physical disconnect of building relationships with faculty and classmates is challenging in an online environment and may lead to high attrition rates for online doctoral degrees. Learning success in online-based programs is the ability of doctoral students to complete their programs through effective technological support and relationships with peers and faculty

(Lee et al., 2020). Communicating and collaborating online can be difficult for doctoral students, primarily when their work depends on building connections and relationships with others.

A lack of learning success among an increasing number of online doctoral students is a cause for concern. Lee et al. (2020) argued that online programs are growing in the United States, and the percentage for graduate students has risen to 36.8%. Faculty are having difficulty engaging graduate students in fully online programs due to the nature of online interaction and communication which is more engaging in face-to-face settings. This is supported by Boone et al. (2020) who showed that faculty of online doctoral programs impact student completion and progression.

Unlike traditional delivery methods where students can interact with faculty and peers without using technology, the online environment requires technology and the Internet's support. Boone et al. (2020) found that online doctoral students are inspired by their family and community, and their persistence depends on online support from peers and faculty. Doctorate degrees with online learning environments have higher attrition rates than students attending classes in a face-to-face setting (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). Friesen and Jacobsen (2021) further suggested redesigning professional graduate programs so doctoral students can more easily complete them in online and hybrid programs.

One way to enhance the student learning outcomes of online doctoral programs is through support services like mentorship. Martin et al. (2022) found that online mentoring is as efficient as face-to-face mentoring and positively impacted students and

faculty. However, the biggest challenge is lack of clear communication in an online setting between mentor and mentee and the generated anxiety due to the lack of social presence (Martin et al., 2022). Researchers suggested incorporating hybrid-based programs instead of fully online programs because of problems such as socialization and completion (Boone et al., 2020; Dzubinski & Sanchez, 2022; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). For example, a type of blended modality that diminishes student isolation includes using face-to-face doctoral residencies in online programs that may increase student persistence and progression (Boone et al., 2020). Even though these online learning strategies can increase learning success, there are other methods of learning such as traditional or face-to-face learning.

Face-to-Face Doctoral Programs

As online programs are increasing, face-to-face programs are challenged with building programs that have integrated learning experiences that increase completion rates (Selingo, 2022). Higher education institutions may consider doctoral residencies to increase student completion and support in face-to-face programs. Doctoral residencies engage students with faculty on a higher level because they focus on socialization and building relationships beyond graduation (Corcelles-Seuba et al., 2022). This is supported by Selingo (2022), who determined that these residencies could show students how their academic programs provide the skills they need and the experiences that employers demand.

Doctoral students in face-to-face programs need adequate support to stay motivated and committed to completing their program. University faculty and staff can

include social learning activities in their programs' first year to promote their doctoral students' socialization and enhance the persistence rate (Matthews, 2021). Social support is an essential aspect of face-to-face doctoral program completion rates. Doctorate students who received minimal support have decreased satisfaction and success in doctoral programs (van Rooij et al., 2021). In addition, doctoral students who experience neglect or decreased support have an increased chance to exhibit fatigue and pressure and communicate dropout intentions than students who have better support (Corcelles-Seuba et al., 2022). Delivery methods are important aspects of doctoral programs; however, curriculum adjustments and enhancements are just as significant.

Curriculum and Completion

Out of graduate programs, doctorate degrees have the highest attrition and half of the successful students complete in 6 to 7 years (McBrayer et al., 2021). Malakyan (2019) found that 64 out of 70 doctoral programs contain intense coursework in the learning process, with less time or content for independent research. Thus, 91.4% of doctorate degrees rely on the main courses of the program that leaves little space for conducting research, and 46% have limited learning that relies on context approaches (Malakyan, 2019). If doctoral programs focus on coursework more than research, it would be difficult for students to transition to a capstone study once they complete all the main courses of their program.

HELs are pressured by accrediting bodies and federal and state governments to reform their curriculum and increase student completion rates (Tarker, 2019). Breitenbach (2019) showed that an unstructured curriculum during the dissertation

process of doctoral programs is a contributing factor to attrition. The lack of structure in the capstone courses experienced in doctoral programs often leads to all but dissertation (ABD) status by doctoral candidates and results in low completion rates.

Another major concern is the activities that doctoral students experience in the curriculum that do not support the development of their identity as a scholar. Ha Choi et al. (2021) found that developing a scholarly identity for doctoral students can be challenging, especially when their activities include conventional and minimal experiences that are universal of doctorate degrees. For example, ubiquitous activities are the required coursework or formalized milestones such as qualifying exams (Ha Choi et al., 2021). However, nonubiquitous activities are not required in doctoral programs, and they are student-driven and initiated, such as formed writing groups by classmates (Ha Choi et al., 2021). Therefore, nonubiquitous activities can strengthen the scholarly identities of students. Sanchez et al. (2023) identified that HELs can reflect on the scholarly identity development of their students through curriculum, instead of assuming that identity development happens on its own. Ha Choi et al. also found that developing an identity as a scholar for doctoral students does not happen by itself, rather, through a curriculum that supports informal or specific experiences that promote student completion. The current curriculum in doctoral programs may require further development, and one way to increase student completion rates is through doctoral mentorship.

Mentorship and Completion

Faculty-to-mentee relationships influence the retention and success of doctoral students during their academic journey. Faculty can implement mentorship approaches to help doctoral students understand the dissertation process (Torres et al., 2021). The dissertation process can be complex and doctoral students need to understand the process beforehand to become better prepared and supported. Gillani et al. (2023) found that doctoral students majoring in Social Work need additional support in their programs because they have few opportunities for beneficial mentor relationships. Increasing mentor relationships can help doctoral students to complete their program more efficiently and to defend their dissertation more easily. Groman and Paquette (2023) also showed that doctoral students need more clear communication, engagement, and enjoyment in the research journey. To help doctoral students complete their dissertations, their motivation can be enhanced by having positive relationships with their mentors and faculty.

A doctoral mentor plays a significant role in helping a candidate transition from main coursework into the process of writing a capstone study or a dissertation. Doctoral students are sometimes professional workers who manage and balance their personal life with their professional work. To increase degree completion in 5 years or less, mentors can focus on the dissertation process and increase discussions about time management (Geesa et al., 2020). Mentors who have integrity and are trustworthy can strengthen their doctoral programs' completion. Roberts (2020) advised that a trustworthy mentor can

encourage doctoral students to take scholarly risks and construct original contributions to academic knowledge through a doctoral dissertation.

Mentors who acknowledge and are aware of doctoral students' situation in balancing their time and effort, can better assist them during the program. Some scholar-practitioners' needs are unique because of having to balance between their full-time jobs and their academic and personal needs. Researchers demonstrated that mentors who strategize and consider their specific students' situation and needs improve doctoral students' completion rates (Geesa et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2019).

Ha Choi et al. (2021) recommended that doctoral programs provide mentorship and training for students and faculty to increase sensitivity to cultural issues. Torres et al (2021) found that building positive mentorship relationships are especially important to serve the needs of minority and diverse students. A mentor who demonstrates cultural competence can increase student satisfaction, completion, and socialization (Dzubinski & Sanchez, 2022).

Mentorship provides doctoral students with support and guidance and allows for a collaborative and supportive environment for the student to complete their academic goals (Torres et al., 2021). Completing a degree is a challenging process for both the mentor and student because it requires patience, persistence, and hard work (Dzubinski & Sanchez, 2022). Doctoral students' programs require feedback and extensive support for students to complete their academic goals. Therefore, mentors can also enhance self-efficacy and learning success of doctoral students when they build flexible technological support and timely feedback (Lee et al., 2020).

Researchers found that the critical aspects in guiding doctoral students to successfully complete their dissertation, are encouragement, assistance with managing their time, and timely communication (Dzubinski & Sanchez, 2022; Roberts et al., 2019). Mentors can direct doctoral candidates to apply their previous learning from the main courses of their studies and use them in their capstone study or project (Ari et al., 2022). In a dissertation or project study, students need to develop research methods and RQs to guide their study. Accordingly, Roberts et al. (2019) suggested that mentors begin with a solid RQ and use that question to influence doctoral students' study methods. Finally, Roberts et al. found that mentors insisted that doctoral students use Socratic methods to aid students in organizing a study or writing and editing a dissertation.

Socratic Method of Mentorship

The key element of the Socratic method of mentorship is to allow the opportunity for students to ask questions (Roberts et al., 2019). Roberts et al. (2019) elaborated that question-asking allows the mentor to comprehend the student's knowledge and encourages the doctoral student to become an independent scholarly thinker. The ability of students to engage in conversations builds positive relationships which is vital in mentoring. The Socratic method of mentorship also empowers and motivates faculty to be strategic partners with the student as they guide them through their academic journey (Groman & Paquette, 2023). The successes of students can reflect on faculty's performance and have positive outcomes on faculty advancement and programmatic outcomes (Farmer et al., 2021). Although the Socratic method of mentorship is important

for student progression in their doctoral programs, there are alternative methods of mentorship to consider.

Identity Development Through Doctoral Mentorship

Another method used in doctoral mentorship is supporting the scholarly identity development of doctoral students. Gillani et al. (2023) mentioned that mentorship literature focuses on academic development through socialization and productivity. Through identity development as a scholar, doctoral students can understand how to complete their degrees and what areas they need to focus on to progress in their program (Geesa et al., 2020). Unlike the Socratic method, that relies on asking questions to understand goals and ideas, identity development focuses on building a scholarly identity and productivity in the doctoral program. For example, an EdD program that focuses on an identity development mentorship would use group-based mentoring, intended to enhance access and sources to mentors to advance degree completion in 5 years or less (Geesa et al., 2020).

Goal Setting

A method of mentorship to consider and that mentors can apply to guide doctoral students is goal setting. Instead of setting goals for the student, the mentor and student should create the goals as a team (Roberts et al., 2019). For example, instead of having students create a goal they can also have the mentor guide them to address their gap in status from ABD to the goal status of PhD or EdD (Roberts et al., 2019). Groman and Paquette (2023) suggested that mentors determine their goals and avoid common pitfalls

that doctoral students fall into and subsequently increase the probability of completing their degrees.

Time Management

Another method of mentorship is time management, which works together with goal setting because every goal has a deadline (Roberts et al., 2019). Ari et al. (2022) found time management to be one of the biggest challenges doctoral students face throughout the different phases of their doctoral education. By understanding the dissertation process and expectations and receiving real-time feedback and support from mentors, doctoral students can better balance multiple commitments and manage their time more effectively (Torres et al., 2021). If mentorship relationships focus on helping doctoral students set goals and manage their time, then completion rates can be increased in doctoral programs. Although mentorship is an important factor of doctoral education, it is important to shed light on the success and challenges of doctoral students.

The Successes and Challenges of Students Completing Doctoral Programs

Many successes and challenges impact doctoral students' scholarly journey such as socializing and building relationships during their doctoral education (Guerin, 2020). Lee et al. (2020) found how growing connections with peers and faculty is crucial to doctorate candidates' education and progress. The success of doctoral students can depend on the support they receive from their faculty and cohort.

Success of Students Completing Doctoral Programs

Ari et al. (2022) found that doctoral students believe their coursework, the dissertation components found in their cohort model, coursework, and faculty's

collaboration in their academic journey to affect their completion. One of the students'

recommendations, from Lee et al.'s (2023) study for improving PhD nursing programs,

was coursework improvement especially in statistical analysis and writing. If students

enhance their writing in their coursework and the dissertation components are found in

their courses, then they can better complete during the process of writing and finalizing

their dissertation.

Socialization and Success

Successful doctoral students build strong relationships with their supervisors and

socialize in their discipline. Success happens when the process of socialization considers

not only the environment the student is joining but also the environment from which the

student originates (Dzubinski & Sanchez, 2022). If student-supervisor relationships are

successful, then doctoral candidates have a higher chance of finishing their degrees.

International students for example, come from a different learning and cultural

environment, so it is important to consider their background and not just the program

they are joining and completing (Schneider et al., 2020). Therefore, student completion

rates can increase if students are succeeding in their relationships and overall

socialization during the program.

Researchers also found that HELs who adopt a cohort model in their doctoral

programs, can foster building connections with peers on the academic, social, and

emotional level to increase student completion (Lee et al., 2020; Matthews, 2021;

Schneider et al., 2020). Accordingly, university faculty can incorporate social learning

activities into their doctoral programs to promote socialization and increase the chances

of student persistence (Matthews, 2021). If students have the support they need to complete the program, develop scholarly identities, and are aware of cultural differences and diversity, they can succeed throughout their programs.

Grit Scores

Doctoral students' characteristics of success varies across higher education institutions, with some focusing on grit as a characteristic of success. Grit is a positive trait that depends on a student's perseverance in a long-term program or goal. Unique experiences shape grittiness and are highly situational, and although grit may not be the primary predictor of success in doctoral programs, it can impact students' completion (Sanchez et al., 2023). If students' success can be measured, then doctoral program completion rates can be improved by focusing on the factors of student success.

Technological factors including relational factors can predict the success of students, and maintaining faculty and peer relationships is critical to the success of doctoral students (Lee et al., 2020). Doctoral students with higher grit scores completed their degrees without personal barriers. This is supported by Sanchez et al. (2023) who found that doctoral students' barriers affect the workforce's diversity, including some graduates that have a degree and continue their specific career path. Therefore, grit can be essential for doctoral students to persevere in their program and lessen their personal obstacles.

Effective Writing

Effective writing adopts the styles of other writers and in a supervisor-relationship, students can advance their own competencies (Holzweiss, 2023). When

doctoral students know how to build social connections and develop writing skills, they can adopt the writing styles of others. In addition, a writing competency-based curriculum can measure students' writing skills and their level of collaboration with peers and advisors, which enhances doctoral students' social relationships (Kirk & Courtner, 2020). Although the success of doctoral students has happened through the socialization and identity development of a scholar, there are several challenges that doctoral students face.

Challenges of Students Completing Doctoral Programs

Doctorate scholars struggle with navigating the various shifts in their roles in the program, such as work-life balance (Gregory & Burbage, 2022). Doctoral students need to rely on themselves throughout the program, which means they require support to show them how to study independently. Gregory and Burbage (2022) argued that higher education institutions offer basic doctoral support, but limited support is provided for the long-term nature of self-study that is required of doctoral students. This is supported by Matthews (2021), who claimed that doctoral students conduct independent research and their method of studying requires them to rely on themselves but limited guidance is given on how to persist and complete in their own doctoral studies.

Torres et al. (2021) noticed that doctoral students are challenged with self-study that involves writing, understanding the dissertation process, and expectations of the program. Holzweiss (2023) suggested that students need more emphasis on commitment to writing development that enhances their completion and minimizes the labor of faculty. Holzweiss further found that although student writing support and preparation are

beneficial to the department, findings show a challenge with student writing that results in supervisors questioning whether the investment of time and labor is worth it. Understanding the dissertation process can be a stressful barrier for students due to the nature of writing a capstone or dissertation. Schneider et al. (2020) claimed that work behind a dissertation has many unique challenges, such as the relevance of topics in their study, funding of their study, and finding a suitable research location for their dissertation or study. Finally, expectations of the doctoral program include a student's ability to balance their time and coursework, analyze data, and write the findings of their studies (Ari et al., 2022).

Researchers studied the challenges of online graduate students and found that student isolation is especially prominent among international students (Martin et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2020). Studebaker and Curtis (2021) further posited that doctoral students, especially international students, are challenged with building relationships with faculty and peers. International students struggle with adapting to different cultures and feel more isolated from their community and peers due to a lack of awareness of cultural barriers. However, participating in research teams or committees can promote international students' academic socialization and completion (Schneider et al., 2020). A lack of socialization in doctoral programs is a cause for student attrition rates to increase (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). Therefore, faculty advisers and higher education institutions can facilitate adaptation and adjustment of international students and contribute to rich and diverse viewpoints that improve PhD education quality (Schneider et al., 2020).

The challenges doctoral students face in their persistence are limited resources and funding that hinder their research ability (McBrayer et al., 2021). HELs can enrich the perspectives of their faculty and staff by raising awareness of building beneficial doctoral student relationships. Effective student-faculty and student-student relationships influence doctoral persistence. Therefore, the literature suggests that students who experience a physical disconnect and are challenged by forming connections with peers and faculty, lead to an increase in attrition of doctorate programs (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021).

Doctoral Program Leaders and Completion

Hanson et al. (2022) identified the perspectives of HELs to provide proactive support to students at risk of completion and offer training and workshops to enhance faculty's relationships with student and encourage their completion. Hanson et al. defined the term *proactive* to mean offering support that identifies student needs and allows the university to take be liable for student success within the higher education institution and doctoral degrees. Hanson et al. also found that higher education administrators who enhance support can increase completion rates. Consequently, HELs can impact the attitudes of faculty, the cohort, and dissertation chairs who build relationships with doctoral candidates and enhance their professional skills.

HELs ensure that higher education institutions and cohorts supply enough sources of information that are easily accessible to doctoral scholars so they can stay motivated and complete (Hanson et al., 2022). HELs including presidents, can increase support for doctoral candidates by enhancing accountability, government funding models, and

curriculum reform to increase student completion rates (Tarker, 2019). Management strategies can help institutions sustain change over the long term and increase student completion goals (Miller & Harrington, 2023).

Successes of HELs Increasing Completion Rates

When HELs improve their knowledge and skills, they can provide high-quality support for doctoral programs with low completion rates. Successes of HELs who increased completion rates include effective leadership practices that presidents identified, such as continuous professional development, reviewing rising trends in higher education, and forming connections and teamwork (Artis & Bartel, 2021). Professional development increases socioemotional support for the high standards and accountability of academic work (Hanson et al., 2022). HELs proactively support at-risk-for-completion candidates (Hanson et al., 2022). Artis and Bartel (2021) found that reviewing current trends facing colleges, such as funding, helps higher education to succeed with programs, services, and staff.

HELs manage completion initiatives suitable for their institutions and students, which requires networking and support by all relevant stakeholders. HELs who use strategic initiatives supported by all institution constituents can understand the scope of things, multitask issues, and focus on their student completion missions (Artis & Bartel, 2021). Artiles et al. (2023) found that successful leadership involves breaking networking barriers, not following traditional methods in graduate admissions that are not suitable measures of degree completion, and breaking barriers of discrimination against underrepresented students. This is supported by Groman and Paquette (2023), who

suggested accepting students into doctoral programs and supporting their graduation goals, as the objective of higher education to create influential leaders, is realized to be worth the effort. If graduation goals of students are the objective of HELs and their programs, then students can complete a program that supports their needs.

Emerging HELs can succeed through ongoing professional development opportunities, reading as much as possible to stay current on trends in their community, and building their leadership teams (Artis & Bartel, 2021). If HELs are up to date and build effective relationships with staff and stakeholders, they can increase doctoral program completion rates. Academic support and high-quality supervision for doctoral students can ensure timely completion (van Rooij et al., 2021).

Challenges of HELs Increasing Completion Rates

Challenges of HELs are due to a lack of collaboration, communication, and misrepresentation of information on reports.

Lack of Collaboration

One of the challenges that HELs face in increasing the completion rates of their doctoral programs is a lack of collaboration among research teams. Corcelles-Seuba et al. (2022) noted that some higher education institutions are challenged with getting sufficient research community support and supervisors' guidance due to the lack of collaboration within research teams, particularly during first phases of students' doctoral program. Faculty members of high-quality programs can align their goals with the program's mission and commit to this goal to limit isolated work and avoid having doctoral administrators such as the program director do all the work alone (Preston et al.,

2020). This is supported by Artis and Bartel (2021), who found that HELs are challenged with believing that they have to be the only decision-maker to collaborate with all constituent groups and build inside and outside connections to progress the institution's mission.

HELs can focus their doctoral programs on the institution's mission and align the program's goals with doctoral applicants' interest to be able to collaborate and support students better. Doctoral students of around 74.7% work alone and limit collaboration with research teams in their programs (Corcelles-Seuba et al., 2022). Morote et al. (2022) found that having an administrator who follows up with students and creates research activities can support their perseverance. Doctoral students also need to collaborate instead of working alone on their studies to complete and be successful in the research community.

A Lack of Communication

A lack of communication is another challenge for HELs including supervision related challenges between the doctoral student and the research director. Presidents focus on the need to communicate clearly, receive constructive criticism from others, and pay attention during conversations (Artis & Bartel, 2021). Denis et al. (2019) found that HELs yielded three main issues related to communication: the choosing and being accepted into a program and employability. First, supervisors rely on their intuition when assessing doctoral students' potentialities. Supervisors can communicate their assessment with relevant stakeholders and their department to decide when enrolling doctoral students. Second, supervisors suggested creating opportunities for students related to their

career goals. Communicating career opportunities and goals increases students'

employability and enables them to complete at a higher rate (Groman & Paquette, 2023).

Misrepresentation of Information

Misrepresentation of information on certain reports such as the federal

government's IPEDS report, a typical measurement that shows the graduation rates for

higher education institutions, is a challenge for HELs to nationally measure and define a

college or university's graduation or retention. HELs who depend on the IPEDS report

may develop an incorrect idea because of the chance for misunderstanding the

information (Kline, 2022). The report challenges administrators to accurately spread the

cohort groups to their appropriate graduation years (Fanguy et al., 2022).

To measure completion rates, administrators are challenged with getting a clear

picture of their student's progress in a concise report. HELs' interactions within academic

departments are an example of how information is presented and distributed (Artiles et

al., 2023). Fanguy et al. (2022) concluded that the numbers in the report do not correctly

differentiate graduates from dropouts, making it harder to understand the reason for

problems in student retention and how they can be addressed.

Administrators can evolve their reports to show clear and concise information to

help them measure and define completion rates and encounter less problems in their

institutions. A lack of awareness from administrators on how to present information and

willingness to change can lead to institutional barriers (Miller & Harrington, 2023).

Using this report challenges administrators with comprehending information about

student progression (Fanguy et al., 2022). HELs are challenged with being accountable in

reporting, communicating effectively, and managing their time with a mindset that leaders cannot do everything alone (Artis & Bartel, 2021). This leads to the strengths and weaknesses of the researchers' approaches to the problem from the literature to be reviewed.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Researchers' Approaches to the Problem

There are several strengths and weaknesses to the researchers' approaches to the problem of low completion rates in doctoral programs. The strengths of the researchers' approaches are adding to the literature on doctoral education and rich qualitative studies with transferability. The weaknesses of the researchers' approaches are the limitations of students' perspectives on completion, struggling to gather data, and limited ability to generalize research findings. In addition, there is limited research on HELs' perspectives found in the literature and more research was found on students', mentors', and faculty's perspectives of doctoral programs.

Strengths of Researchers' Approaches to the Problem

The strengths of the researchers' approaches to the problem adding findings related to instructional strategies, developing time management skills, and program support to the literature and rich qualitative studies with transferable findings. Researchers were able to further studies about doctorate programs through describing more of the problem relative to lower completion rates in doctoral programs. Major findings include course instructional strategies of EdD programs such as the nature of self-study, maintaining students' positive doctoral experiences such as developing a scholarly identity (Gregory & Burbage, 2022; Ha Choi et al., 2021; Kirk & Courtner,

2020). The nature of doctoral students' studies causes them to be independent and rely on themselves as they go through role transitions from students to graduates and graduates to working professionals, and self-study allows them to transition and complete at a better rate (Gregory & Burbage, 2022). A scholarly identity acknowledges students' identity development and naturally happens during the doctoral program that can include intended opportunities for reflection and development throughout the doctoral curriculum (Ha Choi et al., 2021). Other findings include emphasis on discussions about work and life balance, building stronger connections in the program, and addressing student concerns about the program format (Geesa et al., 2020).

The majority of studies investigating doctoral program completion are qualitative. A strength of rich qualitative studies is transferability. Transferability allows the researchers to include thick descriptions and variation in the participants selected in their research. The major transferable findings from the qualitative studies in the literature include extended descriptions of self-directed learning and self-efficacy through doctoral programs' collaboration and social relations that can increase success and completion of doctoral candidates (Gregory & Burbage, 2022; Kirk & Courtner, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Researchers were able to attain their findings being transferable because they extended descriptions on topics currently in practice and varying their participant selection of directors and leaders by selecting from multiple doctoral programs across the United States (Artiles et al., 2023; Chlan et al., 2020).

Researchers' studies found in the literature mostly used the qualitative method and only a few used the quantitative research method. The researchers' approaches to the

problem of low completion rates in doctoral programs can be strengthened if investigated by using qualitative methods because the researcher strives to understand the problem through the participants' perspectives relative to the problem.

Weaknesses of Researchers' Approach to the Problem

Weaknesses of researchers' approaches to the problem of low completion rates in doctoral programs include the limitations of investigating students' perspectives, limited ability to generalize the findings such as struggling to gather data.

Limitations of Students' Perspectives

Researchers' weaknesses include examining students from a residency doctoral program that had a limited diversity of perspectives (Gillani et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023). Lehan et al. (2021) found that the programs in the literature are limited residency or hybrid programs. Lehan et al. found this to be problematic because each program has different functions, limiting the ability to generalize the findings outside higher education institutions.

Limited Ability to Generalize the Findings

Among the quantitative studies, other weaknesses of researchers' approaches to the problem of low completion rates in doctoral programs are the selection of a small sample size of students or the selection of specific higher education institutions (McBrayer et al., 2021; van Rooij et al., 2021). A sample size of doctoral students that is small does not allow for generalizable findings that apply to a broader context. Research by Malakyan (2019) was restricted to resources by doctoral programs on their institutional websites. In addition, researchers engaged doctoral programs that are based

in the United States only, creating a lack of generalizability to non-U.S. contexts (Lee et al., 2020).

Ari et al. (2022) used a quantitative approach to collect data from 35 students after they completed their degrees. Overall, Ari et al. found that students expressed satisfaction with the program's resources and caliber of doctoral education. Ari et al. used descriptive statistics and the limitations of such a method in quantitative research may be the wording of questions on a questionnaire that can influence the descriptive findings. A questionnaire can influence participants' responses and study's results or findings; however, some studies are also limited in generalizing the findings because of other issues such as gathering complex data. In Kline's (2022) study, the purpose was to examine how graduate programs' investment is expensive making completion a big concern for universities. Kline found that the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) compiled reports and tables of data on graduation rates and student demographics (Kline, 2022). NCES's data were complex and could not offer any generalized inferences on persistence and completion (Kline, 2022). If NCES's report's findings cannot be generalized, then the data can still be helpful but there are limitations in terms of increasing completion rates (Fanguy et al., 2022).

Conrey et al. (2020) used a qualitative approach to explore four doctorate-holding administrators' perceptions on the value of their degrees; and whether they believed their degrees to impact their professional goal achievement. The findings of Conrey et al.'s study showed how administrators felt in regard to their doctorate program helping them progress competently and personally. Limited ability to generalize the findings is an

inherent limitation of qualitative research and Conrey et al.'s limitations were mostly due to time constraints. Other researchers faced a limited population sample, outdated institutional website information, and choosing specific universities such as public universities (Artiles et al. 2023; Lee et al. 2020; Schmidt, 2020).

Although I found qualitative studies to be more than quantitative studies in the literature, limited qualitative research was found on HELs' perspectives of the low completion rates found in doctoral programs.

Summary and Conclusions

In the current study, I explored HELs' perceptions on addressing doctoral program completion rates. In Chapter 3, I explain the research design, rationale, and data analysis plan used to complete this basic qualitative study. By interviewing HELs, themes from the data emerge that are important for developing an understanding of the successes and challenges of HELs in increasing the completion rates of doctoral programs. In the following chapter, I describe ethical procedures and trustworthiness for the current study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. In this chapter, I explain the research methods used to explore the topic. The chapter includes the RQs, research design, research rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology (participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment, data collection, data analysis). Lastly, in this chapter, I conclude with the trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

RQs

I explored HELs' perceptions of increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs in this study. This study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of HELs on their successes in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of HELs on their challenges in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?

Research Design and Rationale

For my planned research design, the basic qualitative approach involved semistructured, open-ended interviews and consisted of six HELs. In a semistructured interview, the researcher explores a specific topic, develops a protocol for the interview in advance, and the researcher may have questions to follow up on certain responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The semistructured interviews informed this study through one-on-one settings between myself and each participant. This study's RQs were not the same

as narrative research because this type of research seeks to explore participants'

experiences through their viewpoints and storytelling (see Clandinin et al., 2016).

Another design that did not support this study and did not apply to the RQs was grounded

theory design. Grounded theory, or constructing theory from data, involves obtaining and

analyzing methods and processes from participants' data and not from exploring their

perspectives (Chun Tie et al., 2019). However, in the current study, I explored

participants' experiences and stories as collaborative because the participant's point of

view is told and not the researcher's viewpoint. Methods are procedures or tools used

through various stages of comparative analysis and theoretical sampling (Chun Tie et al.,

2019).

I chose a qualitative design because it focuses on gaining an understanding of

participants' perspectives in relation to the problem of the study. Quantitative research

uses numbers and facts to identify a problem or analyze it. The quantitative method is

unsuitable for the current study because it aims to determine measure or numbers (Rubin

& Rubin, 2011). A research design that is mixed methods includes both quantitative and

qualitative research and seeks to explore the problem through the lens of numeric and

descriptive data. In this study, I did not explore a mixed method design because it seeks

to explore participants' perceptions through open-ended interview questions.

In contrast, qualitative research involves describing things and meanings,

including interviews and discussions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I chose a basic qualitative

study as opposed to other common qualitative study designs such as a case study. A case

study is an in-depth qualitative study design that is bound by time, activity, and location

(Priya, 2021). A basic qualitative study aims at interpreting participants' experiences or perspectives through a broader lens that is not bound to a specific region (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A basic qualitative study was more suitable for this study because it aims at understanding perspectives from participants that are nationwide.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to be the primary data collection tool (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I was the sole researcher and recruited each participant to collect the data, conduct interviews, and analyze the collected data. The participants for this study did not have any personal relationship with me, and I did not select participants from my work site.

Methodology

I used a basic qualitative design with semistructured, open-ended interviews because it allowed me to explore the knowledge or experience of HELs with the problem of interest (see Rubin & Rubin, 2011). In this section, I describe the selection of participants, instrumentation, data collection methods, recruitment of participants, and data analysis. The data collection approach consisted of interviewing participants to explore their perceptions on the successes and challenges on increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs.

Participant Selection

For my research design, the basic qualitative approach involved semistructured, open-ended interviews and consisted of six HELs. Higher education institutions selected were colleges and universities that offered at least one doctorate program. Purposive

sampling helps the researcher deliberately select participants based on what they are

trying to understand, and the sample selected should be from participants that can inform

the study the most (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Snowball sampling is another form of

purposive sampling that allows the researcher to allow the main participants who meet

the criteria established in the study to refer them to other participants (Merriam & Tisdell,

2015). In this study, I followed purposive and snowball sampling methods because they

are types of nonprobability sampling used in qualitative research that allow the researcher

to identify participants based on the purpose of the study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Interview questions I used within this study involved participants' perceptions and

experiences (see Appendix A). Inclusion criteria for participation included the following:

- Participants must have had a current or former leadership or managerial role at

  a higher education institution in a doctoral program.

- Participants must have been fluent in English.

I used the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) to see which participants

meet the study's criteria. I emailed prospective participants to ask them to devote 15 to 30

minutes of their time to answer the questionnaire that was set up according to their

schedule. I communicated through email using my Walden University email to connect

with participants. I used the demographic questionnaire to disqualify participants who did

not meet the criteria.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the main data collection instrument

(Burkholder et al., 2020). Interviews are important in qualitative research because they

help the researcher identify various participants' perceptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In one-on-one interviews, the interviewer asks questions to obtain responses from the interviewee (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). An advantage of one-on-one interviews is that there is no opportunity for another person, other than the interviewer, to interject with their experiences because the focus is solely on one participant. Interview questions developed for the current study were open-ended, so follow-up questions were asked to explain the meanings of participants' perspectives further.

I consulted the study of Hanson et al. (2022) to investigate HELs' perspectives on the problem of low completion rates in doctoral programs. I used the qualitative studies of Delgado-Albán (2020) and Brewster (2023) to help form the interview questions for my study and adapted them. The conceptual framework was also informed by Hanson's (2017) LOVS model and helped me to form the interview questions. The interview questions focused on the first element of the LOVS model which is vital leadership as it relates to the leadership of participants on their successes in increasing completion rates of doctoral programs. I used the second element of informal open systems to help form the interview question on the challenges of HELs as it relates to student support systems. I focused on the third and fourth elements of the LOVS model on flexible structures and individual integration to help form the interview questionnaire as it relates to the integration and alignment of the students' goals with the program and institution's goals.

I used the two RQs for this study's interviews to obtain perspectives from HELs. The interview questions were a total of eight questions to answer the RQs. The basis for instrument development was literature sources and samples of other qualitative studies. I

used open-ended interview questions to allow for a more in-depth analysis of information. I increased validity by inviting feedback on the questions from experts in the field and incorporating their feedback into my protocol (see Dzubinski & Sanchez, 2022).

      The interview questions of the current study should align with the primary RQs, the conceptual frameworks, and the interest being studied. All interview questions were open-ended to elicit responses from the participants and obtain insights from HELs about how to increase the completion rates of doctoral programs. Table 1 reveals the primary RQs of the study and shows how each of the RQs align with the interview questions.

Table 1

Alignment of Research Questions With Interview Questions

Research question	Interview question
Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of HELs on their successes in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?	In your experience, what is an example of a success story in increasing the completion rates in your doctoral programs? What do you think contributed to those successes in terms of leadership? How if at all has your program addressed doctoral completion? If you characterize doctoral program completion as a top institutional priority, what evidence have you seen to support this institutional effort? If you do not, what other priorities do you feel are elevated above it?
Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of HELs on their challenges in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?	From your experience, what are some examples of challenges you face to increase completion rates of your doctoral programs? What do you think contributed to those challenges in terms of student support systems? What have you, as a higher education leader, experienced as the most significant challenge that colleges or universities face in increasing completion rates of doctoral programs? What additional suggestions do you have to increase completion rates of doctoral programs?

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. The study's research location was nationwide, focusing on universities and colleges offering various doctoral programs within the United States. I was the primary researcher

for the study, and I searched for HELs who are the participants for the current study through Google search engine and using their messaging systems such as LinkedIn. I used targeted emails to determine who I contacted based on their profile that lists their experience and education in higher education.

I contacted HELs and managers who have experience working in doctoral programs. After IRB approval, I searched LinkedIn or Internet Search Engines for participants who had experience in doctoral programs. After selecting HELs and managers through purposive sampling method, I emailed participants who met the inclusion criteria and set up interviews. Participants had the ability to get in touch with me through my Walden University email address if they need more information concerning their participation in this study.

I sent the interview questions before I began each interview with the participants to address any inquiries. Before the interview, I sent each participant a letter of consent via email, and if they agree to the study, participants were asked to respond to the email with "I consent." I instructed the participants to review the consent form if they had any questions. I conducted interviews using a semistructured format via Zoom platform and each participant picked a convenient time and date suitable for them.

I informed each participant that they had a semistructured interview lasting from 30 to 45 minutes. An interview is a social interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee that proceeds to craft a meaningful narrative (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). My role as a researcher played an integral part in the process of receiving and transforming information by reviewing research and interview questions. To ensure a successful

interview, I recorded the interview and used the recorded interview for later analysis (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2021). I observed communications through the Zoom platform, which is secure, and took notes on participants' responses.

I informed the study's participants that they could opt out of the study if they wished to do so and that their responses would be destroyed and not used in the study. I voiced recorded interviews through the Voice Recorder application and Zoom. I used these applications along with my annotations to ensure the participants' responses were captured.

Participants could have requested a change to their scheduled meeting time, so I was prepared to adapt my schedule to their convenience and set up a different time to meet. No participants requested rescheduling. I contacted participants following the interview through email to show them gratitude for their participation in the study and informed them that responses were confidential and will be kept for 5 years. I informed the participants that the data would be destroyed after 5 years. Finally, none of the participants received any incentives in this study.

To protect the identities of participants, each participant was given a letter code. Assigned codes depended on the order participants began with the interview. For example, the first HEL participant was HEL 1, HEL 2, and so on. Following each interview, I gave participants a transcript of the interview to review within 3 days of the interview. The transcript was given in case participants needed to correct any information or responses. It was essential to be transparent with participants to ensure the recorded information accurately and honestly represented their perceptions. After the data were

gathered and participants agreed to each transcript, I analyzed the data and coded them using Microsoft Word.

Data Analysis Plan

In this study, I followed a basic qualitative design to answer the RQs and followed Saldaña's (2021) coding methods including first and second cycle coding, that led to the development of themes. I transcribed each participants' responses following the audio-recorded interview through Microsoft Word. In the coding process, I was mainly creating a worksheet in Microsoft Word to analyze the collected data in a three-column table. Open codes, axial codes, and emerging themes were the three columns that made up the table. Saldaña defined open codes as codes that aim to describe, name, or classify the data. Saldaña also defined axial codes to group open codes by connecting or concluding from the concepts. After conducting the axial codes, I concluded the coding process by connecting the major themes determined from the axial codes (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Each category had a theme that displayed the connections of the gathered data that answer the RQs (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Transcribing words in qualitative research is important for data collection because it is the representation and production of the collected data (Saldaña, 2021). The transcripts helped identify themes exploring HELs' perceptions of increasing doctoral program completion rates. Zoom includes an audio transcription option to transcribe the recording of the interview. To transcribe the audio on the voice recorder app, I used Google Transcribe to transfer the audio to text. I used Zoom to give verbatim transcripts of the recorded interviews. The transcribed data were placed into Microsoft Word and

emailed to each participant so they could review within 3 days of the interview. I used my notes and audio recordings to compare the transcript results.

For a qualitative study, it is important for the primary researcher to reach saturation after the interview. Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggested that saturation occurs when new information is no longer being introduced or collected from the participants. I reached data saturation when the same themes were being repeated in the coding process and no new information was being introduced from the participants' responses.

I categorized the study's findings by theme and subtheme and coded the data. First, each transcript was analyzed to detect similarities or differences in the responses of the participants. Second, I used Microsoft Word to organize the data and themes from the gathered phrases of the participants. I identified the themes from the data and applied them to answer the two RQs. I completed the first and second rounds of coding, where I looked for phrases, themes, and categories. I used first cycle coding and open coding which helped me to name and describe data. The next second cycle coding using axial coding guided me to identify categories of the data (see Saldaña, 2021). Finally, thematic analysis allowed themes and categories to be written via an outline on Microsoft Word, and I compared the analysis to validate the results.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is essential because it helps with building rapport and trust with the participants and allows the data collected to be confidential and respectful of the participant's privacy (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Building transparency with the participants and readers was vital to the validity and trustworthiness of this study (see

Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I was clear with the participants about my research goals and process to increase trustworthiness (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure quality in this qualitative study, I verified trustworthiness through established criteria such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is the level of accuracy and trustworthiness of the collected data (Shenton, 2004). The credibility procedures were reflexivity and peer review (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Reflexivity in qualitative research acknowledges the role of the researcher, along with any experiences, beliefs, and assumptions that influence the research process and outcomes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Regarding reflexivity, waiting and raising a closely related point during the interview and when it is my turn to speak indicates to the other party that I understand what was said (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

I tried to remain aware of any assumptions or biases that I might have had as the primary researcher of this study when analyzing data. I kept a reflective journal to help me reflect and overcome any bias. The journal helped me understand the interviews' context and how it related to each participant (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Other strategies I used to ensure credibility were politeness and adjusting my vocabulary and sentence structure to communicate understanding and summarize what was heard in the data sources (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Dependability

Dependability is measured extent of how a research study could be repeated by another researcher and uncover findings that are the same (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Meeting the dependability criterion in qualitative work was a challenge, but I tried to enable a future researcher to repeat this study. I kept an audit trail that had records of the collected data (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I provided participants with the interview transcript to follow up on any clarification or edits that needed to be made on their responses.

Transferability

Transferability is the action of applying this study to other contexts, situations, or populations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To allow transferability, I provided enough information on social change for readers to determine whether the study was similar or familiar to them and whether the findings can be justifiable (see Shenton, 2004). One way to ease the transferability process was to create thick descriptions and variation in the selected participants (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Shenton, 2004). I developed thick descriptions by providing details about the interview and ensuring the same protocol is applied to each participant. Another strategy was diversifying the participants by selecting participants from different colleges or universities, different lengths of experiences in doctoral programs, and different genders (see Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability

Conformability is when data accurately captures participant information and demonstrates that the research findings are repeatable and consistent (Connelly, 2016). The confirmability procedure I used was reflexivity. I used reflexive journaling when collecting data to avoid bias that may influence the interview. I described any biases to show how biases may impact data collection and understanding. During my interviews

with HELs, I tried to ensure the quality of my research by taking notes and writing memos during the interview and following the interview protocol. Finally, I tried to allow my findings to emerge from the data, not my predispositions (see Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Procedures

I submitted my research study to Walden University's IRB for Ethical Standards in Research prior to data collection. In order to make sure the study complies with federal legislation and ethical norms, I submitted my research to the IRB. The three guiding principles of the IRB are justice, welfare, and respect for individuals. Prior to gathering any data, I obtained approval from the IRB. Other ethical considerations of this study included influence, confidentiality, and privacy protection. My first potential ethical consideration when conducting the qualitative method was during the data collection process, which might have influenced the participants' responses or not preserving confidentiality. The second ethical procedure I assumed was confidentiality, which is related to the individual's privacy and data that would be published. I discussed confidentiality with participants about what data would be changed or not disclosed.

My approach to ethics included privileging confidentiality with consent as an ongoing process and developing stronger ethical research regulations (see Mok et al., 2015). The steps I took to ensure the privacy of the data included keeping the data and participant names confidential. I stored the data in a secure folder, and I am the only one who has access to it, and the data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Summary

In this chapter, I included the research method for this study and involved several sections. In the first section, I discussed the research design and rationale and the reason for selecting a basic qualitative research design for the design method of this study. In the second section of the chapter, I discussed the role of the researcher, methodology, rationale for participation selection, and instrumentation. In the third section of the chapter, I discussed the recruitment of participants for the study, the procedures of data collection, and the overview of data analysis. In this chapter, I concluded with ethical issues that may be present and issues of trustworthiness.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the research study findings from collecting the data. I also describe the study results and how trustworthiness is maintained throughout the research process.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. I collected data from interviews with six HELs who had managerial or leadership roles in doctoral programs within higher education institutions. The interviews allowed for one-to-one interactions with participants to explore their experiences with doctoral programs and completion rates. A basic qualitative design was employed because it aligned with the study's purpose and RQs. The following two RQs guided this study:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of HELs on their successes in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of HELs on their challenges in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?

In Chapter 4, I discuss this study's setting, demographics, data collection and data analysis processes, evidence of trustworthiness, and results. The analysis process is provided and compared to the plan outlined in Chapter 3. In this chapter, I also describe this study's research findings as they align with the RQs.

Setting

For this study, I recruited HELs from higher education institutions that had at least one doctoral program within the United States. During data collection, no significant

personal or organizational changes were reported that could have influenced participants

and their experience that could have affected the interpretation of this study's results.

Demographics

I selected participants based on their ability to meet this study's inclusion criteria,

which was surveyed via email. The inclusion criteria included HELs in positions, such as

academic deans, program directors, or assistant program directors, with current or former

roles related to doctoral programs. Participants had to be fluent in the English language.

The exclusion criteria included HELs that did not have experience with doctoral

programs, who were non-English speaking, and who held a role that was not managerial

or leadership based. Table 2 displays information about the participants' leadership roles.

Table 2

Participant Information

Participant	Leadership role	Type of doctoral program
HEL 1	Vice president and dean of academic affairs	EdD in Educational Leadership
HEL 2	Program director	Psychology, Business, and Education (PhD, EdD, DBA, and PsyD)
HEL 3	Dean	EdD in Curriculum and Instruction and an EdD in Instructional Design and Technology
HEL 4	Dean and program director	Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) Program
HEL 5	Former associate dean/doctoral program director	PhD in Counsellor Education and Supervision
HEL 6	Dean	PhD in Communication

Data Collection

I collected data from six participants through semistructured interviews using a

self-developed interview protocol with eight open-ended questions (four open-ended

questions to answer RQ1 and four open-ended questions to answer RQ2; see Appendix A). I also asked follow-up questions as needed to probe participants to gather more in-depth information related to the RQs. The data collected from the semistructured interviews helped me understand how the six participants perceived the successes and challenges of increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs.

All six interviews took place virtually through Zoom or over the phone and lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed and edited as a Microsoft Word document. I transcribed each interview by listening to the interview recordings while reading the transcribed interview script produced by Zoom and editing the transcriptions to align with each participant's responses. After I transcribed each interview, participants were emailed a copy so they could review the transcript and clarify or adjust their responses. All interview transcripts and email communications between myself and the participants were saved in a password-protected file on my password-protected computer. I followed IRB-approved protocols to maintain each participant's confidentiality throughout the data collection process.

In Chapter 3, I stated that I would interview between six and eight participants. I reached data saturation with HEL 6. My committee agreed that six participants was acceptable because saturation was reached at the point. No unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

In this study, I employed a basic qualitative design and followed Saldana's (2021) qualitative research coding process for analysis. The data analysis plan did not change

from the initial plan outlined in Chapter 3. I used open coding for first-cycle coding and axial coding for second-cycle coding, which led to emerging themes. A data analysis worksheet was created in Microsoft Word to organize and analyze the data in a table with three columns: open codes, axial codes, and emerging themes.

I approached data analysis using an inductive process of moving from coded units to categories to themes. In open coding, I broke down the participants' words into small pieces and labeled them with descriptive codes to capture their meaning. Next, axial coding allowed me to cluster the open codes into larger categories. I organized the axial codes into emerging themes for the final data analysis step. The categories created from axial coding allowed me to identify themes, phrases, or sentences that described commonalities for the final thematic analysis.

Four themes emerged from data analysis, suggesting diverse perspectives and multifaceted roles of HELs. I found no discrepant cases during the data analysis process.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I conducted this basic qualitative study to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. Semistructured interviews were used to gather data from the participants. To determine trustworthiness within this study, I assessed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the generated data analysis and outcomes (see Connelly, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is the level of accuracy and trustworthiness of the collected data (Shenton, 2004). The credibility procedures used in this current study

were reflexivity and peer review (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I established a trustful relationship with each participant. Each participant had the opportunity to participate in member checking to provide any clarification or edits to the transcribed interviews, which supported my commitment to recognizing participants' perceptions and thoughts when transcribing the interviews. Data saturation occurred with HEL 6, meaning no new information was being gathered at that point. I kept a reflective journal to mitigate my biases, where I documented the context of the interviews.

Transferability

Transferability is the action of applying a study to other contexts, situations, or populations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To facilitate transferability for this study, I employed the strategies of thick descriptions and variation in the participants. During each interview, I took detailed notes of the context of the interviews and followed the interview protocol with each participant. Participant variation included having four deans and two program directors, all from various institutions of higher education, take part in the study.

Dependability

Dependability is the measured extent of how a research study could be repeated by another researcher and uncover findings that are the same (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To assure the dependability of this study, I provided a detailed description of the research methods, showing alignment between the RQs and interview questions. An audit trail was also maintained where I kept a detailed record of the data collection process, data analysis process, and interpretation of the data (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch &

Carl, 2020). The final strategy used to ensure dependability was reflective journaling, where I noted my reflections on each of the six completed interviews.

Confirmability

In qualitative research, confirmability is the degree to which the data gathered from participants accurately reflect their information and provide sufficient detail to demonstrate that the conclusions are reliable and repeatable (Connelly, 2016). I used reflexivity to establish confirmability for this study. During each interview, I kept notes in a journal to ensure the findings were grounded in the data and not influenced by my biases and preconceptions.

<div align="center">

Results

</div>

I developed the eight interview questions to answer this study's two RQs based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. By using the interview protocol in the interviews, I was able to capture HEL perceptions of the completion rates of their doctoral programs. I also learned how HELs perceive their leadership roles and describe how they influence the relationships with respective departments, faculty, and students.

In this subsection, I provide a comprehensive overview of the study's results. The results are reported by theme, and I provide participant quotations to support the identified emerging themes. Four themes emerged from data analysis: organizing doctoral program funding, hands-on committee service provides students with academic support to complete, leadership toward collaboration and communication, and leadership getting faculty more involved and engaged with students (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Themes
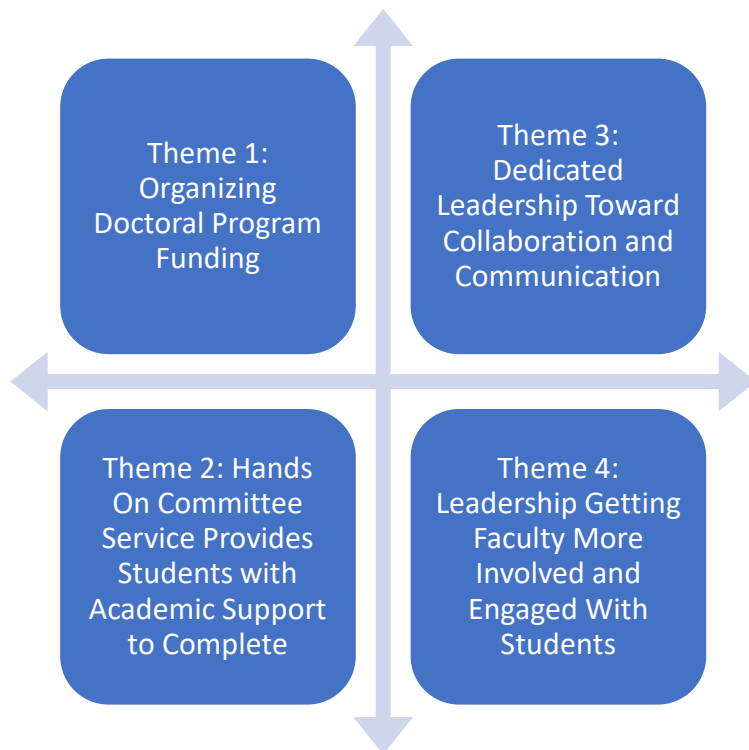
Theme 1: Organizing Doctoral Program Funding

Theme 1 was organizing doctoral program funding, which relates to providing

support for students to be able to have the necessary funds to complete the program. The

first theme emphasizes the understanding that HELs have their own perspectives about

the purpose of funding and financial rewards. This theme acknowledges the various

perceptions of HELs regarding the purpose of offering funding to support student

persistence and completion when developing institutional policies and procedures.

HELs shared their perspectives on organizing doctoral program funding as it

relates to their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates. Related to Theme

1, HEL 5 mentioned how organizing doctoral program funds can allow students to

complete at a better rate. HEL 5 shared how their university views offering to pay for doctoral students' last term so the students can complete and graduate:

Our institution has become a Research 1 institution and it is an expected outcome that our students who graduate within 5 years, actually, the push is now 3.5 to 4 years. So, there is a real emphasis for that and the universities willing to invest monies to help students achieve their doctorate. So, in other words, many times if we have a student who's kind of slow our university will help pay for their last semester of their dissertation.

HEL 5's answer relates to both RQs. The implied challenge is the timeline it takes students to complete their doctoral program and the success is the funding for their final semester.

HEL 5 expressed that financial rewards and employment opportunities during the doctoral program have a significant impact on doctoral completion: "I think financial rewards and financial employment opportunities have had a significant impact on completing degrees and progression towards degree." This relates to the success of providing students with financial rewards such as the university paying for the student's dissertation or final term in their doctoral study to encourage completion. Theme 1 reflects how HELs' perceptions on doctoral program funding and financial rewards intended to help students complete their doctoral degree.

HEL 6 highlighted that one of the big factors that impact doctoral completion is funding. HEL 6 stated,

The two big factors that impact doctoral completion are not having mentorship

and funding. Then you're going to have students not be able to complete the

program in a timely manner because… they're not going to be getting the funding

that they need. So, the evidence that I've seen here on campus has been the

development of fellowship programs to try as best as possible to have students not

have to teach or work outside of the university in order for them to support

themselves to do their research and complete their coursework and then the

program itself.

Relative to RQ2, HEL 6 showed how funding poses a challenge when there is a lack of

funds. Relative to RQ1, the participant also showed how there is success in investing in

fellowship programs to assist with funding and organize doctoral programs to address the

lack of mentorship.

HEL 3 spoke about the challenges of performance-based funding where

universities have to meet a given series of scores to avoid negative impact on their

funding and organization of their doctoral program funds:

For the last 10 years, every university is given a series of scores, and that can, and

many times does, impact some of their funding. Usually it's a score of 10, or 11

criterion which they score you on, one of those that it's always been students that

graduate in graduate programs of strategic emphasis. In other words, those

programs where the Bureau of Labor Statistics says we need more of these, so it

could be teachers, it could be engineers, whatever it is. And the EdD programs

that I supervised and created were of strategic emphasis, and they were an

imperative to the university for them to score well if the students were going to

graduate. So there's a duality and there's a pressure from the president and the

provost to graduate students.

Relative to RQ2, HEL 3 mentioned the challenges of meeting the performance-based

funding scores that directly impact program funding. On the other hand, HEL 2

mentioned organizing doctoral program funding in a way that was dedicated to student

success such as outreach:

I think we had to be willing to spend money to save these students. There had to

be dedicated leadership overseeing student success, including we had a person

who served as sort of the administrator of this in terms of the student outreach

phone calls letting students sort of tell their stories and process the reasons for

their failure up to that point seem to be an important part of the factor of their

success.

Related to RQ1, HEL 2 showed how spending money and organizing funds toward

student outreach can increase doctoral program success and student completion.

Theme 2: Hands On Committee Service Provides Students With Academic Support

to Complete

The second theme, hands on committee services provides students with academic

support to complete, emerged providing support for HELs' perceptions of the function of

the doctoral committee. This theme provides HELs' insights into how doctoral program

committees can provide students with the academic support needed to succeed and

complete their degree as well as the challenges of being able to complete the program at a timely pace.

I used the second theme to answer RQ1 and RQ2 that revealed HELs' recognition of the success that hands on committee service with students contributes, and HELs' viewpoints on defining institutions' willingness to invest in the resources and committee. HEL 1 showed how training dissertation chairs is a success factor in increasing completion rates of doctoral programs because it increases the relationship established between chairs and their students to receive timely feedback and complete the program at a better pace. HEL 1 emphasized the role of training dissertation chairs to ensure adequate support, stating that

> I think the university or the administration needs to, that's where training
> dissertation chairs and what the university expects, and having somebody talk to
> them or meet with. Even leadership meeting with dissertation chairs or students or
> both I would say meet with both, and get some feedback on what the students are
> they getting the support they need.

Related to RQ2, HEL 1 showed the challenge of leadership meeting with dissertation chairs and students to reflect on and address student feedback to enhance student support.

HEL 2 emphasized the institution's willingness to contribute success to hands on committee service with students, especially students who are struggling to complete their program:

> The university spent a lot of money on a program because we had to hire folks
> specifically to serve these students. There was a 5-day turnaround for any

submissions that the student made. They had a learning contract that the student

and the dissertation chair both agreed to with outlining the specific milestones for

completion and students were given editing support qualitative and quantitative

analysis support. And just very hands on good committee service really, to help

them get through and, and this program was really exceptional. The students who

were eligible, 336 of them who were eligible for this particular program, had

struggled to be able to complete and it was for a variety of reasons.

Relative to RQ1 and RQ2, HEL 2 recognized that both the challenges and successes

related to doctoral program completion were students' personal challenges, which can

make it more difficult for them to complete, and how having a hands-on committee

service can increase their challenges of success and completion.

HEL 3 emphasized that hands on committee service can increase the chances of

students producing higher quality dissertations and starting the program more effectively:

When you're starting a program at the very beginning, you can just say get with

the faculty, build out your map, figure out the proper scheduling, what's going to

be most efficient and effective and still be high quality for the students. And then

you start the program that way. So, from the very beginning, it's effective.

Relative to RQ2, HEL 3 showed how building a map of the program from the start and

introducing faculty to that map by having proper schedules can contribute to students'

success in producing high quality dissertations.

HEL 5 suggested creating doctoral program boot camps hosted by doctoral

committees to help dissertation students write better:

One of the things that we did was created a mentoring program, one faculty member with one doctoral student to see if we couldn't speed that process up, also created a dissertation boot camp. A lot of places have dissertation boot camps, but basically it was to help our doctoral students understand how to write APA style, how to write chapters one through five, and how to basically complete their dissertation what they needed to do and how to do that. Along with that, we ended up identifying dissertation editors. So, we interviewed editors for doctoral dissertations, and we created a list of editors. So in other words, what we were trying to do was to have doctoral students learn to write better and help faculty members move these doctoral dissertations completed faster.

HEL 5 emphasized how the challenge of doctoral student writing skills can be improved by doctoral committees offering dissertation boot camps to help them complete the program at a better pace. HEL 6 highlighted how faculty can provide students with hands on feedback if doctoral committees are given professional development opportunities to help students better: "But the other piece is multiple mentoring programs that we have on campus that are like professional development for faculty to help them understand and be educated and better trained to be mentors to graduate students." Relative to RQ1, HEL 6 offered a suggestion to increase mentorship programs to allow doctoral committee to communicate with students more and for faculty to skillfully mentor their students and increase their completion and success. HEL 6 also recommended building a positive trajectory for students by faculty, including committee members, doing a grad review to address completion:

Every semester, we have what is called the grad student review. All the faculty sit

with the list of students that we currently have in the program, and they go student

by student to check where they are at in terms of hitting those benchmarks that are

needed in order to complete the program. So, the students really get feedback

every semester in terms of their status and if they are in good standing or if they

need improvement.

Related to RQ 1, HEL 6 emphasized how helpful a hands-on committee service

can be to increase success once implemented in doctoral programs. Due to doctoral

committees' multifaceted roles, HELs acknowledge the support and resources needed to

provide quality academic support.

Among all the participants, HELs stressed the importance of clear communication

and collaboration between committees and leadership and with students. HEL 3

highlighted the importance of collaboration between faculty and their students:

Doctoral program deserves faculty that are qualified researchers themselves, that

are excellent instructors that can convey to doctoral students at that level, the

learning that's required, that can collaborate engage with them, and not do the

work for them and not sit back and watch them do; but really collaborate almost

like they make the student the first author on everything they do. That is what

universities in doctoral programs really need.

Relative to RQ2, it is a challenge for HELs to find qualified faculty members who

are able to collaborate with their students. HEL 6 also commented about the importance

of communication between doctoral committees and students on their progress toward

completion: "We're doing things in our department every semester to do that grind review and check in and then fully and transparently communicating to the students about where they're at in the program." Relative to RQ1, HEL 6 illustrated how communicating within doctoral committees and departments and reviewing doctoral students' work can increase their chances of completion and success.

Theme 3: Dedicated Leadership Toward Collaboration and Communication

HELs mentioned the importance of being dedicated toward collaboration and communication with faculty and their departments as they strategically increased doctoral program completion.

HELs shared their perspectives on having dedicated leadership toward collaboration and communication as it relates to their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates. HEL 1 defined success as leadership requiring meetings with students and chairs, thereby increasing collaboration and communication:

> One of the things that we tried that helped a great deal was we required the doctoral students to meet with their dissertation chairs 4 times a year at the minimum. Before that, we hadn't had any requirement. We just assumed students would be meeting, whenever they could, but some of them would go off and wouldn't get in contact with the dissertation chair for months. So, we decided we would require that either the dissertation chair contact them or they contact the dissertation chair and meet with them at least 4 times a year.

Relative to RQ1 and RQ2, HEL 1 defined the challenge of getting dissertation chairs to meet with their students and the success of having them meet several times a year so students can complete at a better pace.

HEL 2 spoke about conveying institutional support as an important factor of student completion:

There had to be dedicated leadership overseeing student success, we had a person who served as the administrator of student outreach by placing phone calls, letting students tell their stories, and process the reasons for their failure which is an important part of the factor of their success. I think it's just commitment from the highest levels of leadership to really invest in student success at the doctoral level, is a key component and then dedicated leadership resources to do that.

Related to RQ1, HEL 2 showed how leadership commitment and dedicated to student success can increase student feedback.

Related to Theme 3, HEL 3 recommended HELs are dedicated to increasing cohort-based scheduling and creating highly visible programs for students to enhance collaboration and communication between cohorts and students. If HELs collaborate and communicate with respective cohorts and faculty, then students will complete at a better pace. One suggestion for HELs is to increase communication and collaboration by allowing each doctoral student a professional advisor, faculty mentor, and near peer to complete the program effectively:

So one of the things that we started doing with undergrads and masters and I would love to see it go to doctorates is that every doctoral student, has a

professional advisor, and that's somebody that's constantly thinking with them about what courses to take and what schedules they need to be on. The second person that's on their team is a purposeful faculty mentor and that is assigned or it could be somebody that they choose, but they need someone who is there and when there's something that needs to be done, if there's concerns there, they just call them up. Somebody that is checking in, conversating, and advising students about their program and overall success such as attending conferences. The third person on their team, as I call them, the near peer. And that's probably somebody that's just a cohort or two ahead of them. Another student who, if you're a first year doctoral student, they're probably a third year. So, you can imagine a doctoral student has these three people on their team. Each person knows their name and cares about them.

Relative to RQ1, HEL 3 suggested how student success can be increased in doctoral programs as HELs consider the role of a professional advisor, faculty mentor, and near peer when creating support for student completion. If HELs are dedicated to offering students an advisor, mentor, and near peer, then they can enhance collaboration and communication within their respective departments and for students to complete the program.

Related to Theme 3, HEL 4 mentioned the process of increasing student completion by dedicated leadership toward collaboration and communication between faculty and students. HEL 4 spoke about the process of achieving success in completion

rates through proper structure of the program and making sure faculty who are also known as team leaders are working with students and being trained to do so:

A team leader is somebody who is on faculty. The aspect or factor to success really is making sure that the team leaders that are working with the students know what they're doing, and that they are really aware of what a project consists of, what the outcome is, and how to help a student along. Once we started doing team leader education three times a year, to make sure that our team leaders were doing the right thing with the students, team leaders gave them those resources. It helps the students over the hump and then has them continue on and complete, not drop out.

Related to RQ1, HEL 4 showed how success in doctoral programs can achieved when team leaders are communicating and collaborating with students. HEL 6 also mentioned the success of leadership communicating within their department to build a positive outlook for students who are struggling to complete the program:

A lot of it is also making sure that if they haven't completed, how can we support the students to make sure that they're completing the work in order for them to get graded on that particular course. So, we're doing things in our department every semester to do that grind, review, and check in and then fully and transparently communicating to the students about where they're at in the program. And if there's any issues that need to be addressed, and what can we do to help them address it so they can continue in a positive trajectory.

Related to RQ1 and RQ2, HEL 6 showed the challenges of collaborating with the HELs'
departments and the successes of communicating with students who are not completing
the program or struggling to complete:

> Well, every semester We have what is called the grad student review. And so, all
> the faculty sit with the list of students that we currently have in the program, and
> we go student by student to check in on where are they at in the program and
> hitting those benchmarks that are needed in order to complete the program. And
> so the students really get feedback every semester in terms of their status, are they
> in good standing, do they need improvement?

Related to RQ2, HEL 6 showed the challenge of faculty and leaders communicating and
sharing the list of students to check in on and help them progress in the program. Related
to RQ1, HEL 6 also mentioned the success of faculty communicating with students and
helping them complete, by giving them feedback on their status, current standing in the
program, and whether they need improvement to move forward. Related to RQ1, HEL 5
highlighted the importance of leadership striving to connect their faculty with their
students and building strong relationships that can survive the doctoral journey and
achieve success.

Theme 4: Leadership Getting Faculty More Involved and Engaged With Students

HELs agreed that collaboration with faculty to get them more involved with
doctoral students is essential to increase doctoral programs' success and completion.
However, although participants shared their use of a collaborative process, they also
discussed ways they envisioned faculty getting more involved with students.

HELs shared their perspectives on leadership getting faculty more involved and engaged with students as it relates to their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates. HEL 5 elaborated on setting expectations for faculty regarding getting more involved with students:

> I think in terms of leadership, it was the idea of leadership saying we want to connect with our doctoral students. We want faculty to create relationships with them. We want them we want faculty to check in with them every week we want faculty to see how they're progressing in their courses and on their dissertations. If they're running into problems. What are those problems? How can we handle it? What kind of things can we do differently to help that specific student?

Related to RQ1, HEL 5 also mentioned the success of leadership wanting to connect with faculty to see what they can do differently to help students understand what is needed to complete:

> How is [a doctoral program] addressed after completion? Well, it's gotten faculty more involved with each doctoral student, and it also has allowed students to determine early on in the process if they wanted to continue the program or not. In other words, I think a lot of people just want a doctorate. They don't understand all that they have to put into it (the doctoral program) and they expect their doctoral program studies to be the same as their master's program studies.

Related to Theme 4, HEL 5 detailed how students can determine at the beginning of their program if they wish to complete if faculty are more involved with each student. Students' expectations can also lead them to struggle to complete if they do not fully

understand the process of a doctoral program through faculty engagement and communication with them. HEL 4 also mentioned how faculty should remain engaged with their students:

> Having the faculty available to set up synchronize sessions with students, I think is really helpful and when the student has a problem, even though the faculty has explained it three times, to just call the student or set up a zoom with the student and sometimes it's that human interaction that really makes a difference for the student. And so I think that that's really needed for completion rates.

Faculty workload and professional development are all considered when determining how faculty will function with students and work as dissertation chairs. Related to RQ 2, HELs acknowledge that academic teaching and mentoring can be time-consuming.

While participants emphasized the importance of faculty getting more involved with students, they also acknowledged challenges including faculty workload and burnout. HELs 6 and 4 agreed it is essential to consider faculty involvement and engagement within doctoral programs by not giving faculty more students than they can handle. HEL 4 mentioned,

> So I think having the director really understand what the faculty can handle and what the faculty need. And then listen to the faculty when the faculty complain about the student doesn't know how to write or, you know, the student just doesn't get it, to listen to the faculty and commiserate with them.

HEL 6 also mentioned about faculty burnout,

I think also faculty burnout, faculty are teaching a lot of doing a lot of research. They are super busy. They also have a lot of undergraduate students. And so sometimes that burnout impacts their ability to engage in a meaningful and purposeful and impactful manner with their graduate students, because there's so much that is pulling them in all kinds of different directions, and they are not able to put in a lot of time.

Relative to RQ2, HEL 6 mentioned the challenge of faculty burnout which impacts their ability to engage with their students.

When considering faculty as dissertation chairs, all six participants expressed that setting clear expectations on faculty engagement and outlining how often a faculty member should meet with their student is essential so that faculty can balance workload demands and student needs.

Summary

In the thematic analysis, I identified how HELs strategically collaborate with faculty to support student persistence and completion. According to HELs, achieving success in completion rates can happen through proper structure of the program funding and making sure faculty and committees are working with students. Throughout the interview process, participants were able to describe how they collaborated with faculty to promote faculty engagement and program organization and considering leadership dedication towards engaging faculty with students.

In the study's results, the data revealed how HELs perceive their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. HELs recognize the

pivotal role that faculty, mentors, and peers play in providing support to students. HELs acknowledge that faculty go beyond their traditional roles in teaching to serve as mentors to support and guide students through academic pursuits and personal situations.

In the findings of this study, the data revealed how HELs consider funding, committee service, collaboration, communication, faculty engagement, and involvement as critical components when considering doctoral program completion. HELs consider various ways to foster a culture of student engagement and faculty involvement.

Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of the findings, the study's limitations, recommendations, implications, reflections, and the conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. By completing this study, I sought to fill the gap in practice regarding the efforts to improve completion on doctoral noncompletion and low graduation rates.

I collected data through the completion of six semistructured interviews to gain insights into HELs' perceptions on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. I developed and crafted the interview questions to prompt HELs to articulate their perceptions and share their experiences with completion rates of doctoral programs. After the completion of each interview, I transcribed the recorded interviews. Then, I analyzed each transcribed interview by completing open coding and axial coding to identify emergent themes.

I answered this study's two RQs through four thematic findings: (a) organizing doctoral program funding, (b) hands on committee service provides students with academic support to complete, (c) dedicated leadership toward collaboration and communication, and (d) leadership getting faculty more involved and engaged with students. In the key findings of this study, I show how HELs view doctoral completion and success. HELs value and consider their leadership to play a significant role in shaping the success of their doctoral programs to support student persistence and completion. In Chapter 5, I overview the interpretations of the findings and this study's

limitations. I also make recommendations for future research and highlight this study's contributions to positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

The completion rates of doctoral programs are below the accreditation standard. The Higher Learning Commission (2019) accreditation benchmark of graduation rates for doctoral programs with financial aid is about 80% over a 5-year period. Out of graduate programs, doctoral programs have the highest attrition (McBrayer et al., 2021). I sought to fill the gap in practice regarding the efforts to improve completion on doctoral noncompletion and low graduation rates.

The LOVS model by Hanson's (2017) offers a framework focused on retention factors and TTD and offers suggestions for successful doctoral degree completion. The LOVS model structures equity factors relative to doctoral education into four elements: vital leadership, informal open systems, flexible structures, and individual integration (Hanson et al., 2022). The retention, completion, and TTD of doctoral programs are factors that are considered by the LOVS model and focus on the problem of low completion rates of doctoral programs. In this study, which is framed by the LOVS model, I sought to identify the low completion rates that are currently in place nationwide based on HELs' perspectives so that new opportunities to enhance the doctoral program completion and success can be explored (see Hanson et al., 2022).

By using the LOVS model to guide data collection and analysis, I explored how HELs perceive the challenges and success of doctoral program completion rates. Four themes emerged from the transcribed data and the first theme was organizing doctoral

program funding, which relates to the third element in the LOVS model: flexible structures. Theme 1, organizing the program's funding, illustrates how HELs can support student success by organizing program funding. Hanson et al. (2022) found that HELs can provide proactive support to increase student completion. Theme 1 relates to the LOVS model's element of flexible structures, which are systems within doctoral programs that provide support to students and organize the program's goals with students' goals (Hanson et al., 2022).

The second theme, hands on committee service provides students with academic support to complete, relates to the element of flexible structures in the LOVS model. Hands-on committee service organizes the support provided to students and aligns the students' goals with the goals of the program through guidance by the doctoral committee. If students have hands on committee services, then they can be encouraged to watch and observe their program and peers and have the support needed to complete the program.

The third theme, dedicated leadership toward collaboration and communication, relates to the vital leadership element of the LOVS model, which builds informal and formal systems of a higher education institution. The term *vital* refers to the essential qualities of leaders in higher education that rely on student input for program improvement (Hanson et al., 2022). If vital leaders work and collaborate to overcome challenges, then they more easily adapt to change. Hanson et al. (2022) found that HELs can provide proactive support to increase student completion. Consequently, HELs can

impact the attitudes of faculty, the cohort, and dissertation chairs who build relationships with doctoral candidates and enhance their professional skills.

The fourth theme, leadership getting faculty more involved and engaged with students, relates to the element in the LOVS model, which is individual integration. Individual integration is how well aligned the student's goals are with the program and institution's goal (Hanson et al., 2022). HELs described how through professional development, faculty can be more involved and engaged with their students, which could help them align the students' goals with the overall goals of the institution. For example, Holzweiss (2023) found challenges with doctoral student writing that result in reduced student commitment and the need for more writing development to increase completion rates and reduce faculty labor.

Theme 1: Organizing Doctoral Program Funding

The six participants of this study provided insight from their professional experiences with funding and how to increase student completion by offering more funds for their education, especially the last term to complete and more employment opportunities. Knowing these challenges can inform approaches that college or university leaders can implement, helping institutions increase student completion (Miller & Harrington, 2023).

In Theme 1, organizing doctoral program funding, I suggest that HELs should take a holistic approach to academic funding by providing students with financial resources and support that facilitates flexibility to degree attainment. In the findings from Theme 1, HELs perceived the challenges of the timeline it takes students to complete

their doctoral program. HELs proposed a solution for students to complete at a better pace, which is offering funds for their final semester or employment opportunities. I also found that HELs perceive a success in investing in fellowship programs to assist with funding and organizing funds toward student outreach to increase doctoral program completion.

My findings support that HELs believe that financial rewards and employment opportunities have a vital role in assisting students with their academic, personal, and professional development. This type of support helps the student to actively and collaboratively work with their faculty in completing their academic degree. Funding barriers, posited by Fanguy et al. (2022), include institutional pressure by the government and external funding sources to retain and graduate their students yearly. This relates to what HEL 3 mentioned about the pressure of meeting the performance-based funding scores by external funding sources that directly impact program funding. Leadership challenges, found by Lee et al. (2020), include the ability of HELs to provide effective funding support for students and increase their learning success. Providing effective funding support relates to what HEL 5 expressed about financial rewards and opportunities during the doctoral program have a significant impact on doctoral completion.

Theme 2: Hands On Committee Service Provides Students With Academic Support to Complete

In the findings from Theme 2, HELs showed how they perceive the challenge of communicating within departments and reviewing doctoral students' work to increase

their chances of completion and success. HELs also perceive the importance of finding qualified faculty members who are able to collaborate with their students. The participants of this study suggested that having a hands-on committee can provide students with comprehensive academic support by providing active engagement, effective communication, and personalized guidance to students.

The findings of my study support previous research that indicates that personal barriers that doctoral students face is the complexity of the relationship with their program committee member or supervisor that is needed through the different phases of the research project and doctoral journey (Denis et al., 2019). HELs believe that students who have doctoral committees dedicated to providing them support in their programs can complete at a better rate. Having a committee dedicated toward student success and completion can support students at the doctoral level even if the university has to spend resources and money into hiring.

Theme 2, hands on committee service provides students with academic support to complete, supports that HELs can increase completion rates of students by setting clear goals and expectations regarding committee support of doctoral students.

Some of the challenges that students may face during a doctoral program is the writing of a dissertation or capstone study because doctoral students have to apply and translate what they previously learned in addition to knowing how to do research and collaborate with a committee chair or advisor (Torres et al., 2021). The six participants shared their perspectives on how a hands-on committee can create comprehensive support to address the diverse educational needs of their students while promoting

academic success and well-being. Their perspectives explained how doctoral committee engagement and resources should provide quality support. For example, HEL 1 showed the challenge of leadership meeting with dissertation chairs and students to reflect on and address student feedback to enhance student support. Doctoral students can complete at a better pace if they are able to change their dissertation advisors or chairs when they find themselves not capable of progressing, not offered timely feedback, or having misalignment issues in their research topics (Denis et al., 2019; Hanson et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2021). Finally, HEL 2 recognized that the challenges related to doctoral program completion were students' personal challenges, which can make it more difficult for them to complete; this participant noted that "very hands on good committee service really, to help them get through" can help.

Theme 3: Dedicated Leadership Toward Collaboration and Communication

In the findings from Theme 3, HELs perceived the importance of leadership striving to connect their faculty with their students and building strong relationships that can survive the doctoral journey and achieve success. Moreover, HELs believed that open communication between leadership and administration is essential when considering student success and how faculty can impact it.

HELs can provide valuable insights to students considering a doctoral degree through clear communication and engagement for the universities vying for students (Groman & Paquette, 2023). Lee et al. (2023) found that program improvement and setting clear expectations and communication at the program's start, can better prepare students to meet the program requirements. HEL 6 showed the challenge of faculty and

leaders communicating and sharing the list of students to check in on and help them progress in the program. HEL 6 also mentioned the success of faculty giving students feedback on their status in the program, their current standing, and whether they need improvement to move forward. Leadership strategies and communication methods can enhance the higher education institution's mission alignment with doctoral programs and the inclusion of diverse groups.

HELs can provide dedicated leadership toward collaboration and communication through enhancing professional development and strategic thinking to engage the department and college in discussing change. Professional development and strategic thinking can increase communication and enhance connections within the department and the college. First, providing professional development support and resources can encourage sustained change (Miller & Harrington, 2023). Relatedly, HEL 4 described a process of increasing student completion through focused training of doctoral team leaders. My study's findings suggest that HELs perceive effective communication and collaboration between HELs and faculty to be a crucial component to developing academic support for student persistence and completion.

In my study, participants envisioned workload equity to enable collaborating with other departments. In the results of my study, I demonstrated that HELs are aware of the challenges associated with faculty workload and the need for continuous academic collaboration and training. HELs also established the need for clear and concise faculty feedback and relationship with doctoral students through proper structure of the program and making sure faculty are also known as team leaders actively working with students.

Theme 4: Leadership Getting Faculty More Involved and Engaged With Students

In the findings of Theme 4, HELs suggested setting clear expectations on faculty engagement and outlining how often a faculty member should meet with their student so that faculty can balance workload demands and student needs. The six participants in this study agreed that leadership getting faculty more involved and engaged with students includes faculty professional development and dedicated leadership to increase relationships between faculty and students, can enhance student completion. Relatedly, HELs recognized the challenge of faculty burnout which impacts their ability to engage with their students.

The literature indicates that faculty demands in the twenty-first century include involvement and engagement in student completion initiatives such as academic support and commitment to professional development (Miller & Harrington, 2023; Sanchez et al., 2023; Schmidt, 2020). Commitment to professional development relates to HEL 6 and 4's suggestions about considering faculty involvement and engagement within doctoral programs by also not giving faculty more students than they can handle. Suggestions for HELs to increase completion among doctoral students found in the literature include increasing administrative support, accountability, and supportive feedback (Hanson et al., 2022; Miller & Harrington, 2023; Schmidt, 2020). While supportive and timely feedback is important, HEL 6 mentioned the challenge of faculty burnout which impacts their ability to engage with their students.

Leaders can engage the college and department of doctoral programs to discuss changes through a guided pathways model (Miller & Harrington, 2023). Guided

pathways in doctoral programs is a redesign model for the department to help students complete programs in alignment with their career ambitions. Related to Theme 4 on leadership getting faculty more involved and engaged with students, if faculty are engaging students in the doctoral program then students can align their goals with the goals of the program. HEL 5 mentioned the success of leadership wanting to connect with faculty to help students complete. Lee et al. (2023) reported a reduction in student attrition rates at 33% and an increase in doctoral positions at 37% after implementing a PhD program that had a curriculum revision to include students' career goals. If faculty are more engaged and involved with the doctoral program, then they can engage in the program revision to include students' career goals based on their connections with students.

Institution-based barriers include less diversity of the workforce and institutionalized prejudices that create barriers to the academic success of students (Sanchez et al., 2023). This is connected to Theme 4 because HELs believe that leadership needs to get qualified faculty experts involved with doctoral students and engaged in their success. If faculty are engaged and involved with the students' research journey, then they can encourage students to pursue studies that are of interest to them and allow them to complete. The participants in the study agreed that faculty engagement and involvement with students can help them manage their workload and commit to professional development.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of qualitative research is generalizability. For this study, a small sample size that included six HELs at a United States college or university is a limitation of the generalizability of the findings. Despite every attempt to choose HELs with a variety of experiences with doctoral program completion, there may be limitations to the results' transferability in different contexts or settings. Another potential limitation of this study is my bias during interviews. To limit interview bias, I did not stray from the interview script and maintained nonreactive body language. In conclusion, my study was constrained by a single methodology. Subsequent researchers may choose to investigate the perceptions of HELs on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs using quantitative or mixed-method approaches.

Another limitation of this study was recruiting HELs instead of other participants, such as students or faculty, and the number of responses in the interviews would be limited. Thus, findings were limited to HELs' perceptions on the successes and challenges of their doctoral programs excluding the perspectives of faculty and students on their successes and challenges.

Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to gain a deeper understanding of HELs' perceptions on their successes and challenges in increasing completion rates in their doctoral programs. Future research recommendations include expanding on the diversification of participants and universities. My study participants were HELs (dean, vice president and dean of academic affairs, program director, or

former associate dean) within the U.S. college or university. It is essential to include a more diverse variety of HELs, such as campus presidents or CAOs, within various community colleges and other graduate degree specializations. Future researchers may choose to use a mixed-method or quantitative method to study the function and purpose of HELs perceptions of the challenges and success of doctoral program completion. Future research could survey HELs across the United States to determine the effectiveness of increasing completion rates in doctoral programs.

Implications

The findings from this study have the potential to lead to a positive social change by building on the current strengths of HELs perceptions on their challenges and success to enhance doctoral program completion rates in higher education institutions. The insights gained by HELs in this study can be instrumental in optimizing completion rates.

Related to Theme 1 about organizing doctoral program funding, HELs believe that if doctoral programs have the appropriate funds to enhance and organize their programs then students can complete at a better rate. If HELs strive to organize their doctoral programs' funding, they can increase employment opportunities and encourage students to complete their program at a better pace.

Related to Theme 2 about hands-on committee service to provide students with academic support, students who have enough support to graduate can complete their program and enhance their success. In return, students who graduate with a doctoral degree have the potential to improve their SES, improve the quality of life of their families, and expand employment opportunities, creating a positive social change.

As HELs become more aware of their critical role to be dedicated leaders and strive to connect with their faculty and departments, HELs can strive to collaborate and communicate, which is related to Theme 3 on dedicated leadership toward collaboration and communication, in the running and creation of their doctoral programs. By understanding the purpose and function of doctoral completion, HELs can transform the academic experience into a more holistic approach that creates a more supportive environment throughout a student's doctoral journey.

Related to Theme 4 on leadership getting faculty more involved and engaged with students, when higher education institutional departments enable faculty to adopt a comprehensive approach with their students, students who are at risk of not completing their degree may receive the necessary support to obtain their doctoral degree. Higher education institutions can utilize this study's information to improve their current doctoral programs that meet the needs of their students while balancing the workload and tasks of faculty.

Conclusion

As HELs strive to increase doctoral program completion rates, institutional collaboration and communication would strengthen the doctoral departments and enhance student support. To strengthen faculty engagement and involvement in doctoral programs, HELs can begin to envision and dedicate their leadership to organizing funding resources. Higher education institutions may enhance their overall student persistence and completion by investing in strengthening their hands on committee

services, which influences students beyond graduation by contributing to their overall personal and professional growth within their surrounding community.

HELs perceive that having dedicated leadership can transform the lives of their community, departments, faculty, and increase the completion rates of their doctoral students who are striving to attain their doctoral degree. HELs perceive both their successes and challenges to shape the future of their doctoral programs with a positive trajectory that can increase the completion rates of doctoral programs and allow students to be successful individuals as part of the program and community at large. The potential social benefits of addressing low completion rates are improving doctoral programs and the completion rates of doctoral students. Improving doctoral programs and increasing completion rates can lead to positive social change by fostering knowledge creation, workforce development, diversity, and inclusivity, as well as economic growth (Sanchez et al., 2023).

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Question
What are the perceptions of higher education leaders on their successes in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?	In your experience, what is an example of a success story in increasing the completion rates in your doctoral programs? What do you think contributed to those successes in terms of leadership? How if at all has your program addressed doctoral completion? If you characterize doctoral program completion as a top institutional priority, what evidence have you seen to support this institutional effort? If you do not, what other priorities do you feel are elevated above it?
What are the perceptions of higher education leaders on their challenges in increasing the completion rates in their doctoral programs?	From your experience, what are some examples of challenges you face to increase completion rates of your doctoral programs?

	What do you think contributed to those challenges in terms of student support systems?
	What have you, as a higher education leader, experienced as the most significant challenge that colleges or universities face in increasing completion rates of doctoral programs?
	What additional suggestions do you have to increase completion rates of doctoral programs?

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Participant's Name _____ Date_____

What is your gender?

_____ Male

_____ Female

_____ Nonbinary/ Gender Diverse

_____ Prefer not to answer

How many months or years of experience do you have working as a higher education

leader?_____

What is your current or former leadership or managerial role at your

university/college?_____

Do you have experience working in doctoral programs?

_____Yes

_____No