

The Importance of Transition Programs for Doctoral Student Wellness

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This qualitative case study explored the experiences of 12 self-identified well doctoral students at a mid-sized university in the western U.S. Many of the participants' challenges to wellness occurred during the transition to their role as doctoral students as they learned new expectations, academic processes and procedures, and developed relationships with peers and faculty members. Data collection included two individual interviews and the submission of two journal entries. The findings revealed three main themes related to the transition process: (1) transitioning to the academic environment, (2) understanding academic requirements, and (3) stress. Implications for research and practice for administrators, doctoral faculty, and doctoral students are discussed.

Doctoral students are a growing population in higher education, increasing from 382 doctoral degrees granted in 1900 to 42,155 in 2004 (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). Over the last 50 years, much of the research focusing on the doctoral student population has been from a deficit standpoint, trying to understand attrition and negative aspects of education rather than exploring the experience of students who are successful in order to understand how they thrive while pursuing a doctorate. As college campuses increasingly use perspectives stemming from positive psychology and strengths-based approaches, there is a growing need for research on successful approaches to working with doctoral students. The use of the wellness construct to understand the doctoral student experience is a new approach which focuses on possibilities for success.

Wellness is a well-known concept in popular culture (e.g., television shows and books, such as *The Biggest Loser* and *Fast Food Nation*, devoted to the topic) and in higher education as a developmental model to holistically address various dimensions of students' lives. Generally, wellness encompasses topics on thriving in physical, social, emotional, occupational, intellectual, and spiritual arenas of one's life (Hettler, 1980). Wellness is situated within the current societal focus on health, well-being, and fulfillment in all areas of life. Prior to the concept of wellness, balance was a common goal as people sought to keep all areas of their lives equally teetering, as if on a see-saw. However, while wellness consists of many of the principles of balance including fulfilling various needs, it seems to provide more individuation whereby one can choose which areas encompass personal wellness. Wellness is seen as a process, and not all areas will be in equal balance at all times. Rather, individuals can determine how they experience wellness in

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their lives. This study sought to explore how wellness is experienced in the lives of doctoral students, and how their sense of and continual focus on wellness influenced their degree completion.

Forty-three percent of doctoral students who begin their degree do not complete it (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Additionally, one-third of those who do not persist leave their program during or immediately after the conclusion of their first year (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2009; Walker et al., 2008). Orientation and transition programs are implemented to promote the retention of first-year undergraduate students and can prove valuable for the retention of doctoral students. One of the main purposes of doctoral education is to socialize students into a scholarly profession, and a well-intentioned orientation program can provide the impetus to the socialization process.

Review of the Literature

The doctoral student experience differs drastically from that of undergraduate students with whom they share campus resources (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Socialization into a profession, dissertation processes, and competing roles and responsibilities are among the unique experiences of students seeking the terminal degree. Research about doctoral students is generally categorized into four major areas: attrition and persistence, learning experiences, socialization, and programmatic interventions (Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006). In Bieber and Worley's (2006) review of literature on graduate students, they noted the need to "move beyond analysis of single discrete variables in order to probe more fully the graduate school experience and its complexities" (p. 1010). Developmental issues are rarely addressed in research about doctoral students but may provide an understanding of the challenges of doctoral work.

A majority of the studies of doctoral student experience explore individual, institutional, and societal factors affecting degree completion. Kluever's (1997) study of doctoral students in education from a singular institution compared the academic achievements of 142 doctoral graduates with those of 97 non-graduates whose only remaining academic requirement was the dissertation. He noted that financial support, experience with research, contact with advisors, access to university resources, and emotional support from advisors and families were shown to help students complete their dissertation (Kluever, 1997).

In a qualitative study of faculty members' roles and responsibilities in doctoral student learning at 12 institutions, Bair, Haworth, and Sandfort (2004) supported the findings of other studies on doctoral student experience (Kluever, 1997; Lovitts, 2001; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Bair et al. (2004) found positive relationships with faculty in the classroom and through advising (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Lovitts, 2001), involvement in departmental activities, a supportive departmental culture, high levels of peer interaction (Gardner, 2009; Tinto, 1993), and financial support throughout the doctoral student career to be key components of doctoral student success (Forney, 1999; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Hyun, Quinn,

Madon, & Lustig, 2006; Kluever, 1997; Longfield, Romas, & Irwin, 2006). Positive relationships with faculty were fostered through collaboration in research and professional and personal development through advising and mentoring (Bair et al., 2004). Opportunities for doctoral students to interact with faculty and peers were also found to reduce students' feelings of isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary, & Ryan, 1999; Goplerud, 1980). These findings highlight the social component of wellness with importance placed on peer interaction and involvement in both educational and social departmental activities.

In addition to the importance of addressing academic needs as discussed in the studies above, meeting essential personal needs such as obtaining information about housing, access to counseling and wellness services, and career development are important to the doctoral student experience (Nesheim et al., 2006; Pontius & Harper, 2006). In their chapter discussing seven approaches to engaging graduate students, Pontius and Harper (2006) supported the idea that academic and personal support services are needed to assist doctoral students as they pursue their degrees, but those services are frequently tailored to meet the needs of the undergraduate student population. In the past 25 years, there has been increased attention to understanding the experience of doctoral students in higher education. There are major concerns about the academic and co-curricular components of the doctoral experience that eventually detract from students' ability to complete their degree.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this constructivist case study is to contribute to the gap in literature of the doctoral student experience by exploring the meaning that well doctoral students make of their lived experience at a mid-sized university in the western United States. Case study methodology was chosen as the approach to explore the experience of well doctoral students because of the lack of research in this area. Without prior studies on which to build, case study was a logical beginning to develop a framework for the experience of this population. Only one study (Gardner, 2009) has specifically proposed a developmental model for doctoral students. The overall aim of this research is to explore the lives of well doctoral students, particularly how their choices around wellness influence their academic endeavors. The potential impact of this research can reach students, faculty members, and student affairs professionals as it seeks to provide an initial step in the conversation around holistic development of doctoral students. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do doctoral students make meaning of wellness as they pursue their doctoral degree?
2. How do doctoral students pursue wellness in their degree program?
3. How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' sense of wellness?
4. How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' ability to pursue wellness?

5. How do doctoral students' choices around wellness influence their academic pursuits?

Theoretical Perspective

Theoretical perspective, or ontology, represents how reality is seen, assumed, or discovered in research and is also described as the nature of reality (Crotty, 1998). This study is consistent with the constructivist view that multiple realities exist because reality is socially constructed (Mertens, 2005). One reality of wellness does not exist and during the study, the researcher developed an understanding of the multiple meanings held by the participants in the context of the bounded case (Mertens, 2005). The goal of this research is to present a new perspective of the doctoral student experience by understanding those who are able to maintain their wellness while achieving their goal of earning a doctorate.

Methods

Institutional Context and Participants

Using case study research, this study focused on the experience of doctoral students in their ability to develop and maintain wellness in the bounded system of one university. Twelve participants (see Table 1) from three of the colleges, 1) Music, Theater, and Arts, 2) Education and Psychology, and 3) the Sciences (pseudonyms), at a doctoral degree-granting university, Armfield University (a pseudonym), in the western United States were selected for data collection. Remaining consistent with case study methodology, participants of the study were bounded by the limits of those identifying as doctoral students in one of the three colleges within Armfield University. The following criteria were used because they "directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases" (Merriam, 1998, p. 62). Participants 1) were doctoral students within the bounded case university, 2) identified and considered themselves "well" based on their own definition of the construct, 3) represented diversity in terms of discipline, and 4) represented diversity in terms of their stage of academic progress (coursework and post-coursework). During Fall 2008, graduate students comprised approximately 19% (2,389 students) of the 12,498 on-campus student population. Of the 2,389 graduate students, 18.7% (446 students) were doctoral students from one of the 16 programs within the institution's three colleges (Institutional Fact Book, 2009). Diversity among the participants was sought to include differences in full time and part time status, race, gender, academic area, year in program, marital status, children, and current work status (graduate/teaching assistant, and full-time/part-time).

TABLE 1

Description of Participants

	Age	Race	Gender	Academic status	Major	Work	Marital	No. of Children
Leah	Mid-30s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Psychology	PT/off-campus	Dating	0
Laura		Caucasian	Female	PT	Education	FT/off-campus	Married	2
Robin	Mid-50s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Education	PT/GA	Married	2
Dave	Late-20s	Caucasian	Male	FT	Subject-specific education	PT/GA	Married	0
Katie	Early 50s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Subject-specific education	PT/GA	Married	1
Ruby	Mid-20s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Psychology	PT/TA	Married	0
Helena	Mid-20s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Health-related	PT/GA	Single	0
Abigail	Mid-30s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Education	PT/GA	Married	0
Cassie	Early-50s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Education	None	Married	0
Elizabeth	Early-50s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Health-related	PT/TA	Married	3
Kyle	Early-30s	Caucasian	Male	FT	Subject-specific education	PT/TA	Single	0
Lucy	Early-50s	Caucasian	Female	FT	Psychology	PT/GA	Married	2

Data Collection

Within the case, purposeful sampling of information rich participants, doctoral students who had multiple experiences related to wellness that they were willing to share, was employed to develop a broad, descriptive understanding of the case (Patton, 2002). As the participants conceptualized wellness, researchers explored their experience as doctoral students. The ability to achieve and maintain wellness was explored in an effort to contribute to the understanding of the doctoral student experience.

Participants completed two hour-long individual interviews between May and September 2009. The first interview occurred immediately following the completion of the Spring 2009 semester, and the second interview took place during the first full month of the Fall 2009 semester. Varying the times of the academic year during which data collection occurred contributed to the exploration of different issues that occur in the cycle of doctoral education. For instance, the summer may have allowed for more flexibility in students' schedules and less contact with faculty members. Participants were asked to submit at least two journal entries to the researcher via e-mail, one during the summer and another within the first month of the Fall 2009 semester, prior to the final interview. The purpose of journaling was for participants to provide information about their wellness throughout the research process outside of the interview interactions. Journaling also allowed for triangulation of data with the interviews.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis for this study began simultaneously with data collection and was ongoing through the research process (Huberman & Miles, 2001; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Stake, 1995). Data analysis utilized an inductive approach, which is employed in studies where "the terrain is unfamiliar and/or excessively complex, a single case is involved, and the intent is exploratory and descriptive" (Huberman & Miles, 2001, p. 557). Data collected provided commonalities and highlighted significant unique experiences of participants (Mertens, 2005). The transcriptions of the interviews and journal submissions were used for data analysis as the researcher recorded initial findings and themes. In this emergent research design, coding of themes was completed after each interview and receipt of journal entries by the researcher. The process of coding involved bringing participants' similar responses together to create categories and themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

This analysis informed the structure of future interviews. As themes evolved, changes were made to the semi-structured interview protocol to further explore important phenomena. Based on the topics in the interview protocol and the research questions, themes were grouped accordingly to explore doctoral student wellness. Following immersion in the data through comprehensive review of the transcripts and journal entries (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), themes were

developed that reflected the researcher's understanding of the data (Glesne, 2006). This inductive approach to data analysis allowed for the discovering of themes and patterns through the participants' voices (Patton, 2002).

To promote the trustworthiness of this study, member checks occurred during the final interview with each participant, in which the researcher utilized the previous interview and journal data to clarify themes. The initial interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts and participants' journals reviewed prior to the final interviews. By this time, the researcher had amassed the initial experiences of the participants and had topics to seek further clarification and support and/or disconfirm experiences. An expert reviewer, who was a doctoral student and familiar with qualitative research methods, served as a peer reviewer to ensure the themes generated were reasonable given the data collected. Through the use of multiple data sources, interviews and journals, the data were triangulated. Additionally, the use of multiple participants served to triangulate data within the case.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from the data collection and analysis process yielded three themes: (1) transitioning to the academic environment, (2) understanding academic requirements, and (3) stress. An expanded discussion of each theme follows, including quotations from participants.

Transitioning to the Academic Environment

Students transition to doctoral studies in different ways. When discussing their history with wellness as students, the participants frequently noted their transition time as most challenging as they were learning about academic expectations, developing new relationships with peers and faculty members, beginning new jobs or assistantships, and adjusting to a new community and institutional culture.

Socialization is one of the major purposes of doctoral education (Austin, 2002; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). For many participants, moving from the workplace or previous education into their doctoral program was a phase of adjustment. Although adjustments occur throughout doctoral students' educational process, the first year is noted as the most difficult transition (Gardner, 2009; Hockey, 1994), as was supported further by the experience of this study's participants. Participants now consider themselves well, but many felt the transition into life as a doctoral student, including learning new expectations, relationships, and processes, initially challenged their wellness. The participants reflected on their first semester or year and recognized differences in their wellness between then and now.

The transition issues challenging participants' wellness were mainly academic, but because of their views that all areas of wellness are connected, other aspects of wellness were affected by their academic challenges. Dave's main challenge was

moving from a subject-specific master's program to an education-related program, which was writing intensive. As he reflected on his wellness as a doctoral student, he began to consider himself well after completing his first semester of coursework:

I think it was in the first semester, here at least, when I realized, "Wow, if I did school the way I used to do school, this is not going to work." I was waking up at two o'clock in the morning to write papers. And I was underestimating how long some things would take. And I was not really doing the other things. I think that I gained 10 pounds in the first semester.

Similar to Dave's experience, Abigail was challenged to meet the expectations of her writing, which resulted in some angst as she learned her way as a doctoral student:

I think it was surprising; surprising would be the word. I knew it would be a lot of work, and that I expected. But I think I had miscalculated the subjective nature of success. It was just previously, you work hard, you do well. Now, you work hard and you may not always do well. So that was surprising for me. I think my writing skills or my writing voice, my academic voice, being able to read professor's expectations...I probably was not as skilled as I would have liked to have been.

Robin was also challenged in her first semester as she re-entered academia and learned the expectations for her work:

When I decided to go into the doctoral program, it was a real shock my first semester because suddenly I needed to know how to do research papers with APA format, and I needed to do these big projects. I have been taking maximum loads, and every class has a major project and paper. And fortunately I like to write, so that part goes okay.

Choosing to pursue doctoral studies does not equate with a student knowing his or her future line of research. While some of the participants appreciated the opportunity to begin considering their topic early in the process, for others, transitioning to the expectations of doctoral studies provided enough challenge without needing to determine their dissertation topic within the first month of their program. Laura felt less competent and knowledgeable during her first semester of doctoral studies than ever before in her academic career. Because of her feelings, she contemplated leaving the institution. The approach of choosing a dissertation topic early backfired in Laura's experience, making the transition more difficult.

The transition process was not only in the realm of academics but also outside of academics since most doctoral students move from their support systems to pursue their degrees. Leah moved to the city where Armfield University was located, which compounded her stress during the period of transition to academics. After spending the year adjusting to the new city and her life as an on-campus doctoral student, Leah felt that her wellness improved and described her life as "even." Leah did not share which aspects of her experience contributed to her adjustment, but high frequency and quality of peer and faculty interactions with new doctoral

students were found to decrease the number of stressful events for students during their transition (Goplerud, 1980).

Time management is frequently cited as a necessary skill to be successful in doctoral studies. Laura's negative experience and outlook on the program in her first year shows how difficult the transition period can be:

I was thinking about what has changed for me from when I first started my doc program up to now. I feel a lot more well now than I did during my first semester [when] I think I was not really managing my time very well and/or just overwhelmed...I was so wrapped up in the negativity of how I felt about the program that I just was making everything harder than it had to be. So the first year of the program was terrible, and I would say that I was unwell in that all I really did was work, my school teaching job, and then I would read those horrible books.

Ruby also struggled with time management, particularly during the first semester when she was unsure of the time commitment needed to produce strong work. She did not receive adequate advising and thus felt overwhelmed. She had chosen to take four graduate level courses and began her new role as a teaching assistant. After her first-semester struggles, Ruby took three courses and continued teaching, which was more manageable.

Understanding Academic Requirements

Flexibility in program requirements was considered to be a contributor to some participants' wellness as they were able to fulfill their intellectual curiosity with information that interested them. Other participants had a different experience with the academic requirements being unclear, causing stress and a lack of clarity in their progress. One participant felt unsupported in terms of education about program requirements. The unclear requirements lead Ruby to become delayed in her degree completion because she did not take her comprehensive exam when she should have. Ruby acknowledged her responsibility in terms of seeking out information, but as a first-generation graduate student, she did not have family or friends to educate her on processes, procedures, and timelines. Ruby's experience with unclear requirements was also reflected in the literature where graduate students have reported dissatisfaction with the guidance received from faculty (Aspland et al., 1999).

Leah appreciated the published information on courses, requirements, and processes, but found nuances that were unclear. She acknowledged the diversity in terms of student experience, knowledge, and skills, which makes it difficult to provide uniform information in some cases. Her main concern was that she would miss something and have an experience like Ruby, who did not take her comprehensive exam when she could have. By clearly communicating with her advisor as well as with other students in her program, Leah began to understand her program's requirements, which lessened her anxiety.

The timing of the presentation of requirements also presented an issue.

Depending on participants' learning styles and completion timelines, they may desire information at different times. Orientation programs for graduate students must be developmentally appropriate and address their current concerns, as opposed to explaining information students may not immediately need (Gardner, 2009). Receiving information too early can challenge students' emotional wellness as they begin to worry about components of their program that may be a few years in the future. Understanding where students are and asking them about their readiness for information may prevent anxiety from students who desire more information early on as well as from those who prefer not to be bombarded with information they will not use for some years.

Laura recalled her experience with receiving information at the beginning of her program when her faculty discussed their course matrix and plan of study. Because she was already overwhelmed by the coursework expectations for the first semester, which involved extensive reading and writing, Laura could not concentrate on the additional programmatic information. She desired the program-related information at a different time, but because it was previously discussed, she had to seek out information on her own. As Laura reflected on her process of obtaining information about her program, she understood the approach of the faculty members:

I think it is that transition of "Oh, that is what they were talking about," now looking back. It was like, "O.K., now I see what you were trying to do," and it is making sense now, whereas it made no sense then.

Cassie also shared her frustration over the dissemination of information. She reflected, "There are a ton of procedures in the graduate school. You just kind of find out about them the hard way, or at least in our department."

The lack of uniformity in doctoral student advising, which is related to the experiences with unclear academic requirements of participants discussed above, is a continuing issue in doctoral education as it was previously documented in a study conducted more than 10 years ago (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). The quality of information and guidance provided through the advisor-advisee relationship contribute to student satisfaction, professional development opportunities, and socialization (Lovitts, 2001).

Stress

Stress, an inhibitor to participants' emotional wellness, was a common experience of doctoral students in several studies (Goplerud, 1980; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Hyun et al., 2006; Moyer, Salovey, & Casey-Cannon, 1999). The common structure of academia is characterized by large, semester-long projects with due dates at the end of the term. As many participants mentioned issues with procrastination, stress often accompanied deadlines. Particularly at the conclusion of the first few semesters, participants were challenged in their maintenance of wellness. Since they completed at least two semesters of coursework at the time of data collection, participants were able to reflect on their feelings of stress and ways

in which they overcame it.

As a student taking an overload of classes, Robin's stress stemmed from the number of assignments and amount of reading she needed to complete to be fully prepared for her classes. To reduce her stress, Robin was diligent about remaining current with her work and not allowing herself to get behind. Regardless of her diligence, at the end of both her first and second semesters of coursework, Robin shared with her advisor how she began to doubt her ability to complete her work. After working with her for the year, Robin's advisor shared the observation that she allowed stress to overcome her at the end of each semester. According to Robin, her advisor's view allowed her to "disconnect from the stress and make a conscious decision not to worry about how it gets done." Robin's approach to handling end-of-semester stress is one she plans to employ through the rest of her doctoral career:

I will take each assignment as it comes, and that was a really positive move that I took when I was feeling a challenge. But the biggest challenge of my doctoral experience has been that stress over getting everything done.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings highlight the experience of doctoral students who remained well through their studies. Participants' perspectives of wellness, as well as the successes and challenges they faced as students, provide considerations for improvements within doctoral education, which begins with students' transition to their new role as doctoral students.

One of the most applicable recommendations for addressing many of the concerns presented by participants is the creation for improved support systems for doctoral students. While most offices and departments seeking to assist students on university campuses are developed to meet undergraduate student needs, calls for programs designed with doctoral student needs at the forefront are becoming more prominent. A recommendation made by Guentzel and Nesheim (2006) included the suggestion of a "safe or neutral space" for graduate students to explore experiences beyond those supported by their academic faculty, including identity issues and alternative careers (p. 102).

Among the many responsibilities this entity could fulfill include advising the graduate student government organization; coordinating teaching assistant workshops; providing career development advising and job search skills sessions; gathering and disseminating information on financial aid, scholarship, and grant opportunities; hosting a graduate student orientation; and coordinating student support groups, such as writing groups, support groups for students with families, and groups for older doctoral students. Additionally, this type of support structure could serve in an advocacy role on decision-making bodies within the university to ensure graduate student needs are considered. Most importantly, as participants referenced challenges with unclear academic requirements and relationships with faculty members, this office could serve as a confidential resource for doctoral students to problem solve and process their feelings, experiences, and decisions.

Overall, such support systems could assist students in navigating both academic and personal challenges in their education, which may help alleviate graduate students' feelings of confusion, isolation, and loneliness.

Doctoral students beginning a new educational experience may feel confused and anxious similar to when they began their undergraduate careers (Rosenblatt & Christensen, 1993). Considering that over one-third of doctoral student attrition occurs during the first year of study, orientation could be important for students' successful transition, thus promoting retention (Gardner, 2009). Orientation programs for undergraduate students have been cited as improving retention rates from their first to second year, as well as yielding higher graduation rates overall (Kuh, 2001). While doctoral students' needs differ from the undergraduate students with whom they share campus resources, participation in orientation could have similar positive effects on doctoral students. Orientation fulfills a component of the socialization process as students begin to learn about the expectations and culture of doctoral education (Poock, 2004; Weidman et al., 2001). Doctoral students, as seen in the participant demographics of this study, come to degree programs at different times of their lives and with various educational histories and life circumstances. The needs of each student are unique, but an orientation to the institution, doctoral education, and their peer and faculty communities could prove invaluable by building a strong foundation upon which to begin their studies.

In terms of structure, participants' concerns about receiving information too early and feeling overwhelmed should be considered. Doctoral student orientation programs should be cognizant of the difference between information necessary for students to successfully begin their coursework and information they can receive once they are established students. Gardner (2009) suggested that providing information related to immediate concerns is developmentally appropriate, as opposed to bombarding students with information needed to graduate, which could be three to eight years in the future.

Additionally, as participants indicated, peer and faculty relationships are integral to their academic success and social wellness. Therefore, providing opportunities for doctoral students to begin developing relationships with both peers and faculty members during orientation is important (Gardner, 2009). Since participants seek peer connections, developing a strong community within cohorts and with students more advanced in their degree progress can support students' social wellness. Peer relationships often provide emotional support in challenging times, which may promote students' emotional wellness.

The doctoral student experience is frequently separated into three distinct phases: entry, integration, and candidacy (Gardner, 2009). Ten of the 12 participants had not yet reached candidacy, and wellness specifically in regards to the stage within their degree progress was not explored. Future research should consider doctoral student participants' academic progress in their wellness efforts. As Gardner discussed, students experience different challenges in each phase, thus calling for an understanding of wellness during these unique times.

Given faculty members' close contact with doctoral students throughout

their degree program, their perspectives of the needs of new doctoral students should be explored. The orientation and transition practices established at various institutions should be assessed to determine their ultimate effectiveness and influence on doctoral student retention rates.

Conclusion

Several recommendations for both research and practice have been presented from this study to contribute to the successful transition of doctoral students into their academic programs, with the ultimate goal of seeing them complete their degree aspirations. The recommendations for practice include suggestions for university academic and student affairs leadership, faculty members, and students themselves. Additional studies are warranted as the doctoral student experience is multi-faceted and continuing to evolve and expand.

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