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# Voices of well doctoral students: a case study exploration into the possibilities of academic and personal success

Patricia Anne Witkowsky

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

VOICES OF WELL DOCTORAL STUDENTS:  
A CASE STUDY EXPLORATION INTO  
THE POSSIBILITIES OF ACADEMIC  
AND PERSONAL SUCCESS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of 12 self-identified well doctoral students at a mid-size, western university in the U.S. to develop an understanding of the positive approaches doctoral students take to their academic pursuits. With an attrition rate of up to 50 percent in doctoral education, exploring areas of success through the lens of wellness may contribute to retention efforts. Data were collected through two semi-structured individual interviews and two journal entries yielding descriptions of the participants' personal and academic backgrounds, as well as their views of and experiences with wellness. The themes that emerged from the participants include: the negative narrative of doctoral studies, remaining well through non-academic and academic challenges, structural and interpersonal components of doctoral education and their influence on wellness, students' conscious approach to wellness, and how participants will pursue wellness following graduation. Implications for future research and recommendations for student and academic affairs leadership, faculty, and current and future doctoral students are presented.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In 2007, approximately 375,000 doctoral students were enrolled in the United States' 419 doctoral degree-granting institutions (Nerad, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). More than 40,000 doctoral degrees are granted each year making the U.S. the highest producer of doctorates of any country in the world (Nerad; Walker Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). Of the 42,155 degrees granted in 2004, 8,819 were in life science, followed by 6,795 in social sciences, 6,635 in education, 6,049 in physical sciences, 5,776 in mathematics and engineering, 5,476 in humanities, and 2,614 in business and other professional fields (Nerad). Not only does the American system educate its own citizens, but it further impacts the global economy through the training of international students. These numbers are evidence of the massive enterprise of doctoral education in the U.S.

One of the major purposes of doctoral education in the United States is to provide an educated citizenry and group of professionals prepared to address complex social, economic, and environmental issues (Bair & Haworth, 1999; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Walker et al., 2008). To achieve this purpose, the overarching goal of doctoral education is socialization into graduate school and its associated academic demands and expectations and eventually, socialization into a professional role (Austin, 2002;

Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). However, with attrition rates approaching 50 percent (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Lovitts, 2001; Walker et al., 2008), neither the purpose nor goal of doctoral education, which is to prepare professionals to serve society through educating others and addressing issues, is being realized. If institutions are not addressing the departure of nearly one half of the doctoral students who begin their programs, they are then ignoring the implications for students and their families, faculty members who serve as advisors and mentors, universities, and the global workforce as educated individuals may not be present to address complex challenges (Gardner, 2009a).

Despite the presence of doctoral students on American university campuses since the mid-1800s, exploration of their development has been under-studied for a variety of reasons. Beyond the assumption that doctoral students are self-sufficient and not needing of support, is the perception by some faculty and administrators of doctoral students as colleagues and not students themselves (Gardner, 2009a). Doctoral students serve in teaching, research, and administrative assistantships where they are given a great deal of responsibility and thus may not be seen as students. Doctoral students are also an extremely diverse population, representing a large span of age, life circumstances, and demographic characteristics (Gardner). This variety challenges the development of theories to explain behaviors and experiences of doctoral students. Finally, the study of doctoral education is relatively new and thus the exploration of student development within the structure of doctoral education is continually emerging (Gardner).

Although research has sought to explain students' departure (Gardner, 2009b; Lovitts, 2001), the trend continues and new approaches to exploring the doctoral student

experience are needed. By understanding doctoral student development, retention and satisfaction issues can be addressed to potentially avoid the expense of attrition, the impact on society when fewer educated leaders are prepared to address societal needs, and the personal impact on students who do not persist (Gardner, 2009a). This research will utilize the concept of wellness to explore the experience of doctoral students who are thriving in all areas of their lives, not only academics.

Doctoral education frequently focuses on students' cognitive abilities, socialization into being a graduate student, and future professional responsibilities, but fails to address other developmental aspects of their experience (Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006). A common assumption is "that the graduate student is completely self-aware and entirely developed upon entering graduate school" (Gardner, 2009a, p. 4). However, development is a lifelong process and it could be argued that development is enhanced when students decide to pursue their doctoral degree because of its numerous challenges. Development does not only occur during students' four years as undergraduates but rather continues through their life-span (Gardner, 2009a), and can "extend beyond the undergraduate environment and be applied to students pursuing graduate and professional education" (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006, p. 19). Additionally, doctoral students' cognitive development "affects [their] interpersonal and psychosocial development as well" (Gansemer-Topf et al., p. 25) because "the concepts of learning, personal development, and student development are inseparable" (Pruitt-Logan & Isaac, 1995, p. 124). With the majority of the responsibility for doctoral students placed on faculty members who are generally not trained in developing the whole person,

oftentimes non-cognitive developmental issues are not addressed in the cognitive-focused environment of doctoral education (Pontius & Harper, 2006).

Calls for understanding how doctoral education affects students (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006), how students manage multiple roles (Anderson & Swazey; Brus, 2006; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Polson, 2003; Pontius & Harper, 2006), and the types of developmental processes they experience (Gardner, 2009a; Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006) are increasing. Many agree transformation from student to scholar is the purpose of doctoral education (Austin, 2002; Weidman et al., 2001), but a newer perspective includes the idea that “the process of transformation ...influences much more than one’s professional preparation; it also entails the development of the whole self” (Gardner, 2009a, p. 7). Doctoral students experience a new environment when they begin their programs and developmental issues may re-occur (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Gardner (2009a) presented an approach to understanding the ways in which doctoral students change, grow, and becomes more complex individuals as a result of their experience in doctoral education. The theory of doctoral student development involves the psychosocial, cognitive, and social identity development occurring as a result of the challenges and subsequent support students experience in doctoral education (Gardner). This model explores three phases of the doctoral student experience, entry, integration, and candidacy, and their associated challenges to understand the types of psychosocial and cognitive developmental issues students face. Social identity development serves as an overarching process throughout all phases of doctoral education (Gardner).

In order to help doctoral students negotiate their often complex lives, it is of particular importance for doctoral students to continue to “explore identities and experiences beyond their department or discipline” (Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006, p. 102) as they negotiate the challenges of doctoral work. Considering the recent changes and diversification of the doctoral student population, continuing to avoid students’ developmental issues may only further exacerbate already high attrition rates. For example, if underrepresented students do not have the opportunity to process an experience with an unwelcoming academic environment, they may decide to leave the program. Self-esteem and self-confidence issues may also arise in the academic world of high achievers (Gardner, 2009a). Addressing and emphasizing the social and emotional developmental needs of doctoral students is necessary to contribute to their success in their doctoral pursuits and their future work as faculty members in higher education or professionals in the workforce (Lawson, Venart, Hazler, & Kottler, 2007).

Although doctoral education has been studied since the middle of the twentieth century (Bieber & Worley, 2006), attention to doctoral education has heightened in the past 15 years as the need for a highly educated work force has increased (Walker et al., 2008). In comparison to the research and practical focus dedicated to the undergraduate student experience at higher education institutions across the nation (Boyer, 1990; Cheatham & Phelps, 1995), research on the doctoral student population and experience is scarce and long overdue (Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Haworth, 1996; Isaac, Pruitt-Logan, & Upcraft, 1995).

As has been the approach to much research, studies addressing the doctoral student experience have also taken a deficit approach by focusing on what is missing and



negative in the student experience as opposed to areas of success. Wellness will be the lens through which the doctoral student experience is explored.

Wellness is a well-known construct in popular culture through television shows and books devoted to the topic and higher education as a developmental model to holistically address the various dimensions of students' lives. While multiple definitions of wellness have been published and are discussed in the next chapter, wellness generally encompasses thriving in physical, social, emotional, occupational, intellectual, and spiritual arenas of one's life (Hettler, 1980). Wellness is a social construct 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, wellness, while encompassing many of the principles of balance, including fulfilling various needs, seems to provide more individuation. Wellness is seen as a process and not all areas will be in equal balance at all times. Rather, the individual can determine how they experience wellness in their life. As such, this study sought to explore the positive side of doctoral education, how wellness is experienced in the lives of doctoral students, and how their sense of and continual focus on wellness influences their degree completion.

#### Definitions and Scope

Prior to further discussion of doctoral education, it is necessary to provide the boundaries for this research. As research and recommendations are presented, the term *doctorate* includes 24 types of doctoral degrees, such as the Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.), Doctorate of Fine Arts (DFA), Doctorate of Engineering (DEng), and Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.), but does not extend to medical doctorates or doctorates of

jurisprudence (Nerad, 2007). Confounding the understanding of the doctoral student experience, much of the current research combines master's degree and professional students with the doctoral student population under the umbrella term of *graduate student*. In an effort to appropriately present the research on doctoral students in the literature review, the term graduate student is used when all three populations (master's, professional students, and doctoral students) are included in the study. However, when studies specifically focus on doctoral students, the term *doctoral student* is employed.

Although concerns of master's degree students are sometimes similar to those of doctoral students, it is necessary to focus on the doctoral student experience because of the differing nature of doctoral education and subsequently higher attrition rates (Isaac et al., 1995; Pontius & Harper, 2006). Ways in which the nature of the doctoral student experience is distinguished from masters' or professional students' experiences are further explored in the Literature Review.

#### Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Attrition is frequently focused on those who did not persist, but as Lovitts (2001) suggests, "it is true that 50 percent of those who enter doctoral programs leave before completing the Ph.D., it is also true that 50 percent do achieve it" (p. 39). Among the multitude of research approaches available, a constructivist case study approach is employed because it allows for exploration into the multi-faceted lives of doctoral students without confining them to one measurement of wellness. As wellness is a relatively unexplored phenomenon with the doctoral student population, constructivist, case study research provides the ability to develop relationships with participants and

probe further into their experience through attempting to understand the complexities of their lives (Stake, 1995).

The purpose of this constructivist case study is to contribute to the gap in the literature of the doctoral student experience by exploring the meaning well doctoral students make of their lived experience at a mid-sized western university in the U.S. Only one study discussed earlier (Gardner, 2009a) explored doctoral student development specifically. 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 guide this study:

- Q1 How do doctoral students make meaning of wellness as they pursue their doctoral degree?
- Q2 How do doctoral students pursue wellness in their degree program?
- Q3 How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' sense of wellness?
- Q4 How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' ability to pursue wellness?
- Q5 How do doctoral students' choices around wellness influence their academic pursuits?

#### Significance of the Study

Calls for additional research on individual, institutional, and departmental aspects of doctoral education abound as accountability for attrition rates increases and the demand for a competitive work force remain paramount (Baird, 1993; Haworth, 1996;

Pontius & Harper, 2006). Specifically, research on the developmental issues facing doctoral students is needed given the lack of attention paid to it and its potential influence on attrition rates. Doctoral students' cognitive development is most often the focus, but "change and growth in one area of the self...affects students' interpersonal and psychosocial development as well" (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). Failing to understand the holistic nature of the doctoral student experience assumes aspects other than their cognitive development are unimportant when in fact understanding the non-academic component of their experiences can inform the academic one.

A majority of doctoral students' time is spent outside of the classroom engaging in full-time employment or graduate teaching, research, or administrative work (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). Doctoral students also possess additional time beyond their academic responsibilities, which should be explored to better understand the entirety of the life as a doctoral student and how it may influence the academic component. Research on graduate education has been focused on the "cognitive development of students—the life of the mind—while often neglecting the psychosocial needs of students" (Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006, pp. 102-103). A more holistic understanding of the doctoral student experience could enhance the overall approach to doctoral education and contribute to improving attrition. Not all doctoral students complete their degrees and "factors beyond [institutions'] control in the lives of graduate students will bear in significant ways on whether or how quickly they complete their programs" (Lipshutz, 2003, p. 79). It is unclear how the non-academic component of doctoral students' lives contributes to or detracts from their degree attainment, but "it behooves us to treat

graduate students as whole persons and work with them to view the student experience holistically” (Gansemer-Topf, et al., 2006, p. 28).

As high attrition rates for doctoral students continue and the pressures on faculty members to teach, serve, and produce scholarship increase (Boyer, 1990; Isaac et al., 1995), supporting doctoral students may begin to more commonly be the responsibility of student affairs administrators. Developing the whole student should remain the philosophy for working with this population and the concept of wellness is an area to consider when seeking improved retention and ensuring the academic experience is not an all-encompassing one resulting in neglect of other areas of students’ lives (Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004).

Because “graduate schools have the potential to foster the development of individuals who reach for their potential in all aspects of their lives” (Longfield, Romas, & Irwin, 2006, p. 291), doctoral student development has implications for faculty, student affairs professionals, and students themselves. The retention of doctoral students remains critical for the training of faculty and the development of leaders in public and private sectors. The complex nature of the lives of doctoral students combined with the intensity of doctoral education calls for a holistic understanding of their experience of the non-academic component of doctoral education.

The findings of this study have implications for students who seek to find balance in their oftentimes overwhelming lives as doctoral students. The lessons learned from the study’s participants may influence doctoral students’ approach to their academic life. Additionally, faculty members who work closely with doctoral students may find value in understanding how to contribute to their students’ holistic success when they face

challenges by promoting a well lifestyle of balance. Finally, student affairs professionals who are frequently separated from the lives of doctoral students because of their undergraduate focus and academic silos in which doctoral students live can understand the importance of promoting wellness and balance in this often ignored student population.

### Researcher Perspective

#### *My Experience*

Since beginning my educational career in 1983, I cannot remember a time when my education was not at the forefront of my life. Throughout my schooling, I was intensely involved in being academically successful and involved in co-curricular activities. I consider myself a life-long learner who enjoys new experiences; however, if I did not take care of myself, I would not be able to enjoy all that life had to offer for as long as I had hoped. While my involvement and education has readied me to work towards a doctoral degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership, I cannot say that I considered my health and well-being before focusing on it during my full-time position at Colorado College.

During my first professional position following my master's degree, for one of the first times in my life, I found time to concentrate on myself and my non-academic needs. Being overweight and relatively sedentary, a colleague approached me about joining the at-work Weight Watchers meeting with her the following Monday. I still remember that phone conversation and am so grateful to her for thinking of me. Extremely skeptical of the program, we learned the Weight Watchers way and with that I began my first "diet."

One year later and 60 pounds lighter, I had reduced my high cholesterol level, become more active, and realized that health and wellness were necessary to live a long, happy life. After working for two more years and then beginning my doctoral degree, I knew that I wanted to continue my healthy lifestyle. Ph.D. programs are often characterized as stressful, intense, and never-ending. I decided to continue the choices toward wellness I made as a professional as I pursued my Ph.D. While this was not always easy given the multiple roles I had as a student, employee, and emerging professional and researcher, I continually made it a priority. As I began my coursework, I met more doctoral students and it became clear that developing and maintaining wellness while a student is challenging. This constant struggle of Ph.D. students sparked my interest in understanding the well-being and balance in their lives.

I have been fortunate not to encounter many roadblocks through my doctoral journey. I set forth clear priorities for myself and attempted to adhere to them when I was placed in a position of making decisions about how to use my limited amount of time and energy. Two equally important priorities are the completion of requirements toward my Ph.D. and the growth of my relationship with my partner. My next most important goal was to remain healthy through proper diet and exercise. Finally, I sought financial responsibility and maintained a strict budget throughout my educational pursuits. When conflicts arose around any of these issues, my priorities assisted in my decision-making process.

To further explore my sense of wellness as a doctoral student, I employed Hettler's (1980) model, which defines wellness through six dimensions: intellectual, emotional, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual. As is required to be successful as

a doctoral student, I spent a majority of my time and energy attending to the intellectual and occupational components of my wellness. Through coursework and research, I was consistently gaining new knowledge and participating in learning on a daily basis. I consider my degree program as preparation for my future career and spent approximately 25 hours a week working in my graduate assistantship and as an academic advisor. I have been fulfilled in my work with both faculty and students through these roles. Physically, I have maintained an exercise routine and completed a half-marathon in the September of my second year of coursework and a full marathon during the fall of my third year. I continued to maintain healthy eating habits and worked part-time at Weight Watchers to further my commitment to maintenance of a healthy weight. I have been fortunate to have a stable and healthy emotional life, which has continued as a student.

Despite common stresses of the doctoral program, my wellness and success in other areas of my life have kept me grounded. As a self-aware person, I was able to address concerns by taking the required action to make myself feel better. Socially, by focusing on my work during work time and social aspects when given the opportunity to spend time with my significant other and friends, I do not feel like I am neglecting either area. I work in social environments, and although they are connected to other purposes such as work and class, I have developed relationships with people and consider that time as fulfilling my social needs. As I reflect on the spiritual aspect of my wellness, although I do not attend to it as much as the other areas, I do not feel it is neglected. Although I consider my purpose in life and desire to have the best life possible which guides my actions, spirituality, as many others would define it, has not been a major component of my life.



*View of Wellness*

Wellness can be a loaded term as it is likely that most people would like to consider themselves well. Although I have strived to remain well through my academic work, my experience with wellness is different from others' experiences. It is not my belief that there is one way to experience wellness and by no means do I intend to prescribe one way to "be well." Rather, wellness is an individual experience and was defined and experienced differently by each of this study's participants. Additionally, I see wellness as a process; while one may feel they are, for the most part, well, I do not believe wellness can be achieved and maintained at all times. For me, wellness is a constant struggle as I negotiate different areas of my life described above, and I hope to learn from others, not only the positive aspects of their wellness, but also where they face challenges and how they are able to overcome them.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

One reason was expressed commonly by the leavers in all four of the departments. This was the dawning realization that the life of a graduate student, which could encompass the next half-dozen years of their life, and the life of a young faculty member were characterized by a single-mindedness of purpose and an all-consuming lifestyle that they did not want to embrace. (Golde, 1998, p. 57)

Completing the requirements of the doctorate, coursework, comprehensive or qualifying exams, the dissertation prospectus, and the dissertation (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; Nerad, 2007; Walker et al., 2008), are challenging in their own right without the time and energy needed to deal with other aspects of life. Golde's (1998) study of students who did not persist to graduation demonstrates the common view of graduate work as a life with time only for academic pursuits. The characterization of the "downtrodden doctoral student," the "prevalence of distress among doctoral students," and one study's finding that "nearly a third of our respondents agreed with the statement that graduate school was changing them in ways they did not like" provide impetus for a holistic exploration of the doctoral student experience (Anderson & Swazey, p. 8).

Research on the doctoral student experience has been primarily focused on student attrition and persistence, learning experiences, socialization, and programmatic interventions (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, &

Turrentine, 2006). However, this research has failed to explore what is happening outside of the educational sphere and how doctoral students make meaning of their experience (Gardner, 2009a). Because “faculty and students acknowledge that graduate work, particularly doctoral training, has a tremendous effect on one’s sense of self..., literature is beginning to underscore the importance of the personal dimensions of the experience” (Johnsrud, 1995, p. 75).

Among the many goals of higher education is that of developing the whole person (American Council for Education, 1937, 1949; Hermon & Davis, 2004; Stratton, Mielke, Kirshenbaum, Goodrich, & McRae, 2006; Warner, 1984), but much of the literature on the experience of doctoral students discusses the stress-provoking nature of the experience (Goplerud, 1980; Kenty, 2000; Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001; Valdez, 1982) or provides ways to enhance the academic component of the experience (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Moyer, Salovey, & Casey-Cannon, 1999; Nesheim, et al., 2006). While traditional theories of student development are not directly applicable to doctoral students given their older age and life experiences, Super’s (1980) life-span developmental perspective gave rise to student development theories and may be applied to doctoral students. Super “assumes that the potential for development extends throughout the life span,” which supports the need to focus on all aspects of human development during the doctoral student experience (Sugarman, 1986, p. 2). Both life span development and student development theories come from research rooted in psychological, sociological, and educational perspectives (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). A common approach to student development in higher education involves wellness models. Doctoral student development can be explored using wellness as a developmental concept. However, in

comparison to the wellness experience of undergraduate students, research and campus resources devoted to the doctoral student experience are not well-explored or supported (Peters, 1997; Stratton, et al.). The overarching nature of wellness can influence a student's experience, making it a worthwhile topic to explore.

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the historical influences on doctoral education and specifically doctoral student wellness in higher education. The academic and co-curricular experience of doctoral students is discussed to understand the nature of students' overall experience. Finally, definitions and characteristics of wellness are presented to build a foundation for this concept, as well as the ways in which undergraduate and graduate student wellness has been studied within higher education.

#### Current State of Doctoral Education

To understand the experience of doctoral students, an explanation of the state of doctoral education will be presented. First, the historical perspective provides background on how current educational structures began. The process of socialization, a major purpose of doctoral education, will be explored. Finally, attrition concerns and shifting doctoral student demographics will describe current areas requiring attention in doctoral education.

#### *Historical Perspective of Doctoral Education*

Doctoral education is characterized by massive growth, which continues today. Since 1900, the number of doctorates granted has increased more than a thousand-fold, from 382 graduates from 25 universities at the turn of the twentieth century to over 40,000 graduates from 406 institutions at the turn of the twenty-first century (Walker et al., 2008). Table 1, replicated from Walker et al. (p. 20), presents the growth in doctoral

education. Walker et al. described the history of doctoral education in five stages, establishment, expansion and link with funded research, retrenchment and innovation, diversification and fragmentation, and finally the current stage of reform.

Table 1

*Number of Doctorates Awarded, 1900-2000*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of doctorates granted</b>	<b>Number of doctorate-granting universities</b>	<b>PhD's per thousand BA's granted</b>
1900	382	25	9.1
1920	562	44	12.6
1940	3,277	90	17.6
1960	9,733	165	25
1980	31,020	320	35.1
2000	41,368	406	36.2

*Note.* From *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century* (p. 20) by Walker et al., 2008, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Throughout the 150 year history of doctoral education in the U.S., many influences, changes, and developments have created its current state and areas of concern (Isaac et al., 1995). Change is a constant in higher education (Walker et al., 2008) and doctoral education is not immune. A review of the history of doctoral education provides insight to our understanding of the current experiences of doctoral students. Knowing how doctoral education in the U.S. began may contribute to guiding its future as it allows us to make sense of the current structure. Beginning in Europe, and mainly Germany, doctoral education did not exist in the U.S. until the mid-1800s with the first three U.S. doctorates awarded by Yale University's Graduate School of Arts in 1861 (Walker et al.; Yale University, 2009). Not until Johns Hopkins University opened in 1876 did what is now known as the U.S. model of the doctorate begin to take shape (Walker et al.). As the U.S. model solidified, the number of institutions granting doctorates grew from 44 in

1920 to almost 100 by the end of the 1930s (Walker et al.). Since then, doctoral education in the U.S. has continued to expand and be influenced by societal changes.

Just as undergraduate education expanded following World War II, the adoption of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, and increasing numbers of baby boomers attending college in the 1960s, doctoral education also grew (Boyer, 1990; Walker et al., 2008). Financially, graduate education was flooded with federal funding from legislation, such as the post-Sputnik National Defense Education Act in the 1960s (Isaac et al., 1995; Walker et al.). The well-known practice of doctoral education's federally-funded research for faculty and students and reduced teaching loads to accommodate research began during this time in response to national needs (Boyer). One of the outcomes, however, was increased time to degree for students who were assuming research and teaching assistantship positions (Walker et al.). A period of slowed growth in doctoral education occurred in the 1970s after its previous rapid expansion. Funding for research and design from federal sources decreased because of the recessions of 1970 and 1974. Additionally, deferments from the military draft ceased in 1968 causing the number of degrees granted in 1974 (34,000) to decrease to 33,000 in 1984 (Walker et al.). Fortunately, expansion resumed in the early 1980s with new programs and an increased student population (Syverson, 1996; Walker et al.).

The final decade of the twentieth century saw economic, political, and social movements influence the state of doctoral education (Isaac et al., 1995). The conclusion of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, increased competition from Asian economic markets, the movement of the U.S. from an industrialized economy to "a knowledge-based economy" (Syverson, 1996, p. 18), and growing numbers of women in

the professional work force contributed to heightened demand for doctoral education from both students and employers. This resulted in the number of degrees granted to increase to over 40,000 in 1994 (Syverson).

The major change beginning in the 1980s and continuing today is the diversification of the doctoral student population in terms of race, gender, age, and nationality (Brus, 2006; Syverson, 1996; Walker et al., 2008). Although statistics are not available for racial diversity in doctorate recipients until 1980, the number degree recipients more than doubled from 2,575 students of color in 1980 to 6,660 in the year 2000 (Walker et al.). Women have seen the largest gain from 1,041 female degree recipients in 1960 to 18,120 in 2000 (Walker et al.). Finally, international student degree recipients have increased from 1,236 in 1960 to 13,485 in 2000 (Walker et al.). Clearly, the doctoral student population has become markedly diversified over the past 50 years though representation of degree recipients remains unmatched with the percentages of non-majority people in the general population.

### *Socialization*

Doctoral education frequently uses a three-stage model (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2009a). The first year represents the first stage and is characterized by entry and adjustment into the role of a doctoral student. The second stage is the time for students to develop competence, which continues through their coursework, comprehensive or qualifying examination, and the dissertation proposal. Finally, the last stage encompasses the process of completing the dissertation (Bowen & Rudenstine). In addition to the tangible requirements needed to achieve a doctoral degree, a major purpose of doctoral education is for students to participate in the developmental process

of socialization into their future profession, whether inside or outside of academia (Gardner, Hayes, & Neider, 2007; Golde, 1998; Nesheim et al., 2006; Polson, 2003; Poock, 2004; Walker et al., 2008; Weidman et al., 2001).

Socialization in doctoral education is two-fold; students are first socialized into the role of a doctoral student and as they progress through their degree, into the roles and responsibilities of a future professional (Weidman et al., 2001). This dual socialization process whereby doctoral students become acclimated into the role of a student and then the role of a professional scholar is necessary for doctoral students' success in their education and afterward as it entails understanding the values of academic life from the point of view of a student and the values of their future profession (Weidman et al.). In their monograph on socialization of graduate and professional students in higher education, Weidman et al. offered an extensive discussion of the definition of professionals in society and the characteristics, dimensions, and various frameworks of socialization.

The socialization framework of Van Maanen and Schein (1979) has been applied to graduate student socialization (Tierney & Rhoads, 1994) and can be defined as "the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society" (Brim, 1966, p. 3). Another definition of socialization is that it is "a subconscious process whereby persons internalize behavioral norms and standards and form a sense of identity and commitment to a professional field" (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 6). Thirty years ago, Van Maanen and Schein argued that what happens to a person in an organization was rarely explored. The purpose of organizational socialization is to teach newcomers of an organization how "to see the



organizational world as do their more experienced colleagues if the traditions of the organization are to survive” (Van Maanen & Schein, p. 211). Weidman et al. provided examples of how Van Maanen and Schein’s six dimensions of socialization, collective versus individual, formal versus informal, sequential versus variable, fixed versus variable, serial versus disjunctive, and investiture versus divestiture, are applicable to the graduate student experience. Practically, socialization has been associated with a successful doctoral student experience (Turner & Thompson, 1993) and includes orientation (Gardner, 2009a; Poock, 2004), research and teaching assistantship experiences (Austin, 2002), and interaction with peers and faculty (Weidman et al.).

Egan (1989) presented an alternate view of socialization, seeing it not as a “gradual, benign, well-intentioned developmental process” (p. 200), but rather a re-socialization because of the intent of socializing graduate students into a profession. While only discussing the socialization of graduate students intending to pursue teaching positions in academia, Egan argues that the purpose of socialization in graduate education is “to provide students with an entirely new, currently lacking professional self-image and scholarly world view, altering the past rather than merely building on it” (p. 201). The difference between socialization in earlier levels of education and in graduate education is that the intended outcome is not only educating the students, but producing “a new and different person, one with a transformed, professional self-concept” (p. 201). In her theoretical discussion of re-socialization, Egan argued that the structural process through which re-socialization occurs may negatively influence students’ self-concept. Weidman et al. (2001) also recognized that socialization looks different for students of color, women, and international students in doctoral education.

*Socialization of non-academic track professionals.* The initial purpose of doctoral education to socialize students to become future professors has expanded to include preparing those with Ph.D.'s to become professionals and work in other fields (Austin, 2002; Isaac et al., 1995; Lovitts, 2001; Polson, 2003; Walker et al., 2008) to meet the needs of a knowledge-based economy (Haworth, 1996; Syverson, 1996). Better trained workers are needed to address pressing, complex social issues (Zohar, 1997), including globalization, climate change, and economic challenges, to name a few, and doctoral education can provide the necessary training. With this change comes an increase in external pressures on doctoral education, which is to be expected in this era of connectedness where training of professionals influences economic and social spheres (Allen & Cherrey, 2000; Love & Estanek, 2006; Walker et al.). The traditional idea of socializing students to pursue academic position must be expanded to meet the diverse professional goals of doctoral students (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). Weidman et al. (2001) recognize that socialization must be broadened as their monograph explores socialization into a profession, not only the teaching profession.

*Socialization and technology-delivered education.* Both the increase in doctoral students pursuing their degree part-time and the influx of non-degree students seeking professional development in doctoral level classes has placed demand on online course offerings (Isaac et al., 1995; Weidman et al., 2001). However, the ability for online courses to address the developmental socialization process is under question (Syverson, 1996; Weidman et al.). Given that a major stated purpose of doctoral education is socialization, delivery of doctoral education online has the potential to alter one of its long-standing purposes if socialization is not intentionally included in online degrees.

Many doctoral programs are beginning to implement the use of technology, whereas others continue to value the traditional in-class approach to learning.

### *Attrition*

An overlying concern of doctoral education is the high rate of attrition (Lovitts, 2001). Given the three stages of doctoral education previously discussed, of the 50 percent attrition rate (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Golde, 2005), one-third of students leave during or after their coursework, another third depart before completing their dissertation proposal, and the last third do not finish the dissertation (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2009a; Walker et al., 2008). While some attrition is to be expected considering the challenging nature of the doctorate and that the median time to degree is eight years (Nerad, 2007), failing to retain almost half of the students who begin doctoral work is a major concern.

Changes in U.S. doctoral education, including its expansion and increased time to degree, contribute to its success and global notoriety, but have also laid the groundwork for high rates of attrition. Time to degree has significantly increased from two years in 1861 (Walker et al.) to a median of eight with the teaching and research assistant responsibilities associated with the doctorate (Isaac et al., 1995; Nerad, 2007). Given the high emotional and financial costs associated with recruiting, admitting, teaching, socializing, and employing doctoral students (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Lovitts; Malone et al., 2004; Nesheim et al., 2006), completion rates are likely to come under question, making it “in the interest of the student, the institution, and society as a whole for the percentage of students completing their doctoral degree to increase” (Lipshutz, 2003, p. 79).

Placing the onus of responsibility on the student for not completing their degree is a common starting point when discussing retention issues (Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001). It is frequently assumed that students who leave the ivory tower were academically ill-prepared for the rigor of doctoral work (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006; Malone et al., 2004). However, what the student has or does not have in terms of cognitive ability does not determine their success (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). Rather, “the organizational culture of graduate school, the structure and process of graduate education” (Lovitts, p. 2), “student frustration with academic policies and procedures, student disappointment with program offerings and faculty advising, and student experiences with an inhospitable department climate” (Haworth, 1996, p. 94) are more likely the cause. Focusing on students’ aptitude detracts from trying to understand what is happening to students in doctoral education that leads to their departure (Lovitts). More attention should be placed on what students are experiencing both academically and non-academically that is contributing to their departure (Golde).

Because of the need for doctoral graduates in the workforce and the extensive resources used to train them, it is important to understand more about the influences on doctoral student attrition (Smallwood, 2004). In Lovitts’ (2001) study of 511 degree completers and 305 non-completers from nine departments at two universities, she found both social integration into the educational environment and relationships with peers significantly contribute to students’ success. Academic reasons for departure include lack of integration and conflicts with an advisor (Lovitts). Personal reasons, such as wrong reasons for choosing to pursue a degree, such as uncertainty of future professional goals and lack of desire to hold employment, relationship issues in their personal lives, and financial reasons,

such as obtaining a full-time job and being unable to pay expenses, were reasons stated by those who did not finish their degree (Lovitts). Pontius and Harper (2006) concluded that “prior socialization to graduate school, student-faculty advising relationships, student engagement, and peer interaction correlate positively with persistence to degree” (p. 49).

Structural and cultural aspects of doctoral education have been explored as influencing attrition (Gardner, 2009b). In interviews with 60 doctoral students and 34 faculty members from six departments at a single institution, the findings demonstrate differences between faculty and students in their perceptions of why students do not persist in their degree attainment (Gardner). Faculty reasons included students lacking ability, both in motivation and academic aptitude, personal problems often related to mental health, and a misunderstanding of their professional goals (Gardner). While students agreed personal problems often contributed to student departure, they more often attributed it to outside responsibility as opposed to mental health issues (Gardner). Students also mentioned programmatic issues, such as poor advising, financial concerns, faculty mismatch, and politics, as well as graduate school not being a good fit for certain students (Gardner). Clearly, the reasons for doctoral student attrition are multi-faceted and perceived differently by various constituents involved in doctoral education (Gardner). Further consideration of these areas by institutions of higher education is warranted as concerns of attrition continue.

*Shifting Student Demographics*

Many graduate classrooms of today look strikingly different than they did just 50 years ago with the diversification of the doctoral student population from mostly White men to women, students of color, students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT), differently-abled students, non-traditionally-aged students, and

international students (Boyer, 1990; Brus, 2006; Forney, 1999; Walker et al., 2008; Weidman et al., 2001). Despite the increase in visibility of women and students of color in doctoral education, experiences of a chilly climate and discrimination continue, as well as attrition rates of underrepresented populations above those of their white peers (Lovitts, 2001). While student diversity continues to increase in doctoral education (Isaac et al., 1995; Polson, 2003; Walker et al.), a limited number of studies have explored the doctoral experiences of students of color specifically (González et al., 2001; Wasburn-Moses, 2007). Additionally, despite the increased diversity, doctoral student populations have not yet reached a level of equality (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995; Ellis, 2001). Further concerning is the continuing trend of higher attrition rates of non-White, non-male students in comparison to rates of students from majority social identities (Cheatham & Phelps). The changing demographics of the doctoral student population in turn require structural change in doctoral education to meet the non-academic needs of a diverse student population (Isaac et al., 1996; Polson, 2003; Weidman et al.).

Table 2 presented below, reproduced from Walker et al. (2008), shows the distribution of doctorates granted across gender, race and ethnicity, and citizenship status at the past five decade turns. Further discussion of each identity group follows, but in general the data reveals increased diversification through the years. However, what is not represented here are the female, racial and ethnic minority, and international students who did not persist to graduation.

Table 2

*Doctoral Degree Recipient Demographic Information*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>U.S. Racial and Ethnic Minority</b>	<b>International</b>	<b>Total Doctorates</b>
1960	10.7%	No data	12.7%	9,733
1970	13.5%	No data	15.5%	29,498
1980	30.3%	8.3%	18.7%	31,020
1990	36.3%	9.6%	30.9%	36,067
2000	43.8%	16.1%	32.6%	41,368

*Note.* From *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century* (p. 26), by Walker et al., 2008, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Women.* Prior to World War II, women were not frequently found pursuing a doctorate (Hite, 1985; Nerad, 2007), but during the last decade of the twentieth century an average of 40 percent of all doctorates were awarded to women (Walker et al., 2008). The surge in the number of women receiving doctorates is related to the economic, political, and social changes in society discussed in the historical background of doctoral education. Women most frequently earn degrees in education followed by social sciences, business, physical sciences, and engineering, but the numbers of women receiving doctorates remains below the rates of their male counterparts, most notably in the sciences (Weidman et al., 2001). Women's successful completion of the doctoral degree is often reliant on their experience in the educational system (Weidman et al.), but a chilly climate remains especially for women who juggle multiple responsibilities of employment and family while pursuing their degree (Brus, 2006; Dublon, 1983; Hite; Moyer et al., 1999).

A study of 548 male and female doctoral students from 27 academic fields at a large university in the Midwest examined respondents' role congruence, perceived

faculty support, and perceived peer support (Hite, 1985). Female participants reported lower levels than their male counterparts in all three foci of the study (Hite). Hite suggests educating faculty about the unique perceptions of women students and how they can decrease negative academic experiences to avoid student attrition.

In a study of 213 female doctoral students, participants completed an open-ended questionnaire addressing their professional and personal concerns (Moyer et al., 1999). Themes were generated from the responses and categories were subsequently created by two independent raters (Moyer et al.). The major concerns for the participants included future employment, financial issues, professional development, life balance, stress and time pressures, challenges associated with faculty, supervisors, or administrators, race or ethnicity concerns, a lack of a supportive environment, and emotional health (Moyer et al.).

Because social identities do not exist in a vacuum, studies of female doctoral students have not only explored the influence of gender on students' experiences, but also focused on differences between White women and women of color (Turner & Thompson, 1993; Ellis, 2001). In her study of social and academic integration of Black and White doctoral students at a predominately White institution, Ellis interviewed both current students and graduates in all four sub-groups, Black men, White men, Black women, and White women, totaling 67 participants. The academic integration construct was "defined as involvement in course work, research projects with peers and faculty members, teaching publishing, and presentations" and the social integration construct represented "the informal contact students have with faculty and peers in their departments beyond the classroom" (Ellis, p. 32). Ellis reviewed the data using content analysis and her



findings fell into four categories: “1) mentoring and advising, 2) the environment of the home department, 3) interaction with peers, and 4) research and teaching” (p. 35).

Significant findings regarding race and gender include more concerns about the academic environment from women than men, Black women reported poorest relationship with their advisors, and enrolled Black women felt the least satisfaction with their experience (Ellis).

*Students of color.* The Civil Rights movement and subsequent federal legislation improving access to higher education lead to an increase in students of color in doctoral education in the 1960s and 1970s (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995). Approximately 20 percent of all doctorate-earners who are U.S. citizens identify as a member of an underrepresented racial ethnic group (Nerad, 2007). However, a limited amount of research has been conducted to specifically explore the experience of doctoral students of color.

In regards to the Latina/o doctoral student population specifically, it has not increased in proportion with the growth of the general Latina/o population in the U.S. (National Research Council, 1998). In a six-person, autoethnographic study of the Latina/o doctoral student experience at different Research-I institutions, González et al. (2001) sought to present their overall experience as Latina/o doctoral students. The findings revealed seven themes of their experience, including a lack of understanding from their family members, the challenges associated with the unfamiliar environment and culture of academia, the invisibility of other Latina/os in their programs, feeling like an outsider, experiencing changes in their identity, seeking validation for their efforts,

and progressing through conflicts arising from life in two different cultures (González et al).

In a study of a specific discipline, special education, 164 students of color responded to the Satisfaction Survey of Special Education about their perceptions of their program (Wasburn-Moses, 2007). As part of a larger data collection approach that yielded an additional 430 White respondents, the total number of institutions represented in the study was 78, although it is unclear how many institutions were represented within the student of color population (Wasburn-Moses). The data revealed that Latina/o students were more satisfied than their Asian American and African American counterparts (Wasburn-Moses). However, it is unclear the reasons for students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their program.

Although the discussion of literature on doctoral students of color above is not exhaustive, it is clear from the dearth of recent studies of the experience of students of color in doctoral education that they are a population requiring additional attention in research, and likely in the curriculum as well. However, the structure of doctoral education does not encompass the experiences of students of color, nor does it meet their cultural needs, because it assumes their needs are similar to White students (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995). The lack of integration of students of colors' culture can contribute to their desire to leave their degree program (Cheatham & Phelps).

*International students.* International student populations rose in the 1990s (Isaac et al., 1995; Walker et al., 2008; Weidman et al., 2001) and currently represent 14 percent of the entire doctoral student population (Nerad, 2007). International student populations are most highly concentrated in science and engineering programs (Syverson, 1996).

Although there was an increase in international doctoral students in the 1990s, their nations of origin changed as Asian higher education institutions and research opportunities improved. Increased numbers of international students are from Eastern Europe (Syverson; Woolston, 1995). Interestingly, the retention rates for international students are higher than the national average (Lovitts, 2001) despite the challenges associated with navigating a new culture and language proficiency.

Although several studies highlight the cultural adjustment (Barratt & Huba, 1994), academic stress (Misra & Castillo, 2004), and need for social support (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992) of international graduate students, little research exists isolating the experience of international doctoral students. A case study of 12 students in a mentoring program for international doctoral students was conducted because of the additional importance of helping this population of students understand the culture of American academia, in addition to the language and cultural challenges they face (Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008). Data were collected through pre- and post- surveys and pre- and post- in-depth interviews and findings revealed that international doctoral students joined the mentoring program because they sought to learn about teaching, research, culture, and job preparation, as well as extend their network of social support (Ku et al.). Additional research is needed on the international doctoral student experience specifically because of their unique challenges.

*Non-traditionally-aged students.* The average age of students has risen as many students are beginning their doctorates after years of work (Gardner, 2009a; Isaac et al., 1995). The median age of doctoral graduates was 33.3 years old in 2004 (Hoffer, Welch, Webber, Williams, Lisek, & Hess, 2005), but varies by discipline from median ages of

31.7 years old to 43.1 years old (Hoffer, Welch, Webber, Williams, Lisek, & Hess, 2006). The experiences, both personal and professional of non-traditionally-aged students may benefit their pursuits. However, additional responsibilities, such as family and dependents, frequently accompany older students and may challenge students' degree attainment (Brus, 2006). Limited research has explored the experiences of non-traditionally-aged students. One study interviewed ten female graduate students with a mean age of 40.2 years with the intent of exploring the influence of adding the role of graduate student to their other roles (Anderson & Mieзитis, 1999). They found that the women generally felt positive about their graduate experience, but that the students' role as a parent created the most internal and external conflict with their academic role (Anderson & Mieзитis).

*Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students.* While the presence of GLBT students in doctoral education is not new, this population of doctoral students has become more visible as acceptance of various sexual orientations improves (Isaac et al., 1995). However, a lack of empirical research on the experience of GLBT doctoral students remains a concern as their experience has not been explored. In a theoretical discussion of the unique needs of GLBT graduate students, Smith (1995) provides several considerations for this marginalized population of students. Mainly, students may be at differing stages of the coming out process as they pursue their degree and may also struggle with negotiating their personal identity with their professional identity (Smith). Understanding the needs of GLBT students is paramount to their personal and professional success.

*Differently-abled students.* Federal legislation including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, improved differently-abled students' access to all levels of higher education (Belch, 1995; Isaac et al., 1995). Similar to the lack of literature about the GLBT experience in doctoral education is the lack of research conducted with the goal of understanding differently-abled students' experience. However, developing and maintaining an inclusive educational environment and accommodations for this population of students is necessary for their success (Belch).

### Doctoral Student Experience

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 et al., 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 the 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. Using survey data from three scales concerning procrastination, help and hindrance, and responsibility, Kluever analyzed programmatic and relational aspects of the doctoral student experience to determine his results. He found financial support, experience with research, contact with advisers, access to university resources, and emotional support from advisers and families were shown to help students complete their dissertation (Kluever). In a qualitative study of the roles and responsibilities of doctoral faculty members in doctoral student learning at 12 institutions, Bair, Haworth, and Sandfort's (2004) findings supported the findings of other studies of the doctoral student experience (Kluever; Lovitts, 2001; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). They 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, 2009a; Tinto, 1993), and financial support throughout the doctoral student career to be key components of doctoral student success (Bair et al., 2004; Forney, 1999; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006; Kluever, 1997; Longfield et al., 2006). Positive relationships with faculty were fostered through collaboration in research and professional and personal development through advising and mentoring (Bair et al.). 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 including 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 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.

Hadjioannou et al. (2007), four doctoral students themselves, presented an autoethnography of their experiences as members of a student-led doctoral support group. The participants represented diverse backgrounds, including two non-traditionally-aged women, an international transfer student from Thailand, and an international student from Cyprus. They encapsulated the doctoral student experience with the finding that it was challenging to balance the stress caused by multiple responsibilities, including academics, finances, and family and friend relationships (Hadjioannou et al.). Addressing non-academic concerns in the midst of challenges related to completing a doctorate led to role conflict among students (Anderson & Miezeitis, 1999; Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Brus, 2006; Hite, 1985). Finding balance with multiple competing responsibilities is a common concern of doctoral students.

Other characteristics found in the literature on the doctoral experience include loneliness, isolation, frustration, confusion, stress, and mental and emotional challenge

(Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2000; Golde, 2005; González et al., 2001; Hadjioannou et al.; Nesheim et al., 2006; Peters, 1997). The solitary nature of certain aspects of doctoral work, including individual research required to complete course assignments, the comprehensive exam, the research proposal, and dissertation writing, leaves students feeling isolated. The challenging experience of doctoral studies may lead to high levels of frustration with the process because of compounding stresses in other areas of students' lives. Ultimately, stress levels can increase to a point inhibiting students' academic productivity. Perfectionism is also a well-noted cause of stress among high-achieving doctoral students (Green, 1997; Onwuegbuzie, 2000), which if identified, could provide insight to students into the internal barriers inhibiting their success. Without proper institutional support to assist with maintaining balance, doctoral students' multiple, and often times conflicting roles as both a doctoral student and a parent, spouse, or full-time employee, may lead to an inability to complete their degree or come to regard the experience as miserable.

Using a discussion oriented method, a study conducted by two doctoral students, Krueger and Peek (2006), examined their own experience as they shared strategies to assist other students in completing their Ph.D.'s. Taking initiative, developing a personal learning style, learning to multi-task, being a professional, and not allowing for unnecessary distractions are effective in work towards completion of post-baccalaureate studies (Krueger & Peek). In the face of negative experiences often occurring in the doctoral experience, such as conflicts with a faculty member, confounding personal responsibilities, and financial sacrifices, implementing coping mechanisms is helpful and necessary. Stated more positively, being well in the experience can assist with challenges.



The research and recommendations available about the doctoral student experience are useful as faculty and student affairs practitioners work to meet students' needs.

Achieving and maintaining wellness remains challenging with limited research available on the topic.

The past 25 years has been marked by increasing 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. In an introduction of wellness to student affairs professionals, Beeler (1988) explored how organizational cultures influence wellness. The culture of doctoral programs and their associated norms and values can both promote and inhibit students' wellness efforts (Beeler). As Cowen (1991) explained, "just as wellness can erode under conditions of adversity, it can be enhanced by favorable conditions or processes, both natural and engineered" (pp. 404-405). In an effort to promote doctoral students' development, the influence of the environment should be one that supports their academic success while remaining well.

#### Definitions of Wellness

In an effort to understand doctoral student wellness, various definitions and characteristics of wellness are explored. There have been numerous constructs presented over the past 50 years, yet there is no clear consensus of which model to consistently apply (Beeler, 1988). The term wellness is used throughout this review, but many other words can be used to describe wellness, including life satisfaction (Cowen, 1991; Stratton, et al., 2006), gratification in living (Cowen), and health promotion (Sackney, Noonan, & Miller, 2000). Wellness provides broad and commonly understood

terminology and thus will be the term employed in this study. The original definition of wellness emerged in 1961 (Beeler; Sackney et al.; Sivik, Butts, Moore, & Hyde, 1992; Warner, 1984) as a way of being that incorporates all components of a person's life "oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable within the functioning environment" (Dunn, 1961, pp. 4-5). With both individual and environmental components, cultures and environments influence wellness. Prior to the first definition of wellness, the World Health Organization (1947) defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being" (p. 29), adding multiple dimensions to the concept of health. This definition provides a comprehensive vision of health by including the physical, mental, and social components, and catapults health into action, which leads to the concept of wellness. However, environmental factors, including external situations and settings that influence wellness, as well as "macrosocial factors such as disempowerment and injustice [that] work insidiously against wellness" (Cowen, p. 406), are not considered by the World Health Organization. Despite the varied nomenclature and conceptualizations of wellness, many of the characteristics of wellness are consistent: wellness is generally agreed upon as putting into action choices and behaviors leading to achievement of life dimensions or tasks, and described consistently as ever-changing (Dunn), not static (Cowen; Dunn; Ryan & Travis, 1981), and multi-leveled (Dunn).

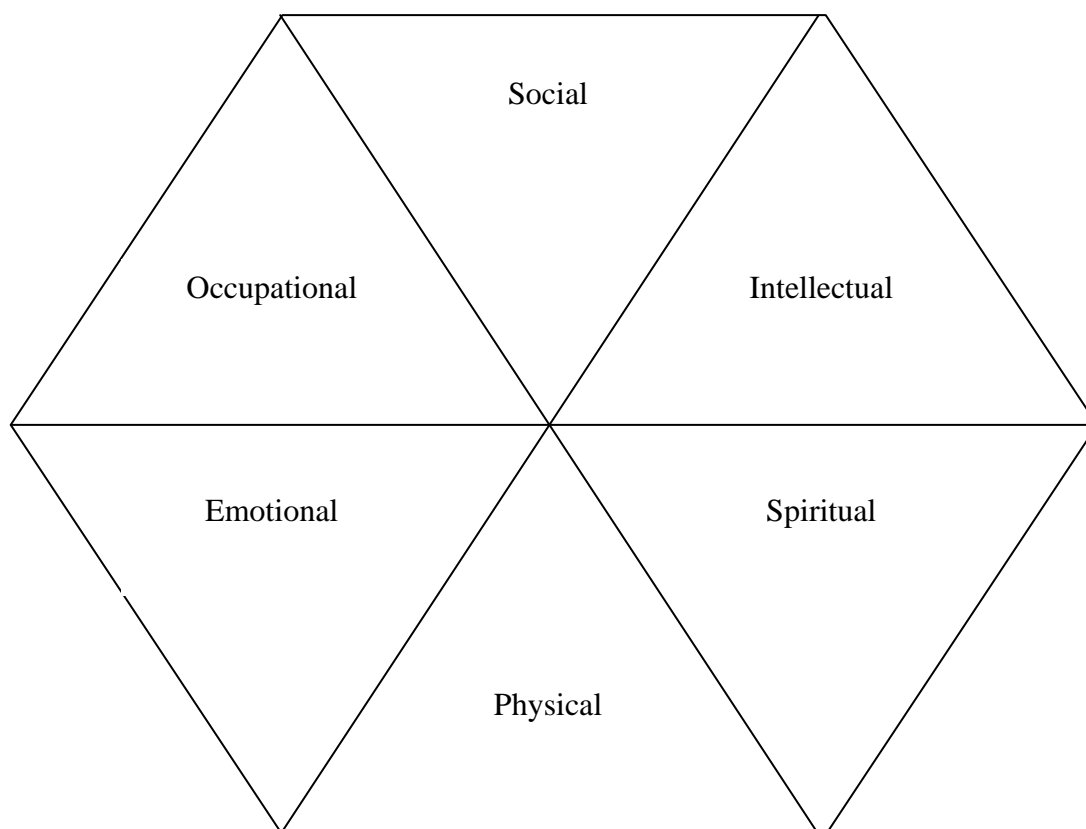
Table 3

*Overview of Selected Wellness Models*

<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Key Components</b>
Hettler (1980)	Wellness Wheel	Intellectual, emotional, physical, social, occupational, spiritual
Ardell (1977)	High Level Wellness	Self-responsibility, nutritional awareness, stress management, physical fitness, and environmental sensitivity
Ryan & Travis (1981)	Wellness Index	Self responsibility and love, breathing, sensing, eating, moving, thinking, feeling, playing and working, communicating, sex, finding meaning, and transcending
Witmer, Sweeney, & Myers (1993)	Wheel of Wellness	Spirituality, self-regulation, work, friendship, and love

Models and constructs differ in their representation of wellness (Archer, Probert, & Gage, 1987) and consequently are used in different settings. Table 3 provides an overview of selected models of wellness described in more detail below. A six dimensional model proposed by Hettler (1980) is the most comprehensive and applicable to the higher education environment (Warner, 1984). Represented by six equal-sized triangles creating the shape of a hexagon, the six dimensions are intellectual, emotional, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual wellness (see figure 1). The intellectual component involves lifelong learning, emotional wellness includes the ability to have feelings and address both positive and negative feelings constructively, and physical wellness incorporates multiple aspects, including exercise, nutrition, safety, and illness prevention (Beeler, 1988; Hettler, 1984). Social wellness is characterized by developing and maintaining positive relationships with others, occupational wellness involves performing meaningful work using an individual's skills, and spiritual wellness is seen by a person examining their purpose and the meaning of their life (Beeler; Hettler). This

model is used to examine educator wellness (Sackney et al., 2000) and compare wellness in traditional and non-traditionally-aged college students (Hermon & Davis, 2004). Additionally, an entire textbook, *A Wellness Way of Life*, is based on a discussion of wellness of Hettler's six-dimensional model (Robbins, Powers, & Burgess, 1994). Thus, Hettler's dimensions can provide a broad model applicable to multiple individuals because of the flexibility allowed within each of the six areas.



*Figure 1: Six Dimensions of Wellness*

*Note.* Adapted from <http://www.hettler.com/sixdimen.htm>.

Despite the widespread use of the Hettler's (1980) model, several other wellness definitions and models are utilized in research and practice. The term "high level wellness" represents a similar definition of wellness, which includes taking care of the

physical, cognitive, emotional, and social components of one's life (Ardell, 1977). From this definition, the five dimensions of wellness center on self-responsibility, nutritional awareness, stress management, physical fitness, and environmental sensitivity. The difference between these dimensions and the dimensions of Hettler's model is the additional emphasis placed on physical fitness and nutritional awareness, the disregard for occupational and spiritual dimensions, and the highlight of care for the environment. The wellness wheel index (see figure 2) represents another model, including the following 12 dimensions of equal importance: "self responsibility and love, breathing, sensing, eating, moving, thinking, feeling, playing and working, communicating, sex, finding meaning, and transcending" (Ryan & Travis, 1981, p. 2). Along with the Wellness Index, Ryan and Travis' book allows one to assess their level of wellness and suggests ways for improving each of the 12 aspects of wellness listed above.

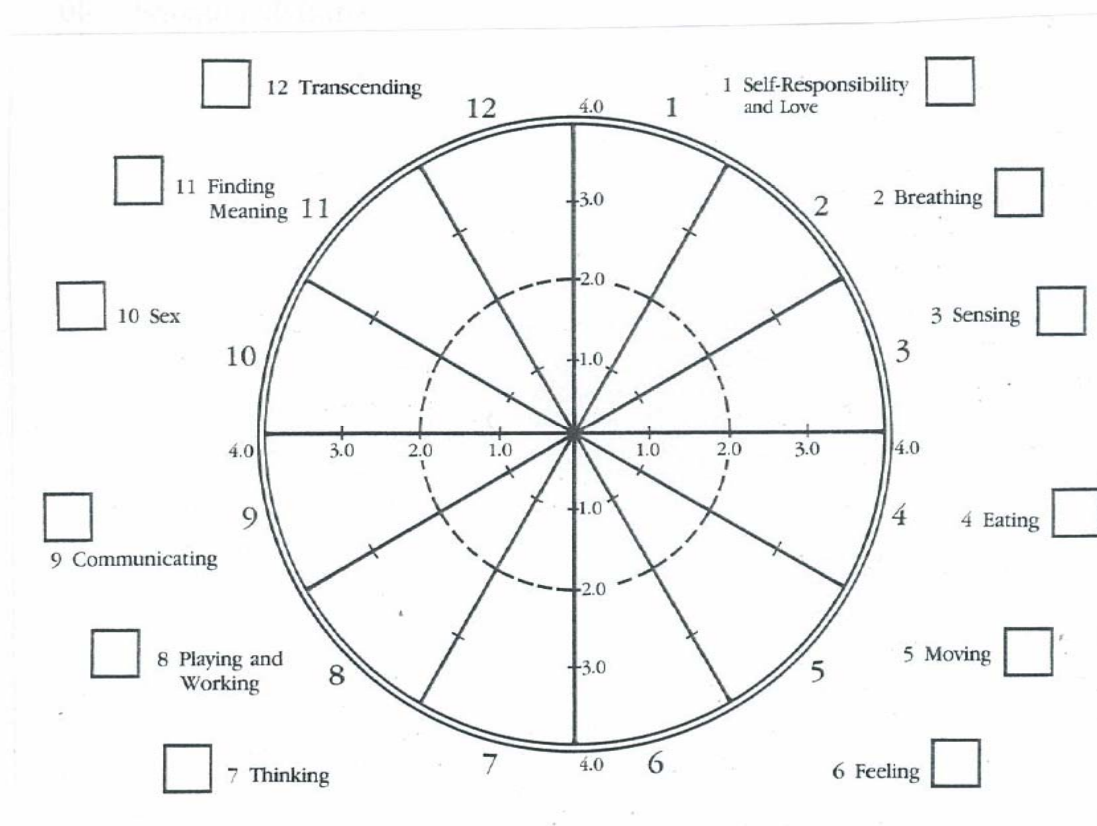


Figure 2: Wellness Index

Note. From *Wellness Workbook* (p. 46), by R. S. Travis & J. W. Travis, 1981, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press.

Yet another holistic definition of wellness describes it “as a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community” (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000, p. 2). Accompanying this definition of holistic wellness is a model with five life tasks which encapsulate a well person including, spirituality, self-regulation, work, friendship, and love. In this model, spirituality is at this center of the circle with self-regulation surrounding it. Spokes describing ways to promote wellness extend out to a larger surrounding circle that lists the other three tasks, work, friendship,

and love. Mainly, this model is used in studies to examine individuals' level of wellness in counseling environments (Hermon & Hazler, 1999). Six years after its development, a revised model replaced the task of self-regulation with self-direction and replaced work with both work and leisure (Myers, Mobley, & Booth, 2003).

The varying ways in which wellness is conceptualized does not lead to a conclusion about which is most appropriate to use when working with students, specifically doctoral students. However, Hettler's (1980) six dimensional model is most frequently used to design wellness programmatic interventions in higher education and may prove useful in exploring doctoral students' wellness. Additionally, Hettler's six dimensions have been employed in studies of counselor wellness (Witmer & Young, 1996), increasing its applicability and credibility across disciplines. Wellness may differ drastically within a person's life depending on their life circumstances. However, wellness is often seen as the responsibility of the individual (Hybertson, Hulme, Smith, & Holton et al., 1992), but environment factors, such as work pressures, financial responsibilities, and family roles, can strongly influence it as well (Beeler, 1988; Hybertson et al.). The interest in wellness of doctoral students comes to the forefront as individual choices within the academic environment are explored.

### Wellness in Higher Education

Holistic student development is an espoused value of institutions of higher education (American Council for Education, 1937, 1949; Hermon & Davis, 2004; Stratton et al., 2006). One of the many components of personal development is the promotion of wellness (Beeler, 1988; Fedorovich & Boyle, 1992), which is a natural connection for higher education institutions to promote because of the relationship

between wellness and educational and personal development outcomes intended for students (DeStefano & Harger, 1990). A common assumption is “that wellness-oriented life-styles lead to a generally better human existence” (Archer et al., 1987, p. 312). The environment of higher education can impact students’ future choices regarding wellness (Sivik, et al., 1992) and institutions would be remiss for not taking advantage of the opportunity to promote and instill wellness in their students. Because of the potential environmental influences of higher education on an individual’s wellness, including either promoting or inhibiting wellness, higher education as a setting and its role in developing and maintaining students’ wellness should be explored.

The next section of the review discusses the role of higher education in the promotion of wellness by providing an overview of studies about wellness on college campuses. Studies focusing on the wellness of undergraduate students and graduate students are explored. However, because of limited research on doctoral students specifically, the studies discussed will encompass all graduate students, not only doctoral students.

### *History of Wellness*

The history of wellness promotion in higher education is often noted as beginning at the University of Wisconsin-Steven’s Point (UWSP) with the Student Life Program in the early 1980’s. Following the impetus from their president in the early 1960’s (DeStefano & Harger, 1990; Hettler, 1986; Sivik et al., 1992; Warner, 1984). UWSP administrators, including the Vice President for Student Affairs Fred Leafgren and William Hettler, who developed the six dimensions of wellness (Hettler, 1980), believed in support of the whole person (Hettler; Warner). Many studies described in the



upcoming section on research on undergraduate student wellness have explored how the models previously presented in this review can be utilized in the design and effectiveness of wellness programs on college campuses, often referring to UWSP as the leader in wellness programs (Archer et al., 1987). Following UWSP's lead, several other universities across the country sought to promote wellness among their students, including James Madison University, University of Virginia, University of South Carolina, and the University of Maryland—Baltimore County (Warner). Although wellness programs and promotion are a major component of many institutions' student development focus, literature relating them to the experience of doctoral students is non-existent. It is more common for wellness activities to be geared toward undergraduate students, but can also be beneficial to the doctoral student population who may have similar concerns about wellness.

#### *Research on Undergraduate Student Wellness*

Just as wellness resources on campuses in the U.S. focus on and are designed to meet the needs of undergraduate students, the majority of research on wellness in higher education focuses on the pre-baccalaureate population as well. Research has been conducted to examine college students' attitudes towards wellness (Archer et al., 1987), ways to focus wellness programs for undergraduate college students (Hettler, 1986), and how physical activity can promote well-being during first year students' transition to college (Bray & Kwan, 2006). Despite the vast difference in characteristics of undergraduate students and doctoral students, some linkages can be made to understand doctoral student wellness.

While wellness is often seen as an individual responsibility (Hybertson et al., 1992; Warner, 1984), in a study comparing factors that affect wellness of traditional-aged and non-traditional-aged commuter undergraduate and graduate students, the environment and the culture were found to have an impact, particularly for older students (Hybertson et al.). Of the random sample of 356 students from a single institution who completed the survey based on Hetter's (1980) six dimensions of wellness and items about lifestyle and environment, approximately 237 were over 25 years old, and the academic breakdown included 240 undergraduates, 90 graduates, seven post-baccalaureate students, and 16 non-degree seeking students (Hybertson et al.). Not that only older students experience concerns beyond academics, but generally, as students get older, it becomes more common for their responsibilities to extend beyond those associated with academic goals. Competing responsibilities, such as "job demands, financial obligations, and family responsibilities intrude upon the individual's opportunities to make the choices and to exercise the effort needed to achieve or maintain wellness" (Hybertson et al., pp. 50-51). These findings contribute to understanding the difference in and increased complexity of wellness for doctoral students, who are older than the traditional-age undergraduate population.

Doctoral students have many responsibilities in addition to completing the requirements for their degree. Given that the mission of many institutions of higher education includes promoting academic and personal development, it is appropriate to apply student development to doctoral students and use it to promote and ensure their wellness (Bair et al., 2004). Other research, though not specifically focused on doctoral

students, examines related components of wellness and the study participants are graduate students.

### *Research on Graduate Student Wellness*

Various aspects of the graduate school experience have been studied separately by focusing solely on emotional wellness or social wellness, as opposed to looking at wellness from a holistic viewpoint (Hyun et al., 2006). Developing a comprehensive view of doctoral students' wellness is confounded by the lack of uniformity in the research. Studies use various methodological approaches, often combine master's students with doctoral students, or limit the research to students in one academic discipline (Myers et al., 2003).

Research into graduate students' life satisfaction is most related to the topic of doctoral student wellness (Stratton et al., 2006). Although life satisfaction is sometimes used synonymously with wellness, in this study life satisfaction is defined as the way a person perceives their well-being in relation to their experiences (Fujita & Diener, 2005). Stratton et al. sought to further explore their experience as graduate students by researching other graduate students following their experience of having numerous roles to fulfill and finding that maintaining a healthy work and life balance was difficult. Utilizing a heuristic approach to their research, eight doctoral and eight masters students from a College of Education were interviewed about balance and satisfaction in their graduate school experience (Stratton et al.). The study found that developing balance is important to students for self-improvement, but often not maintaining balance can lead to health problems, difficulties with personal relationships, and questioning their reason for pursuing an advanced degree initially (Stratton et al.). These influences are found in one

form or another in the wellness models described in the previous section and highlight the social and spiritual components of wellness. Dimensions of wellness may influence life satisfaction and promoting them among doctoral students may contribute to an improved graduate school experience.

Gaining insight into graduate students' perspectives about how their activities and self worth were affected by their student status incorporates the student experience with environmental factors (Longfield et al., 2006). In seven focus groups, a total of 47 participants' shared that their role as graduate students affected their physical and social activity, as well as their self-worth (Longfield et al.). Participants shared that they were most challenged by finances and having quality interactions as graduate students (Longfield et al.). This study revealed that both academic responsibilities and environment play a role in graduate students' wellness as other priorities may compete with their ability to promote their sense of wellness (Longfield et al.).

The stress-provoking nature of graduate education has lead to numerous studies exploring and addressing the emotional and counseling needs of graduate students (Caple, 1995; Goplerud, 1980; Hyun et al., 2006; Kenty, 2000; Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001). Graduate students' mental health needs, knowledge, and use of counseling services were explained in a study of 3,121 students at a large university (Hyun et al., 2006). Of the respondents, approximately 68% were doctoral students. Using survey methods, the study sought to understand how the institution was meeting the mental health needs of graduate students. The study showed a significant percentage of students, 44.7 percent, dealt with an emotional issue within the last year of graduate education, which was measured through questions regarding "feelings of hopelessness, exhaustion,

sadness, depression, and being overwhelmed” (Hyun et al., p. 252). Causes or severity of the emotional issues, however, are unclear from this study, but the research highlights challenges to emotional wellness. Often only one component of the entire wellness construct is the focus of studies, which only provides a glimpse to the explanation of students’ reality.

Another study examined the wellness of both undergraduate and graduate students pursuing a counseling degree (Myers et al., 2003). Using the five-dimensional Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle inventory (Witmer et al., 1993), counseling students were found to be “more well” than other students (p. 271), which was attributed to the students’ responsibility to serve as role models. Interestingly, doctoral students experienced greater “total wellness” than entry-level students. Future research is suggested to further examine this phenomenon because it contradicts other research suggesting the challenges to achieving wellness as a doctoral student.

### Conclusion

Graduate school influences all other aspects of students’ lives. Oftentimes, the educational culture does not support wellness, but dimensions of wellness are needed to remain academically productive (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). The research studies focusing on graduate students recommend conducting additional research to provide a more complete understanding of their experience and developing support services to meet their needs. The goal of the literature review is to bring attention to an important issue in higher education, the dissatisfaction and lack of well-being among doctoral students. Listening to a group of doctoral students, conversations likely surround concerns about busy schedules, work load, and personal pressures, yet universities provide little or no

support for these concerns. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of the unique, often times intensive, experience of doctoral students may enhance the support and services provided them, simultaneously increasing rates of degree completion.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand how doctoral students experience wellness while pursuing their degree. Researching the experiences of doctoral students who consider themselves well contributes to understanding the holistic doctoral student experience, not only the academic components. Focusing on well doctoral students illuminated aspects of their lives that are often not considered as contributing to academic success. Rigorous qualitative inquiry is dependent upon consistency in the research design; “procedures themselves are not the criteria on which a study is deemed sound, but rather it is the congruency of the theoretical perspective, methodology, and method” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 124). As such, this chapter provides an overview of the elements of research utilized in this study: epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, and methods (Crotty, 1998). Additionally, a description of the setting, participants, and data collection, analysis, and representation are presented in exploration of the following research questions:

- Q1 How do doctoral students make meaning of wellness as they pursue their doctoral degree?
- Q2 How do doctoral students pursue wellness in their degree program?

- Q3 How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' sense of wellness?
- Q4 How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' ability to pursue wellness?
- Q5 How do doctoral students' choices around wellness influence their academic pursuits?

Generally, this research is designed to explore the experiences of doctoral students regarding wellness. Participants were selected from different colleges within a university and at different levels of their degree attainment to develop a broad understanding of the issue. Interview data and journal submissions from the participants contributed to the findings represented through a description of the participants and case-based themes (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

#### Epistemology

Epistemology describes the nature of knowledge, how knowledge is obtained, and the relationship between the knower and the participant (Mertens, 2005). In constructionism, "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). For this study, one truth was not being sought out. Rather, there were multiple realities to be explored and the meanings of doctoral students' experiences were constructed through the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Crotty).

This research is value-bound; it is impossible for the researcher to separate from the research and research subjects because values and biases are present throughout the research process (Mertens, 2005). Knowledge in constructionism is constructed by the participants being studied (Crotty, 1998). Particularly as both a doctoral student and the researcher, avoiding my values as the researcher was impossible. The experiences I had



as a student could have influenced the themes developed from the participants' experiences.

Doctoral student wellness was explored using a constructionist epistemology, which is appropriate to use when exploring complex human phenomenon (Broido & Manning, 2002). The lives of doctoral students are multi-faceted as various roles confound their educational responsibilities. Understanding the diversity represented in doctoral education requires a constructionist approach allowing the individual participants' voices to be heard because "the nature of the [doctoral] student experience...vary among, as well as within, demographic groups" (Forney, 1999, p. 2). This case study is described as "constructionist" because the focus of the inquiry was on the participants' construction of meaning and understanding about wellness in their doctoral student experience (Jones & Abes, 2004).

#### 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 research process, I developed an understanding of the multiple meanings held by the participants in the context of the bounded case (Mertens). 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.

## Methodology

Methodology represents the ideas behind how to move toward the methods of the research (Crotty, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (2000) viewed methodology as addressing how the researcher goes about finding knowledge and understanding of their area of interest. In remaining consistent with constructivism, the methodological strategies were used to understand multiple realities of doctoral students' wellness through interactions between the researcher and the participants (Mertens, 2005). Additionally, the methods were informed by the chosen case study methodological approach.

Case study has been utilized in a multitude of settings and by scholars in anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, and education (Merriam, 1998). The goal of case study is to develop a detailed, multi-layered description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam). The study is defined as bounded when the limits of where data can be collected is clear (Merriam). Case study is chosen as a methodology when the researcher seeks to "gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, p. 19).

Case study methodology has been discussed by multiple authors, each with different conceptualizations of the approach (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). It has also been argued that case study is a method of site selection and thus not a methodology at all (Jones et al., 2006); however, there are overwhelming arguments to the contrary (Creswell; Merriam, 1998; Stake; Wolcott, 1992). Of those in agreement, the main characteristic of a case study is the necessity of the bounded nature of the research; there must be clear boundaries for data collection (Merriam). Participant selection must be limited based on the criteria set forth in the case and participant selection processes.

For this inquiry, the case study approach of Stake (1995) was employed. Stake stated the main uses of case study are to garner ways in which participants describe and interpret their experience. Two types of case studies described by Stake include intrinsic and instrumental, each requiring different methods. The intrinsic case calls for exploration into a specific case because of its uniqueness (Stake). Alternatively, instrumental cases are presented when “we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case” (Stake, p. 3). This study is an instrumental case study, as doctoral student wellness, the focus of the research questions, was explored within one bounded case (Creswell, 2007; Stake). It represents an instrumental case study because it “is less about the case itself and more directed toward understanding of an issue” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 55).

#### Institutional Context

Because of the necessary characteristic of case study research being the bounded setting and defining the “scope of the study” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27), the site selection is presented and institutional context is discussed at the forefront, prior to exploring the methods. 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. The participants were selected from a 4-year, undergraduate-focused university in the western United States. Remaining consistent with the case study methodology, the participants of the study were bounded by the limits of those identifying as doctoral students in one of the three colleges within the institution, Armfield University (a pseudonym). During the fall of 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 sixteen program within the institution's three colleges (exact college names masked to maintain confidentiality of the institution)—1) Music, Theater, and the Arts, 2) Education and Psychology, and 3) the Sciences (Institutional Fact Book, 2009).

Four components to consider when choosing a research site have been outlined in qualitative research literature and include:

- 1) Entry is possible.
- 2) There is a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, structures of interest, or all of these.
- 3) You are likely to be able to build strong relations with the participants.
- 4) Ethical and political considerations are not overwhelming, at least initially (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 54; Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 136).

The site selected for the research met each of the above criteria for an “ideal site” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 136). The institution is one where I have previous experience, which contributes to my ability to access participants and develop rapport with participants because of my understanding of the cultural components of the setting. Additionally, my prior understanding of the setting assisted me during the interviews because of my ability to move past the logistical details of the institution and into further probing of the participants' experiences within the setting. Key informants, those who understand the purpose of the research, are personal contacts of the researcher, and who can connect the researcher to potential participants, assisted in identifying information-rich participants (Jones et al., 2006). I was familiar with the larger context of the case, but not the particulars of each academic program. The mix of academic programs allowed for

at least one area of participant diversity. In regards to ethical and political considerations, I did not possess positional power that could influence participants' involvement. As a fellow doctoral student, my position allowed me to empathize and relate to the participants' stories. The main criteria used for the selection of Armfield University as the case was the ability to access a willing population of doctoral student who identified as well (Patton, 1990).

Glesne (1999) discussed the issues with conducting "backyard research" (p. 26) by warning researchers of the challenges of involvement in a known setting. One such challenge is the potential that the researcher could enter a setting with expectations based on their prior experiences with participants in the setting, which could impede effective data collection. Additionally, Glesne saw role confusion as a potential concern, as both the researcher and the participants may experience uncertainty about the researcher's role during data collection because of previous involvement in the institution. Jones (2002) echoed Glesne's concerns with three potential concerns of research at one's institution including 1) the researcher not understanding the difference between their researcher role and their role as a member of the community being studied, 2) not making sound sampling decisions, rather pursuing participants based on convenience, and 3) previously-held assumptions of the researcher.

In response to these concerns, the components of the site that were congruent with that of an "ideal site" counteract these concerns. My previous role at the institution changed when I began my research and being a researcher was my main responsibility at that time. Sampling decisions were based on the contribution of the informants to the research, not on convenience. Finally, it is impossible for researcher assumptions to

remain separate in qualitative research. However, through the use of a researcher's journal, I kept record of my assumptions to regulate my personal feelings beyond the participants' initial meanings. Particularly when coding themes, I recognized where my experiences converged and diverged from the participants and through recognition and reflection, represented themes based on the data as opposed to my experiences and priorities.

### Methods

Within the case, purposeful sampling of information rich participants, doctoral students who have several experiences related to wellness they are willing to share, was employed to develop a broad, descriptive understanding of the case (Patton, 1990). The initial plan was for approximately three to four doctoral students from each of the three doctoral degree granting academic colleges at Armfield University in different stages of their academic programs to be asked to participate in the study. Diversity of the sample in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and degree status, in addition to academic program, were sought for the study when possible, to explore the uniqueness of participants' perspectives. The participants conceptualized wellness as we explored their experience as doctoral students. As a doctoral student myself, together with the doctoral student participants, the ability to achieve and maintain wellness was explored in an effort to contribute to the understanding of the doctoral student experience. The goal of this understanding was to better inform the work of doctoral students' advisors, academic departments, student affairs administrators, universities as a whole, and current and future doctoral students.

### *Participant Sampling*

Although the first important choice in case study is the selection of the case, the next most important goal of case study research is to obtain participants with rich stories to fully understand the case (Merriam, 1998). Patton (1990) describes sixteen types of purposeful sampling, including extreme and deviant, intensity, maximum variation, homogeneous, typical, stratified, critical, snowball or chain, criterion, theory-based, confirming and disconfirming, opportunistic, random, politically important, convenience, and combination or mixed. Criterion-based sampling, in which specific characteristics of participants were used to determine who would participate supported the purpose of the study, was employed. Student participants were purposefully sampled (Patton) using criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) to provide a strong understanding of a specific phenomenon, doctoral student wellness. The following criteria were used because they “directly reflect[s] the purpose of the study and guide[s] in the identification of information-rich cases” (Merriam, p. 62). Participants must 1) be doctoral students within the bounded case university, 2) identify and consider themselves “well” based on their own definition of the construct, 3) represent diversity in terms of discipline, and 4) represent diversity in terms of their stage of academic progress (coursework and post-coursework).

As discussed previously, key informants are those who understand the purpose of the research, are personal contacts of the researcher, and are those who can connect the researcher to potential participants (Jones et al., 2006). As I have been pursuing this topic in many graduate-level qualitative research courses with students from a variety of disciplines, I have been collecting names of potential participants. Additional participants

came from key informants, who because of their “insider status” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 74) have connections to doctoral students. Informants may include other graduate students from the wide variety of disciplines at the university, the Graduate Student Association listserv, faculty, and staff members at the university. Snowball (also known as chain or network) sampling, which involves obtaining participants from people who know of potential information rich participants (Patton, 1990), was also employed to obtain additional participants (Merriam, 2001). To represent the three stages of doctoral education, I attempted to select at least one student working on their coursework, one student who had completed coursework, but was not yet a doctoral candidate and still completing comprehensive exams and had yet to defend their dissertation proposal, and one doctoral candidate from each of the three colleges to comprise the sample. The final sample included 12 participants.

Although the initial intention of the sampling procedure was to include between nine and 12 participants, additional participants would have been included until saturation and redundancy in the data collection was reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Saturation in data collection occurs when participants share common themes and new data is not being shared by participants (Merriam). The stories shared in the initial sample displayed saturation, so additional participants were not added to the original sample.

Every student who responded to the listserv announcement about the study was included in the study, along with one participant obtained through a gatekeeper and another participant obtained through snowball sampling. The specific demographics of the participants are included in the following chapter, but it is worth noting that diversity



in terms of gender, academic program, and degree stage were met with the twelve participants.

### *Data Collection*

Merriam (1998) stated, “any and all methods of gathering data...can be used in a case study” (p. 28). However, common methods of data collection in case study research include interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis (Merriam; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Several studies have exemplified case study research and methods commonly applied in other studies were considered for use in this study of doctoral student wellness. Specifically, I employed individual interviews and participant journals as methods of data collection.

After obtaining human subjects approval from the institution, doctoral student participants were sampled in April and May of 2009 and data collection occurred between May and September of the same year. Once identified either through their volunteering or informants, participants were contacted via email about the details of the study. During this email exchange (Appendix A), I explained the purpose of the study, the maintenance of their confidentiality, the time commitment required, the incentives to participate, and logistics for the interviews and journals to determine their willingness to participate (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Students received a monetary incentive for their time in the form of a \$25 gift certificate to a local dining establishment after completing the data collection requirements of two interviews and two journal entries. During the first interview, students signed an Informed Consent (Appendix B) to participate in the study acknowledging their understanding of the study’s purpose, the data collection process, and the incentive for their participation.

*Individual interviews.* The goal of case study research is to understand the “multiple realities” held by participants in the case (Stake, 1995, p. 64). In congruence with constructionism, interviews with participants were the primary method used to elicit the meaning they make of their world as well doctoral students. In-depth interviews were chosen as an effective method of data collection because understanding wellness involves individual thoughts, feelings, and choices and through interviews “we...find out from [participants] those things we cannot directly observe....We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions” (Patton, 1990, p. 196). The interview is not intended to be an objective or neutral data collection method. Rather, as Fontana and Frey (1994) contended, interviewing “is inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically, and contextually bound” (p. 695). As the interviewer, I was aware of my position as a self-proclaimed well doctoral student. In order to understand the entirety of participants’ process of being well, I expressed my challenges so they too would feel comfortable sharing the entirety of their experience.

Another potential issue that could have arisen during the interviews is if a participant shared negative experiences that could somehow be connected back to their program or faculty members. Thus, any identifying information, such as degree program, personal characteristics, and experiences were altered to maintain the essence of the participants’ background and experience, but not at the risk of compromising their identity. To do this, I worked collaboratively with the participants as I composed their descriptions. The participants were provided with their description I composed and any quotes I considered using in the findings following their first interview and journal submissions. Participants were asked to make any alterations to the details of their

description and quotes to protect their identity and the identity of their program. Only the participants knew exactly which components of their background were known by others at the institution. Thus, the participants were intricately involved in the development of their descriptions to avoid being identified.

Participants completed two individual interviews between May and September 2009, each lasting approximately one hour. 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 the data collection occurred contributes 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. The spring interviews allowed participants to reflect on the entirety of the previous year and the fall interviews provided information about how they approach a new year with potentially new roles and responsibilities depending upon changes in their academic progress and work. There were three months between the time of the first and second interviews, which allowed the participants to reflect on their wellness and participation in the research, as well as provide rich data because "humans are complex, and their lives are ever changing" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 722). As participants dialogued with me about their wellness, they further reflected on their wellness in the time between the two interviews because of the influence participation in a research study can have.

Interviewing approaches include structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 1994). A semi-structured interview protocol provided insight into

participants' experiences as doctoral students and also provided flexibility to allow the researcher to develop relationships with the participants, as is customary in constructivist research. Further, because the role of the interviewer is established in the research setting, Frey and Fontana (1991) support the use of a semi-structured question format because it allows for both structure to achieve the goal of the research and free-flowing conversation as I developed relationships with the participants. To ensure the interview protocol was easily understood by the participants, the questions were pilot tested with a doctoral student who did not participate in the study prior to the official data collection process. Changes were made to the interview protocol based on the feedback from the pilot test.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) distinguish between three types of interview questions: main questions, probes, and follow-up questions. The main questions for the initial interview were as follows and questions for subsequent interviews emerged from the first interviews. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed probes and follow-up questions to emerge during the interviews. Each participant was asked to bring a pictorial representation of wellness to the first interview. Incorporation of this type of interview question (question 10) allowed the participants to share a story of their experiences that may flow more naturally than their responses to other interview questions. Additionally, the pictorial representation allowed participants to think about wellness both theoretically, as well as how they experience it in their lives.

- 1) Please tell me about yourself.
- 2) Please discuss your educational background.
- 3) Tell me about your choice to pursue a doctorate.

- 4) Please describe your experience as a doctoral student, including experience with academic requirements, peers, and faculty members.
- 5) Tell me about the peer culture in your program.
- 6) Tell me a time that describes your interaction with faculty in your program.
- 7) How would you describe your institution and your program to someone else?
- 8) Please describe your degree program, including academic requirements for completing your degree.
- 9) Where are you in terms of your progress towards completing your degree?
- 10) Please draw a picture of wellness as you see it. Please describe your representation.
- 11) What is your view of wellness?
- 12) Tell me about your history with wellness.
- 13) Tell me about times when you were well in your program.
- 14) What strategies do you use to be well during your program?
- 15) Describe times when your wellness was challenged in your program.
- 16) In what ways, if any, does the structure of your doctoral program support your wellness?
- 17) In what ways, if any, does the structure of your doctoral program challenge your wellness?
- 18) In what ways would you like to improve your wellness?
- 19) In what ways did your doctoral program address wellness?
- 20) How can your doctoral program assist in your work toward wellness?
- 21) What will you do differently in terms of being well after you complete your degree?
- 22) What can institutions of higher education do to promote doctoral students' wellness?

Written consent for the audio-recording of the interviews was obtained prior to starting the first interview. During the interview, participants selected a pseudonym for identification in the research. Following each interview, I spent time recording my impressions and thoughts while they are still at the forefront of my mind in a researcher journal (Janesick, 1999; Stake, 1995). I then transcribed the interviews for data analysis purposes. I cleaned up the transcripts to allow for readability and clarity by removing language, such as “um” and “you know.” These extraneous words were only removed if they did not alter the intended meanings or the voice of the participants (Poland, 2002). Many participants expressed embarrassment after seeing their spoken words in writing and asked me to further clean up their transcripts by removing overuse of the word “like” and other such casually spoken words, which I did.

Questions for the final interview emerged from the first series of interviews and the journal entries. The final interview served mainly as an opportunity to check with the participants about the data they previously provided in the first interview to ensure confidentiality of their identity. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized for the final interview as I sought to check meaning and initial themes with all participants. The questions were as follows:

- 1) How was your summer?
- 2) How is the fall semester going for you?
- 3) Where are you in terms of progressing toward your degree now?
- 4) What about your wellness, if anything, has changed in regards to what we discussed in May?

- 5) Any new challenges, positive things, revelations about your wellness as a doctoral student?
- 6) After reviewing the description of yourself and potential quotes to be used, what changes would you like made to mask your identity?

I also presented the initial findings to the participants during the second interview to gauge their agreement or disagreement with the themes.

The interviews occurred in an academic building at Armfield University, as it is appropriate to conduct the research in the setting of the case (Merriam, 1988). However, given the potentially varied residency statuses of the participants, they were given the option of another safe, quiet space if that is more convenient for them. One interview occurred in a restaurant near the participant's home. Both the location and the time of the interviews were mutually decided upon by the researcher and participant, with the participants' time preferences being most important.

*Journaling.* Research-generated documents, such as journals, provided additional data as throughout the data collection process (Merriam, 1998). Janesick (1999) supported the use of journaling in the research process "as an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and the participants" (p. 506). Journaling may provide more reflective thought than is given in the interview setting because of the participants' ability to develop their thoughts slowly and at their own pace (Janesick). Participants were asked to submit at least two journal entries to the researcher via email, 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.

The first journal prompt asked participants to consider an artifact that demonstrates their wellness and discuss how it influences their academic pursuits. The second journal prompt asked two questions:

- 1) How do you think your experience as a well doctoral student will influence your future career and life choices?
- 2) In what ways, if any, has your participation in this study influenced your understanding of, approach towards, or practice of wellness?

### *Data Analysis*

What constitutes data analysis differs among qualitative researchers and the use of various approaches depends upon the researcher's chosen epistemology. Huberman and Miles (2001) defined analysis as "three linked subprocesses: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification" (p. 553). First, data reduction occurs when the multitude of data collected becomes reduced dependent upon the purpose the research. The next step, data display, alters how the data looks from its raw form to summaries, synopses, vignettes, and diagrams (Huberman & Miles). Finally, Huberman and Miles see the interpretation phase as the last process in data analysis whereby the researcher makes meaning of the data. Wolcott's (2001) conception of analysis included three steps, description, analysis, and interpretation, in which each can lead into the next. Whereas Huberman and Miles began with the preliminary step of data reduction, Wolcott argued that analysis begins with description of the case answering the question "what is going on here?" (p. 574). Analysis involves discussion of themes and patterns, and finally



interpretation seeks to answer the question, “what is to be made of it all” (Wolcott, p. 575)? I utilized Wolcott’s approach to data analysis by first producing a description of participants, presenting my analysis from the stories of participants, and finally providing interpretation of the findings. This approach was appropriate because it allowed for flexibility in working with the unknown data generated from qualitative research.

Data analysis in qualitative research begins simultaneously with data collection and is on-going through the research process (Huberman & Miles, 2001; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Stake, 1995). For this study, I took an inductive approach to data analysis, 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, p. 557). During data collection, I began to develop commonalities, as well as highlight significant unique experiences of participants (Mertens, 2005). The transcriptions of the interviews and journal submissions were used for data analysis as I 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).

This analysis further 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), I developed themes that reflect

my understanding of the data (Glesne, 2006). This inductive approach to data analysis allowed for a discovering of the themes and patterns through the participants' voices (Patton, 2002).

Specifically, I recorded themes by hand and listed the participant's name and transcript line number beneath each theme. To further analyze the theme, I placed the entirety of the quotations creating an extensive document with the data. Next, I began to further review the data and separate the quotations to create the participant backgrounds and general themes. Finally, I reduced the quotations to highlight the relevant components of their experience and constructed analysis and narrative around the themes.

The interview questions and journal prompts were worded to promote reflection about the possibilities of students' doctoral experience. While challenges were presented by participants, the themes and recommendations included solutions to their struggles, as opposed to the common theme in literature about the doctoral student experience as negative and all-consuming. The topics discussed in the interviews and conveyed through participants' journals, and thus the analysis, continually remained focused on the possibilities of doctoral education.

### *Data Representation*

The representation of the findings described the participants, analyzed the commonalities and anomalies, and finally interpreted the findings to provide practical knowledge for faculty and administrators working with doctoral students (Wolcott, 1994). Participants' voices are prominent in the data representation as their words brought life to the themes through the use of quotes. In the representation, I sought to

present often time conflicting statements from participants to demonstrate the diversity of the well doctoral student experience.

### Trustworthiness

Developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness in qualitative research, includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria depend upon the implementation of various techniques employed throughout the research process to ensure quality (Creswell, 2007; Jones et al., 2006). Although “goodness” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) in research has been stated throughout this proposal as congruency in the theoretical perspective and methodological choices have been defended (Jones et al.), additional approaches were employed in this research to promote trustworthiness.

### *Credibility*

For credibility, the researcher is concerned with the “correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive their social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints” (Mertens, 2005, p. 254). Possible approaches for developing credibility in qualitative research include peer review of findings, member checks, and triangulation (Mertens). Member checks occurred during the final interview with each participant, in which I utilized the previous interview and journal data to clarify themes. I transcribed the initial interviews and reviewed the transcripts and the participants’ journals prior to the final interviews. By this time, I had amassed the initial experiences of the participants and had topics in which I sought further clarification and supporting and/or disconfirming experiences. Additionally, the participants reviewed the descriptions I composed of them in order to confirm the data, as well as ensure their

identity is fully masked. An expert reviewer, who is a doctoral student and familiar with qualitative research methods, served as a peer reviewer to ensure the themes I generated were reasonable given the data collected. Through the use of multiple data sources, interviews and journals, the data was triangulated. Additionally, the use of multiple participants also served to triangulate data within the case.

### *Transferability*

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of well doctoral students. However, in terms of application, “the burden of transferability is on the reader to determine the degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context” (Mertens, 2005, p. 256). To develop transferability of the study’s findings and conclusions for readers, as well as remain consistent with data representation in case study methodology, “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 3) provided information about the setting of the case, the backgrounds of the participants, and the participants’ experiences.

### *Dependability*

In qualitative research, knowing how data were collected and how research decisions were made enhances the dependability of the findings (Mertens, 2005). Dependability was established through an audit trail, whereby I kept detailed notes about how decisions were made in the research process. Further, “the audit trail provides sufficient information so that the reader can offer a judgment as to the appropriateness and thoroughness of the method” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 124).

### *Confirmability*

Finally, confirmability is enhanced when “qualitative data can be tracked to its source, and the logic that is used to interpret the data [is] made explicit” (Mertens, 2005, p. 257). The audit trail, member checks, and peer review all supported confirmability and the other areas of trustworthiness described above.

### *Authenticity*

Five components of authenticity, which are essential in establishing validity (credibility and transferability in qualitative work) in constructivist studies, include fairness and ontological, tactical, educative, and catalytic authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The inclusion of perspectives from each of the participants within this case study represent fairness as I sought “to act with energy to ensure that all voices in the inquiry effort [have] a chance to be represented in any texts” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 180). In the implications section of the research, the recommendations for change emerged directly from the data, thus upholding catalytic authenticity. Tactically, the goal of this research is to share it with members of the educational community through publications and conference presentations. The impact of this research was considered throughout the process to ensure that it is appropriate in terms of its recommendations (Shank, 2006).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Qualitative research involves complex ethical considerations because the inquiry is based on gathering data through the human relationship between the researcher and participants (Jones et al., 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). It is impossible to predict all ethical issues that may arise in a qualitative research study, but the researcher must be aware of the potential for ethical dilemmas at all points of the research process. Eisner

and Peshkin (1990) encouraged researchers to possess “the sensitivity to identify an ethical issue and the responsibility to feel committed to acting appropriately in regard to such issues” (p. 244). As I pursued this research, I anticipated and addressed common ethical issues noted in qualitative research literature in the design of the study (Magolda & Weems, 2002; Jones et al.). I remained vigilant throughout the research process and sought to pay “attention to ethical issues and [make] good judgments [to] increase the likelihood of behaving ethically” (Jones et al., p. 153).

When interviewing people, researchers should employ “extreme care...to avoid any harm to them” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 715). Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the research and the requirements and incentives for their participations through the information outlined in the informed consent. Although all aspects and assumptions of the study were not revealed as participants’ knowledge of them may influence their responses, there was no intentional deception. In the informed consent, I explained to participants that they would be asked to create a pseudonym to be used in any reporting of the data to ensure their confidentiality and any identifying statements would be altered, including their degree program and characteristics that could link their statements back to their identity.

Participants shared feelings about and experiences with their faculty members during the data collection. Negative statements that can be linked to one’s identity can be damaging to the faculty member’s professional credibility, the academic program’s reputation, and the student’s ability to be successful in their degree attainment because of the power held by a doctoral student’s advisor. Thus, I took several steps to protect the identity of the participants and the setting. Because I conducted research at an institution

where I was affiliated, masking the identity of the participants was important so they were comfortable sharing potentially negative experiences. The process for maintaining the confidentiality of the participants, their programs, and their faculty members was described in the previous section on participant selection and interviews.

Additionally, I did all that I could to prevent harm by allowing participants to choose not to answer questions they do not feel comfortable answering (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Jones et al., 2006). With a master's degree in a counseling-based college student personnel program and practical student affairs experience, I felt comfortable providing professional resources should their participation cause emotional distress (Fontana & Frey; Jones et al.).

Ultimately, the researcher's power in the study cannot be denied as all design and methodological decisions are made prior to participant involvement (Jones et al., 2006). However, through the co-creation of knowledge in constructivist research, there was an attempt to decrease the researcher's inherent power. One of the main areas of power I possessed in the research process was during the interview as I sought information from the participants. Although I did not specifically employ a feminist methodology, I used the feminist values of care and responsibility throughout the research process (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Another area of power was in my role of representing the data. I strove for understanding of participants' experiences in the interviews and worked with them to represent their experiences honestly.

### Conclusion

The findings of the study provide deeper understanding into the development of doctoral students. This study sought to uncover what is working in doctoral education in

an attempt to provide more effective support and developmental opportunities for students. As wellness continues to grow as a societal value, encouraging wellness in our society's leaders, future doctoral-degree recipients, is a reasonable approach to doctoral student development. This study describes the possibility of doctoral students living a well life while immersed in their academic endeavors and hopefully the influence will be that more people will begin doctoral studies and more students will complete what they start.



## CHAPTER IV

### STORIES OF WELL DOCTORAL STUDENTS

While similarities arose in the conceptualization of and meaning of wellness in their lives as doctoral students, each of the 12 participants entered their doctoral program with unique experiences that led them to seek a well life while pursuing their degree. For some participants, wellness was a consideration from the beginning of their program, whereas others made a conscious choice during their program to make wellness a priority to enhance their overall life satisfaction. The academic expectations on doctoral students and environment of graduate school presented challenges to wellness, but fulfilling the dream of obtaining a doctoral degree and contributing intellectually was also part of participants' sense of wellness. This chapter first presents the backgrounds and demographics of the participants, as well as their view of wellness. Following a description of the participants, commonalities and themes will be further explored in the next chapter.

The differences in participants' backgrounds and current situations as doctoral students provided diverse perspectives. Participants ranged in age from early 20's to late 50's, with six of the ten women participants considering themselves non-traditionally aged in their 40's and 50's. Ten participants were either married or partnered and three of

them chose to live away from their partner for at least a portion of the week to attend classes and complete academic requirements. Two participants were male and all participants self-identified as White. Five participants had children, some of whom were out of their homes living independently and other children who were completing their high school education and still living at home. In terms of stage of degree progress, three participants were in the entry stage, seven in the integration stage, and two in the candidacy stage (Gardner, 2009a). Participants represented ten academic programs, seven from the College of Education and Psychology and three from the College of the Sciences. Only one participant was pursuing her Ph.D. on a part-time basis while she maintained a full-time job. As participants are described, their programs and their specific characteristics are intentionally vague to protect their anonymity and limit the ability of readers to identify their academic program. While their experiences were positive for the most part, they also shared experiences that challenged their wellness.

#### Leah

In her mid-thirties, Leah always dreamed of pursuing her doctorate and viewed the intellectual challenge of coursework, research, and writing as part of her well life. Leah was pursuing a psychology-related degree, but had transitioned to the on-campus Ph.D. program after completing much of her content area courses through an off-campus program. She transitioned from her original program to complete the research-based courses and additional requirements of the doctorate, including the comprehensive exam, research proposal, and dissertation. At the time of the study, Leah was beginning her second year on campus in the Ph.D. program with the goal of completing her final 12

coursework credits within the year and planning to take her comprehensive exam and propose her dissertation topic in the fall.

When she began the Ph.D. program, Leah moved from the metro area an hour away to be closer to the institution following her recent divorce from her partner of six years. However, while Leah appreciated being able to focus on her academic endeavors by living near the institution for a year, she decided that much of her support system was in the metro area and moved there to support her wellness. Leah had been in a new partnered relationship for a year and they began living together after her first year in the program. Originally from the metro area, Leah felt fortunate to have close family and friends nearby.

Prior to choosing to pursue her doctorate on campus full time, Leah worked in education as a teacher. She left her teaching position when she moved near the institution and held an administrative graduate assistant position on campus and supplemented her income with an outside tutoring job once a week in the evening. As she began to work on her comprehensive exam and dissertation proposal, Leah decided to leave her graduate assistantship. She chose to incur additional loans in order to focus on achieving her academic goals and allow time for other areas of her life she deemed important, such as nurturing relationships with family and friends.

Leah described her history with wellness and shared how self-awareness was the major contributor to her wellness. She considered herself someone who always sought opportunities to seek wellness, but could not recall her family promoting wellness as she grew up. Leah described her divorce as a turning point, when she decided to pursue wellness after characterizing her life as not well. Leah felt her marriage was unhealthy

and she did not spend time reflecting on it, which allowed emotional strain to continue. After her divorce, by deciding to pursue her doctorate, which her ex-partner did not support, Leah regained her sense of wellness:

So this has been the most well period of my life, which I think is sort of ironic because there are so many people talking about graduate school as a horrible, stressful thing and I think some of my [previous graduate] program was like that, but I am really happy to be here and choosing to be here, so it just feels good.

Leah's view of wellness rested upon understanding herself and making decisions which coincided with how she envisioned her life, including being a doctoral student:

Wellness is about self-awareness and from that every other aspect of wellness can come. So, it is highly subjective, highly individualistic...I think that individual consciousness is really what I see as the well spring. That is where all the other decisions about things I might stereotypically categorize as wellness, health, fitness, diet, interpersonal relationships. I think it all comes from that individual consciousness.

Leah described American culture as unsupportive of wellness because of the emphasis on the "no pain, no gain" philosophy and how work is rarely characterized as fun or fulfilling.

#### Laura

As a student completing the second year of her education-related doctoral program, Laura's experience was different from the other participants in this study because of her part-time status. However, her philosophy of and approach to wellness was similar to other participants. She taught full-time in a town approximately 20 minutes from Armfield University and lived with her husband, two high school-age children, and two pets. Her husband worked in the technology field and they enjoyed retreating to their

vacation home in a neighboring state. Laura turned 50 during the duration of this research and began her doctoral studies after obtaining a master's degree from the same program at Armfield University, also on a part-time status. She was focusing on completing her final six classes and anticipated graduating two years from the time of the study. Laura sought to be a faculty member to increase her impact in education from the students she had been teaching for seven years to educating future professionals in teacher preparation programs, who would in turn influence even more children's educational experiences.

For Laura, wellness was not always a priority in her life. Although Laura received her master's degree from Armfield University, her experience as a doctoral student was much different. Wellness and re-incorporating parts of her life she began to neglect when she started her doctoral degree became an approach to achieving academically. After a challenging first year in her program, Laura considered withdrawing from school. The prescriptive nature and clearly-defined timeline of her master's degree program assisted Laura during the challenging times of balancing multiple priorities. However, her experience as a doctoral student seemed unstructured and ambiguous. With limited time to complete assignments and wrestle with new material as a doctoral student, Laura felt unwell. She chose to make wellness a priority and re-framed her perspective, allowing doctoral studies to become a part of her wellness and not consume her entire life:

Wellness would be having all the balls in the air and feeling ok about everything. And so the first year of my doctoral program was a very unwell year and I think I let my own self just get run over totally and it was always a struggle. So wellness has really become more of a focus for me over these past two semesters.

When asked about her view of wellness, Laura said "in general I would say it would include physical health and mental health and just a feeling of being able to do what I need to do and being able to do it." Being able to incorporate various components

of her life and feel like she was doing all of them well was important for Laura's wellness. During the first year of her doctorate, Laura did not feel as though she was able to maintain all areas of her life. However, after the positive influence of a faculty member outside of her program who provided a realistic perspective of the dissertation process, she reframed her situation.

### Robin

Robin, a woman in her early 50's, completed the first year of her doctoral program in an education-related program while participating in the study and was fulfilled by being able to pursue her degree. Married with two college-age children, Robin lived away from her husband during the school week because their home was over an hour and a half away from Armfield University. After leaving a three-year long tumultuous work experience in education and several personal challenges with deaths in her family the year prior to beginning her doctorate, Robin strongly desired a change of pace, which she was finding in the intellectual stimulation and challenge of life as a doctoral student. Because she lived away from her husband, Robin was attempting to complete her degree quickly by taking an overload of credits each semester. Although she had just completed the first year of her doctorate at the time of the study, because she was pursuing her degree on an accelerated timeline, Robin began working on her comprehensive exam and dissertation proposal at the beginning of her second year. Outside of the classroom, Robin was a life-long learner and enjoyed reading approximately five to eight books each week.

For Robin, wellness was, simply put, “the balance of mind and body.” She explained that wellness can be represented by a scale and that her experience as a doctoral student allowed for her to feel balanced in her wellness:

I think of wellness as well-being, a balance between mind and body and if I am balancing the attention I am paying to my physical health and to my social health, that is connecting with other people, and balancing that against what I am doing with my mind, which is the intellectual challenge and the emotional stability, I think wellness is keeping those fairly balanced.

As she described her wellness, the mind and body were the two areas she focused on in her experience as a well person. When she was with her husband, Robin walked five to six miles several times a week to promote her physical health. As she was getting older, Robin found that walking and remaining active helped alleviate many of the aches and pains that began at her age. The area of her wellness she was most conscious about was the emotional area:

Overall, emotionally, I find I am pretty even-keel and I am fairly hands-off in terms of what I expect from other people. I guess I do not make expectations for other people. My brother comes and spends every summer with us and he says to me, when you go to the core of your being, he says I go to my emotional place and that is probably true. I react emotionally to lots of things. I do not get angry very easily but when I hurt, I hurt a lot. So, I try to monitor my emotional health when there are things I cannot do anything about, I just cannot...But I think that I do have to be conscious about it and I do think the emotional piece gets out of whack faster than any of the rest of them.

Robin’s experience highlighted how participants in this study are challenged by wellness, but made choices to pursue wellness by reflecting on their lives and developing self-awareness of areas where they continue to struggle.

Dave

Toward the end of his four-year doctoral student career, Dave was in the dissertation phase of completing his degree in a subject-specific education field. In his

mid 20's, Dave had been a full-time student the entirety of his doctoral student career. Dave served as either a teaching or research assistant each semester and appreciated the opportunity to teach and be supported financially throughout his education. Dave relocated with his wife of four years from out-of-state to attend Armfield University. His wife worked full-time in education and was a major part of his wellness both in terms of educating him about the topic because of her professional knowledge and by helping him keep other priorities while he pursued his studies. As he discussed his sense of wellness, his wife consistently contributed to his feeling of wellness. Dave's view of wellness included addressing the reality of one's life, enjoying the good parts, and possessing and employing coping skills when necessary:

I think the real life version would probably be something along the lines of somebody who does the best that they can and finds a way to get through things and makes sure that their priorities are attended to. Does what is good for themselves, as well as what is good for the things that are important to [them].

Dave would not have considered himself well during his master's degree program five years ago. He described himself as overweight as a master's student and after ending a relationship with a former girlfriend, Dave began to evaluate his lifestyle. By reading several self-help books, Dave found the main idea to be self-awareness and the importance of understanding both the positive and negative aspects of himself. Following a book titled *Love Hunger*, Dave explored the reasons for his unhealthy diet. After addressing emotional issues, he was able to understand behaviors that were impeding his ability to be well. Self-awareness was the foundation of Dave's sense of wellness. Many other participants also underscored the importance of self-reflection when experiencing challenges, both academic and personal, to be able to thrive. Living as a well person was a decision he made and continued to make on a daily basis:



For me it was very conscious. I do not think it just happened because I was not raised in a very healthy home. And I certainly was not in a very good place when I started graduate school. So for me it was very conscious. I had to make the decision to be better.

Katie

Soon to be 50 years old in a subject-specific education degree program, Katie was also close to reaching her goal of the Ph.D. with only two semesters remaining. She was married and had one high school-aged daughter. Katie's husband was very supportive of her doctoral pursuits, but she sometimes felt she was unable to provide family-life structure for her daughter because of the ever-changing demands on her as a student.

She previously worked in public education after volunteering in her daughter's classroom. Although she entered her program with a master's degree, it was in an unrelated field and thus started her doctorate as a master's en route student; she was initially admitted to first obtain a master's and then a doctorate. But, Katie was quickly moved to the Ph.D. route, allowing her to bypass several master's level courses after a faculty member recognized her success in the classroom. She worked as a teaching assistant throughout her program with the exception of one semester during her second year, which she took off as she re-evaluated her priorities and the doctoral program.

Katie was recommended to the study by another participant and so she did not necessarily self-identify as well when the initial call for participants was published. Katie's experience with stress at the beginning of her graduate school career brought an unexplored personal issue to the forefront. Her previous life struggles were no longer avoidable and Katie began counseling to address the issue. Although Katie would not have considered herself unwell prior to beginning counseling, after becoming more self-

aware, she considered herself more well as a doctoral student than she has felt at other points in her life:

So, ironically, the four years, has been very stressful and difficult, and yet in some ways, because I finally started dealing with this issue, I probably had the most growth. And I think after graduate school, knowing myself much better and I have much more skills and strengths, but it has also been a lot of work.

Katie shared two ideas about wellness; the first was her thinking of wellness as an individual process of pursuing equilibrium among the mind, body, and soul, and the second was wellness as characterized by one's relationships with other people and things in the world. Her perspective on wellness included various components of wellness, as well as her view of wellness as a process as opposed to an outcome. As she explored her personal history with wellness, she clarified that wellness was an on-going process:

And one of the first things I realized that was confused in my mind was wellness as an outcome versus wellness as a process. So, wellness as an outcome, I perceived as this sort of nirvana Buddhist state, which I am never going to achieve, certainly not in grad school. So then I thought well does that make you not well in some sense? And this is sort of where, in my own personal journey, I began to think more of it as a process. So, I thought of wellness as more of an outlook on the world. So, I tried to say it is a process of seeking meaning, fulfillment and growth in all aspects of life. And ideally, with an open and accepting attitude. And then I qualified that by saying, wellness is not dichotomous cause...you are either well or you are not well, but I do not think I could put myself in those categories. So, it is more of a matter of degree.

Katie articulated the perspective shared by many participants that wellness was a constant process with consciousness at the helm. Katie emerged from her doctoral studies more conscious of herself and planned to use that knowledge as went forward in her teaching and mentoring of students in her career.

### Ruby

In her mid 20's and recently married, Ruby began her psychology-related master's degree at Armfield University immediately after completing her bachelor's

degree in psychology from a small institution in the Midwest. Following completion of her master's degree, Ruby was admitted to the doctoral degree program in the same field. Ruby lived near the institution for the first four years as a graduate student, got married and without as many responsibilities on campus, moved approximately 40 minutes away from campus with her husband. As a master's degree student, Ruby worked as a waitress, but as a doctoral student taught undergraduate classes to meet her financial needs and obtain professional experience. After taking a full load of classes for two years and teaching two classes each semester, Ruby completed her required coursework. She was working on her comprehensive exam and continued progressing towards her degree, but would have also liked to continue taking classes because of her love of learning.

Ruby did not think about the idea of wellness prior to reading the call for participants, yet after being introduced to the topic, began to reflect on her history with wellness. She wondered if childhood asthma and her subsequent inability to exercise had led her to loving exercise as an adult. Ruby described her family's influence on her wellness pursuits with her mother role modeling physical, spiritual, and environmental wellness. Because of her mother's influence, Ruby enjoyed taking care of herself, eating healthy food, exercising, and nurturing her spiritual health:

And I think part of being healthy is not just physically healthy, it is also mentally. And so my faith has played a big part in that. Just staying away from crap that I do not need to have in my mind all the time. Focusing on a higher power. So, having that balance where there is always some physical activity and some faith activity in every day, that is ideal, but it does not always happen. I think that helps me maintain wellness.

Similar to Katie's view of wellness, Ruby shared her perspective of wellness as a process, which continually changed depending upon her responsibilities and life circumstances. Ruby was able to manage multiple responsibilities well by determining

how much time to spend on each area and recognizing perfection cannot be reached.

Wellness ebbed and flowed for Ruby:

It is just kind of up and down all the time and sometimes I neglect exercising for two weeks straight and I know that everything else is suffering because of that and I have to go back and realize I need to put some time into this.

An additional component to wellness Ruby recognized in her first interview prior to getting married was financial wellness and its influence on her overall sense of wellness. As she considered combining finances with her future husband, Ruby thought she would have to worry about finances. When she worried, Ruby felt unwell and tending to her financial wellness became a new priority for her.

#### Helena

Coming directly from her undergraduate degree at Armfield University, Helena completed her first year in an applied health-related doctoral program. Slightly different from the research-oriented doctoral degrees being obtained by the other eleven participants, Helena's program was very structured to be completed within a certain time frame and more emphasis was placed on practical skills, as opposed to research and writing. Originally from a suburb approximately an hour away from Armfield University where her parents still live, Helena lived near the university and was single and dating. She worked part-time as a graduate assistant during the year and obtained additional financial assistance from her parents. Helena enjoyed spending time with her friends from her undergraduate experience who remained in the area.

Her view of wellness included areas concerning the individual and also their relationships with others in the world:

I think being well balanced plays into being well. Just being really well balanced and being well in your emotional state, in your physical state, socially being well.

Getting along with people is important because you can have relationships, but if all those relationships are broken or tattered, I do not think that is well. Physically well, emotionally well, socially well...

Helena believed she had been well for most of her life, and acknowledged her parent's positive influence. Thus, she did not need to re-evaluate her wellness during the first year of her doctorate like others in the study. She discussed family, social support, healthy eating, exercise, professional development, and faith as integral to her sense of wellness. Helena had close relationships with her sister, parents, extended relatives and friends who provided support to her in her studies. Her friends also gave her a social outlet outside of her academic peer group, which provided time to pursue non-academic interests. Helena saw the typical areas of healthy eating and exercise as promoting her wellness, but also shared a unique perspective about the role of pets in her sense of wellness:

Pets because I think that animals bring a lot of joy to your life, so for me, having pets is important. I want a puppy, but you cannot have puppies at my apartment. They just bring so much joy to your life that I think that it is really important to have something like that and being able to show kindness to animals I think really shows like a type of person you are, kind of your compassion for animals.

For Helena, her education and faith are also important components of her wellness:

Another important part of wellness is your education and knowledge. Being able to be educated and be knowledgeable about things in the world and your own profession and having a specialty in your profession and making that decision. The other thing I thought of is faith and having that in your life is really important. Just that there is something bigger than you out there and being able to trust in that. Helps you get through the tough times in life and being able to trust in someone.

#### Abigail

A woman in her mid-30's pursuing an education-related doctoral degree, Abigail had been married for five years and lived approximately 45 minutes from campus near her husband's work place. Abigail completed two years of her program, comprehensive

exams, and was working on her dissertation proposal during the time of the study. Prior to beginning her doctoral degree, Abigail taught for twelve years and after restructuring at her school, she and her husband decided it was a good time for her to pursue her dream of a doctorate. Abigail maintained two part-time assistantships, one as a teaching assistant and the other as a research assistant for an administrative department on campus. In addition, she held a flexible, part-time job for approximately four to six hours a day. Her part-time job provided a reprieve from the academic rigor of her other responsibilities.

Originally from an area near Armfield University, Abigail spent a great deal of time with her family consisting of three siblings and nine nieces and nephews. She was also very active in her church as her religion and spirituality were part of her core being. Abigail presented wellness as “that happy zone between reality and our expectations. The larger that gap is between our expectations and these wishes out of life, and our reality, whether it’s physical, emotional, spiritual, or relational, that creates unhealthiness.”

Abigail felt wellness was a part of her life growing up in a religious home where holistic wellness was emphasized. Living in a religious, family-centered environment, Abigail viewed wellness as incorporating healthy relationships, nutritious foods, and an active lifestyle. Experiencing wellness as a child provided Abigail with the impetus to pursue wellness as a doctoral student. However, Abigail experienced a period where her wellness was challenged during her first marriage:

During my first marriage, I became unwell as far as just trying to hide from reality. I mean, unhealthy eating, lots of caffeine, lots of sugar, just so I could go go go, 24/7 so that I did not have to be home and did not have to deal with my broken dreams and expectations. And then after that marriage, [I] continued that same lifestyle because I had to make it financially and then it just became a habit.

Like Robin, the pursuit of the doctoral degree, although challenging, was an integral component of Abigail's wellness, as she sought to achieve her professional goals. Abigail experienced a clashing of her approach to her studies with the expectations of others in academia. She shared, "[they have a] very narrow definition of success and I can either choose to buy into that definition and then work to achieve it, or I can construct my own definition, which I have chosen to do."

Although Abigail saw herself as well, she continued to explore ways to improve her wellness. Abigail considered various aspects of her wellness, including physical, relational, spiritual, and emotional components:

I would like to sleep more. That would be nice. I would like to eat better because of physical wellness. Relational wellness. I would like to not take so long to make connections. Spiritual wellness. I would like to spend more time on my faith, developing personally, as opposed to doing things because sometimes faith is in actions. So faith-wise, I would like to develop more of a relationship versus do things for spiritual reasons. And emotionally, I would like to I think be more of an intrinsic problem-solver versus just an emotional reactor. I think instead of reacting emotionally with self-criticism or anger, to just kind of logically say, here is where I am at, I do not like this feeling, what do I need to change to change this feeling? Instead of just letting the feeling take over.

#### Cassie

Cassie, who was in her early 50's, returned to graduate school to pursue her doctorate in an education-related program twelve years after completing her master's degree in the same field. She previously worked in learning and development for large corporations and a few years before she began her studies, started saving to be able to attend school full-time. She supplemented her savings with adjunct teaching and advising at a local college. In terms of degree progress, Cassie had three courses remaining along with the additional non-coursework degree requirements during the study. She married her long-time partner three years ago, but they lived apart while she pursued her degree.

Cassie appreciated her husband's support as she pursued her long-held educational goal. Like Robin, Cassie maintains a small apartment near campus and commuted to and from home and campus twice a week.

Cassie's conceptualization of wellness was expressed using three colors, blue, green, and yellow, each representing different parts of wellness. She thought of wellness as an opportunity for growth as a joyous experience:

When I thought about wellness, three colors always came to mind. The blues merging into the greens and into the yellows. The blue represents the calming. The green also was calming, but it is fresh, it is new, it is growth. And the yellow represents just light, lightness, happiness, and joy. So it is just the three colors, kind of come together, it is kind of just a lightness of being. Not meant to be cold, not meant to be hot, but again, cooling, calming, fresh, growing, new, warmth, happiness.

Cassie incorporated the following three components of wellness as she experienced wellness in her life: love, health, and spirituality. In terms of love, Cassie described a wonderful relationship with her husband and being able to do what she loved. Her health was good and she concluded attitude and outlook influence physical health as she continually attempted to remain free of illness in order to complete her academic responsibilities. Cassie's positive attitude stemmed from a book she read. She shared how having two of the three areas "off kilter" became noticeable and when she felt most unwell:

And love, health, and spirituality have always been in my mind and when I have been out of balance, it has been when two of those things are off kilter. When I am most balanced is obviously when all three things are working in harmony...And I have a great attitude and I do not know if you are familiar with the book, *The Secret*. It is by Ronda Burn. It can be kind of new agey, but it is a whole way of coming from a place of appreciation and gratitude. It is not religious per se, but it draws on some of the great philosophers and it is really about what you think about is what you bring about. So that is kind of the underpinning. *The Secret* is presented in a more Joe Average vernacular kind of thing. I



mean it is philosophical and esoteric, but those are the things I hang on to. Again, coming from a place of appreciation and a place of gratitude. I think everything else follows you that way in that healthy light area. What you think about, you bring about.

Cassie sought to positively influence her life through positive thinking and self-talk.

### Elizabeth

Elizabeth's situation was unique at Armfield University, so her background is intentionally vague to maintain confidentiality. She worked for 30 years in her profession prior to pursuing her doctorate and was in the midst of the dissertation phase of an education-specific degree program with her eventual career goal being to teach students training for a specific occupation. Her program was an off-campus program with distance education components, which did not require Elizabeth to come to Armfield University campus. However, she felt isolated from the academic environment and felt she needed the opportunity to focus on obtaining her degree. Elizabeth moved from her rural home community in a different state to the city where Armfield University is located. She moved from her husband and high school-age daughter and maintained communication with them via phone and the internet for a year. She was preparing to do so for another year until she graduates. Elizabeth also had two other adult children who no longer lived at home, but one of them, a member of the military, was deployed out of the country during the last year which caused her to worry about his safety.

Elizabeth's conceptualization of wellness included physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects. She shared a unique experience where she felt the external pressures of the doctoral program encouraged her to become well. Elizabeth began her program overweight, but wanted to lose weight. As she envisioned herself defending her oral comprehensive exam, Elizabeth thought people may view her as less intelligent or less

motivated, which encouraged her to begin the process of weight loss. The external motivation of wanting to pass her comprehensive exam helped Elizabeth not only succeed in becoming physically healthier, but it also promoted her mental wellness. She saw a connection between her academic success and wellness:

I feel like I am accomplishing something. I like it when I can see that my thinking has become more advanced, more complex, higher level thinking. It is like, oooh, some of this is sinking in. I am thinking better. And so physically better, you know mentally better.

Elizabeth was still challenged emotionally being away from her family:

Emotionally, that would be the big challenge because I am away from my family, my husband, my children. I missed prom, I missed [final games and performances], and I missed Mother's Day and I missed [my child's] 18th birthday. All of these within the past couple months and so then you kind of think, what in the world are you doing? So, there is the emotional thing that is a little bit different.

Elizabeth recognized that her wellness was challenged in her doctoral program, but also how being in school contributed to her wellness. She was comforted in knowing that her challenges with wellness were temporary and that she would regain her social connections and relationships with her family once she graduates. Following her year at Armfield University, Elizabeth's youngest child moved in with her to begin college, which presented a new challenge as she negotiated attending to her child while attempting to remain focused on her timeline for completion.

### Kyle

In his mid-30's pursuing an education-related degree in a specific subject, Kyle was in the process of completing his final course and working on his dissertation proposal. He obtained his master's degree in the subject from a nearby institution and after moving to another state to teach, chose to move back to the state where Armfield

University was located because of his social connections in the area and the strong reputation of the program. Kyle had been serving as a teaching assistant each semester during his three years on campus and during the summers at nearby colleges. Outside of academics, Kyle enjoyed spending time with friends in the metro area and considered moving from the home he purchased near the institution to be closer to his friends since his need to be on campus had decreased as he progressed in his degree.

When asked how he views wellness, Kyle saw it as being balanced. “You have the right balance of everything and you have the right connections to whatever things are important to you. You are not overly focused on one thing, there are other things that are important too.” Kyle took pride in his ability to focus on completing his academic requirements and obtaining teaching and research experiences to contribute to his professional marketability. In terms of his own experience with wellness, his view coincided with how he experienced wellness as a doctoral student, though he shared the thought that it is a journey, not a destination:

I am probably not that good at it in some cases. And that varies from time to time because I can tend to be too focused on some things. I probably do not eat very well as far as like lots of fruits and vegetables and that kind of thing. I think just some of the little things, like I carry too much weight on my back, which is why my back is messed up. [In my previous career], I was way too focused on my job, so that was not good. So I am aware that there is just always an excuse for not doing it. I think I have actually done pretty good this past semester finding connections with things that are meaningful to me. Actually it is kind of interesting because two years ago, I taught off campus during the semester, I have done it often during the summer, but that was just very overwhelming and it was also right after I bought my house and I just had a lot of things with that going on. And this semester I did a lot better at that. It might have to do with the courses I had. Lighter course load or reasonable teaching assistant type things. I think finding those other things, finding a balance. You are doing your Ph.D. or whatever you are doing, but then you have things outside of that to balance that out.

Kyle felt most well when there were multiple areas of his life, not only academics. As circumstances changed, whether because of workload or living situation, he saw how his sense of wellness evolved.

### Lucy

After living abroad for many years, Lucy and her family relocated to the area near Armfield University to allow her to pursue her doctorate. She was married and had three children, though only one moved with them and continued to live at home. Lucy began her psychology-related program last year and because she did not obtain a master's degree prior to enrolling, planned to take five years to complete her degree. Lucy described herself as a member of the "sandwich generation" because she was taking care of both her child who had special needs and her ailing parents who lived in a different state. One of the biggest challenges she faced was her husband's inability to obtain employment in his chosen profession, which was not only difficult financially, but also in terms of her husband's sense of purpose.

To contribute to the family's financial needs and support her education, Lucy worked as a graduate assistant in an on-campus administrative department serving students. She had recently changed graduate assistantship positions because she did not feel she could focus on her academics like she needed to with the demands of her graduate assistant position.

When asked to explore her perspective of wellness, Lucy used the metaphor of a grapevine:

I am not terribly well-versed in the agriculture of grapevines, but I am picturing a grapevine that has been around for a while. It has this huge stump, almost a trunk, because what happens is every year, that trunk is pruned so that it can put its energy into a limited number of leaves...the fruit is actually much more plentiful

that way because if you let the grapevine just grow, you would have a lot more vines, but it will not produce as much fruit. And I feel like balance and wellness requires taking good care of that trunk, but also clipping off perfectly good things in order for the greater good...So I am seeing this living organism that is changing and growing and maturing and some things are being lopped off, but for a purpose, and other things are being fed, but keeping that balance, and keeping that understanding that you cannot just let it all go wild and do everything because then you have got nothing.

Lucy analogized the grapevine to her approach toward being a well doctoral student:

Like instead of saying, I cannot do something because I am in this program, I say, I choose to prune this one, so that this one will grow more. At the same time I am choosing balance because I am not going to let this program so focus me.

Lucy made a decision to reduce her course load because of the needs of her family.

Additionally, she continued to focus on her personal wellness because she could easily allow the needs of others to overshadow the importance of taking care of herself. Lucy's view included recognition of letting some things go to pursue others. She believed that a strong foundation must first be present to know what to focus on at certain times, and when sacrifices must be made.

### Overview of Wellness Perspectives

Participants presented their unique views of wellness and how it applied to their lives as doctoral students. I will synthesize the perspectives of wellness shared by participants above to develop an initial conceptualization of doctoral student wellness. Different components of wellness, the interconnected nature of wellness, the consideration of wellness as a process, and the consciousness associated with wellness efforts are discussed.

### *Components of Wellness*

Recall the various definitions (Dunn, 1961; World Health Organization, 1947) and different components of wellness (Ardell, 1977; Hettler, 1980; Ryan & Travis, 1981;

Witmer et al., 1993) discussed in the review of literature. Just as multiple theories of wellness exist in research and practice, so were there multiple components of wellness articulated by participants. Balance was used by Robin, Helena, Lucy, Kyle, and Ruby in their definitions of wellness. The general consensus among participants of the components of wellness included physical, emotional, intellectual, and social aspects.

Katie cited the well-known trio, body, mind and spirit, and also included relationships as the areas of wellness in her life. Beyond just being social, Katie, Helena, and Abigail highlighted the importance of healthy relationships with others. Cassie described the social component as love, which promoted deep relationships as part of wellness. Spirituality and faith were also mentioned by Abigail, Cassie, Elizabeth, and Helena as components of their wellness. Robin separated the mind component to include both emotional and intellectual stability. Financial wellness was an added area of wellness by Rudy and Helena as they recognized money issues influencing their emotional health. While most participants agreed on which aspects compose wellness, some variation was presented.

#### *Interconnected Nature of Wellness*

Another main similarity in the participants' conceptualizations of wellness was its interconnected nature. Participants mostly noticed the connection between their physical wellness and other areas when they neglected exercise and healthy eating. As participants became busy with academic and work responsibilities, physical wellness was the first area to sacrifice as Dave explained:

I'm very good at [exercising] when I feel like I have time to be good at it. So, like during the summer, we exercise a lot and during those kind of lolls during the middle of semesters, we go snowboarding and things like that. But it's one of the

first things I drop when it's crunch time, so there's that side of it. But I think it's really vital for me for feeling good.

However, participants recognized other areas of their wellness being affected by the lack of attention to their physical wellness.

Katie found that her emotional wellness was jeopardized when she did not tend to her physical wellness. "Keeping myself physically active was important because I did find when I was fatigued or didn't exercise, then that's when I couldn't control myself emotionally." She also reflected on her spinning class:

They represent balance in that it is important to me to maintain both a healthy mind and body. I truly feel my intellectual work in the program benefits from maintaining physical wellness. Exercise also moderates my emotions. Given that I am often slightly sleep deprived during most of the semester, which tends to make me less calm emotionally, the exercise serves to offset the lack of sleep...Sometimes working my body helps me think more productively, especially about upsetting things.

Although Ruby struggled with incorporating physical activity each day, she sought it out because of its benefits on her overall wellness. "So, having that balance where there's always some physical activity and some faith activity in every day, that's like ideal, but it doesn't always happen. I think that helps me maintain wellness."

Lucy's sentiment that physical activity was not always enjoyable, but was always necessary, was true for many people:

I think the wellness times were where I would sit down and make conscious choices to do what was best, as opposed to what was most urgent. Conscious choices to get back into exercise because when I'm more physically fit, which is obviously not my forte, I'm more mentally and emotionally fit as well. I think physical health for me is one that I have to constantly kind of like push myself to do. It's easier for to stay connected relationally and spiritually and emotionally, but to do what it takes to keep me physically well is the piece that's most challenging for me. As soon as things start to go haywire, it's real easy to skip the gym. And when I get too many papers in one week, it's real easy to snack too much. Not taking care of myself physically means that I'm less able to do all those other things. So, it's a matter of self-preservation, but I don't love doing it.

Elizabeth's physical activity of swimming connected with her academic pursuits because it allowed her time to think while engaging her body:

When I first get into the pool and start swimming laps my mind is very much on my physical self, what stroke I am doing, which lap I'm on, how do I feel...heart rate, breathing, muscle strength, etc.. But as I continue to swim laps my mind lets loose of the physical and enters the imaginative. I imagine all sorts of things...what will I look like in a year from now, where will I end out teaching. However, as more time passes my mind leaves the more concrete things and goes to the more abstract. My imagination engages on my dissertation topic. Ideas flow, sometimes I have a mini-eureka moment. I feel empowered by swimming. I finish swimming thinking I will succeed and get that Ph.D.

Although participants did not directly relate their wellness to academic success, connections between their physical well-being and intellectual performance were noted.

#### *Wellness as a Process*

Participants highlighted key characteristics of wellness. Most notable was the idea of wellness as a process. As Katie processed wellness versus non-wellness, she found it not to be dichotomous, but rather a continuum with different degrees of wellness. Cassie viewed wellness as a developmental process where there is growth, which was agreed upon by Katie who expressed wellness as "a process of seeking meaning, fulfillment, and growth." Kyle also saw wellness as a "journey, not a destination" he can reach. Elizabeth experienced the process of wellness as she expressed challenges to her social wellness as a student, but looked forward to regaining her social wellness when she had more time to devote to friendships.

Related to the process-oriented characteristic of wellness is the idea of wellness fluctuating depending on a person's life circumstances. Ruby shared how her focus on wellness changes depending upon her course requirements. Additionally sacrificing certain areas of life was a necessity for Lucy to feel well. The idea of fulfilling



responsibilities to the best of their ability was necessary for Laura, Dave, and Ruby's wellness. Dave described a well person as someone "who does the best they can." As Dave, Leah, and Katie experienced wellness changing throughout their doctoral experience, they found awareness of and reflection on their wellness efforts as key to their pursuits. Lucy reflected:

I thought about it coming in and yes, I had to re-evaluate it after the first semester. And then re-evaluate it again after the spring semester. And I may not have reevaluated quite enough or I would have taken one less course. No, I would have still done it. Sometimes there are course sequences that kind of force you to make a choice too. There was a course sequence, which is the reason why I took the additional hours. I think that wellness is an on-going re-evaluation and it doesn't just happen all by itself.

### Conclusion

The participants discussed several aspects of wellness and when combined, wellness was a process requiring conscious decisions and self-awareness to decide what is working and which areas need more attention. From participants' perspectives, wellness was not being able to do everything, but rather being able to do everything each individual can do at one time. Those who identified as well continued to struggle, but developed and utilized coping skills to overcome challenges and found ways to be well. For the participants, wellness included physical, social, emotional, spiritual, financial, and intellectual components, which were interconnected and at times influenced each other.

Themes emerged as participants recalled their histories with and perspectives of wellness. The next chapter will explore additional commonalities among the participants and address specific ways doctoral education can support students' wellness.

## CHAPTER V

### THEMES

Each participant's view of and history with wellness was unique, yet commonalities abounded in their approach to becoming a well doctoral student. They also shared similar challenges experienced both in and out of the classroom, the positive aspects of their experience that contributed to their wellness, and how their experience as a well doctoral student would influence their future career choices. This chapter explores the themes that arose from the interview and journal data using the participants' voices to address the research questions.

The research questions guiding this study included:

- Q1 How do doctoral students make meaning of wellness as they pursue their doctoral degree?
- Q2 How do doctoral students pursue wellness in their degree program?
- Q3 How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' sense of wellness?
- Q4 How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' ability to pursue wellness?
- Q5 How do doctoral students' choices around wellness influence their academic pursuits?

The responses I received after sharing my research interest of doctoral student wellness varied from interest to doubt. As seen from the experiences of participants,

wellness was a conscious approach students took while engaging in the intellectual challenge of doctoral studies. The themes developed from this research are: 1) the negative narrative of doctoral studies, 2) remaining well through non-academic challenges, 3) structural and interpersonal components of doctoral education and their influence on wellness, 4) making choices to support wellness, and 5) how participants will pursue wellness following graduation. The themes are presented in this order because they followed a spectrum of participants' exposure to doctoral education prior to beginning their degrees to personal and academic experiences as students, followed by ways they overcome challenges to their wellness, and finally how they envision pursuing wellness in their post-doctoral lives at the end of the spectrum.

#### The Negative Narrative of Doctoral Studies

Despite the pervasive narrative of one's doctoral education being the worst time of their life, many study participants discussed conscientious efforts towards wellness as important. Whether wellness was a priority before they entered their program or it became one after experiencing challenges in their program, the participants realized they felt self-aware and as such, made conscious choices about their wellness. Accompanying the commonality of participants' choices to support their wellness was the responsibility they took for their experience, education, and wellness. Participants believe wellness is their responsibility, but documented several aspects of their doctoral programs that either contribute to or detract from their feeling of wellness. The themes presented here include participants' suggestions and experiences.

*Negative Narratives*

The stories many participants heard before deciding to pursue their doctorate begs the question; why did they start the degree in the first place? Part of the impetus for this study was the pervasiveness of negative narratives about doctoral education. Participants' experiences as doctoral students explored different ways to approach doctoral education outside of the mainstream perspective of it being an all-encompassing experience requiring complete isolation and a single-minded focus to complete the degree. Much of the literature of doctoral education further promotes the negative narrative. In an autoethnographic study of a doctoral student peer group, the authors wrote "program demands, the enormous stress, and the loneliness that each of us was experiencing were the rule rather than the exception of doctoral student life" (Hadjioannau et al, 2007, p. 161). Nyquist et al. (1999) substantiated the findings of Hadjioannau et al.'s study as graduate students described their experience in a similarly negative light characterized by anxiety and isolation.

A conversation Leah had with one of her mentors during her undergraduate career caused her concern. Her mentor said, "everyone I have ever known who's had their Ph.D. was either crazy before they started or crazy by the time they finished." Leah then wondered how she could still achieve her dream of the Ph.D. without sacrificing everything else she wanted out of her life. "I had been thinking about how could I do this and still have some sanity and some wellness and preserve my life." Having been a doctoral student for several years, Leah is surprised she can say the opposite than what she had been told about being a doctoral student:

So this has been the most well period of my life, which I think is ironic because there are so many people talking about graduate school is a horrible, stressful

thing and I think some of my [previous] program was like that, but I am really happy to here and choosing to be here, so it just feels good.

Leah continued to wonder, “so is the story we create about how horrible and hard it has to be, are we creating more stress than is really necessary with this, it has to be a painful hard thing.” Creating a new narrative about doctoral education could improve access as those who think they cannot be successful may see that there are alternate approaches to the dominant narrative. Leah’s approach is arguing the unarguable and shared:

If a faculty member said yeah well I had to work hard, or part of getting a Ph.D. is suffering and struggling, I would say that is arguable...I can create my life to be set up so that I do not have to suffer and struggle. Sorry, I do not buy into that. Again, it is just a story about what it means to get a Ph.D. and I might not be interested in someone else’s version of the story.

Leah is choosing to view her educational process in a different way and take responsibility for her experience. In a book on the unwritten expectations for doctoral studies, Hawley (1993) acknowledged the view held by some faculty members that doctoral education should be a painful experience for students.

Some participants had experiences with faculty members who fed into the perception of doctoral education being a horrible experience. Participants discussed how some of the negative perceptions had been part of their reality as doctoral students, but Abigail suggested presenting possible challenges and ways to overcome them, as opposed to a blanket statement void of constructive recommendations:

We had one lunch at the beginning of the program, where pretty much, professors in the program said this will be the worst time of your life and it will be over. And you are sitting there like someone who cannot wait and you are like, how can it be that bad?

In Abigail’s view:

I do not think that the doctoral program should be labeled as the hardest time in your life. I think it should be, no worse than first grade should be the hardest time

in a first grader's life. If we're at this step and we have had all life's experiences and educational experiences, it should just be a matter of taking a step. Maybe a very steep step, or it may be multiple steps and then to me rather than saying this is just going to be the hardest time of your life, maybe a more critical look at, well why is it so difficult? Is it necessary for it to be difficult?

Abigail suggested making each milestone toward the doctorate more manageable, as opposed to thinking about the entirety of the process at the beginning. Her suggestions included ensuring students are prepared for doctoral level work prior to admission or individualizing timelines for degree progression depending on students' abilities. Most importantly, Abigail sought the doctoral experience to be promoted as possible, despite the challenges students will inevitably encounter on their journey. She shared, "instead of the professors around me saying this will be the hardest time of your life, but it will be over, instead I think I would have liked to have seen some optimism."

In her interview, Laura included discussion of an experience with a professor she credits for saving her doctoral career. The professor presented a positive, realistic view of the experience with some of the optimism Abigail would have appreciated:

She did not have the attitude of well, I had to do that in my doc program, so you are going to have to do it and then some. I am going to make it harder on you than it was on me. She does not have that mindset. She remembers the struggle and the reality of it and so she is a teacher and she's not a punisher. And so I decided that, she was what kept me in the doc program.

As will be discussed in more detail in this chapter, faculty members are the main point of contact for doctoral students and can have an major influence on students' experience as one of Laura's faculty members had on her. Laura's perspective on doctoral education changed from thinking she must learn everything there is to know before graduating to "this is a foundation, but it's not supposed to kill you; it's supposed to help prepare you."

Laura made a choice to begin incorporating wellness after a challenging first year in her program, which led her to question her goal of the doctorate.

Another component of the negative narrative is the belief surrounding the amount of time the doctoral degree should take to complete. Time to degree varies by discipline and is also influenced by differences in student's life circumstances, academic goals, and priorities. Leah experienced faculty members who considered her timeline for completion unrealistic, but by not setting time bound goals for herself, Leah felt she would not be able to maintain her wellness long term. The perspective of some faculty members she encountered was that time in the doctoral program allowed students to fully explore their research topic. Although Leah was committed to producing quality research, she did not agree that fulfilling doctoral student responsibilities should prevent her from spending time on other important areas of her life:

My academic work is a big piece of my life. I am devoting a huge piece to it, but I would like to be finished within a certain time frame and believe it is realistic. So, I do not really want tunnel vision. I know there are times where I will waver in and out of that and there will be times that will be more intense than others, but I do think there is this sense of, in academia, I suffered, so you should suffer too.

#### *Some Truth to the Negative Narrative*

While participants in the study self-identified as well and acknowledged wellness is a way of life they are constantly working towards and making conscious choices about, some participants recognized sacrificing parts of their pre-student lives to succeed academically. As someone who moved away from her family and friends to complete her degree, Elizabeth missed being close to friends and the ability to participate in sporadic social interactions such as planning lunch dates. Elizabeth felt she sacrificed her social life when she became a doctoral student because of her limited time, but also enjoyed

sharing her new knowledge with friends in her career field. Sacrificing her social life and community involvement at church were unexpected consequences of pursuing her doctorate. She then considered how making sacrifices impacted her wellness:

Then you wonder, ok, is your spiritual health and wellness suffering? But it is kind of that thing of something's gotta give, something's gotta go. You cannot do it all. Some people can, but I am not one of them.

Elizabeth's feelings of sacrificing her social interactions with others also stemmed from the structure of her coursework, which was mainly online. As a student taking several courses in an online format, Elizabeth found that she spent extensive amounts of time in front of her computer pondering readings and writing papers. Because of her experience, she wondered if some semblance of isolation is requirement to achieve her doctorate. Certainly time alone with your thoughts is a necessary component of the academic experience; however, Elizabeth began questioning if it all needed to be that way. She chose to integrate herself into the academic community to combat the isolating nature of online doctoral work.

Ruby was not able to continue involvement in all of the activities she would have liked to do. Her experience has involved sacrificing areas of her life to achieve academically:

So I had to drop some of my extra things like my part-time job, I do not play an instrument anymore, I do not run as much as I used to, I hardly ever hike, I went skiing once this year. It is just hard dropping all the other things out of your life for grad school. But, that is necessary to keep up with the requirements. Just keeping up with coursework and everything you are supposed to do on the side.

Ruby's experience of changing social and physical parts of her lifestyle has been seen in the lives of other graduate students. Both social and physical activity participation often change when a student begins graduate school because of issues such as limited time,



finances, and proximity to friends (Longfield et al., 2006; McWhorter, Wallmann, & Tandy, 2002).

Participants still feel well despite needing to put some of their activities on hiatus during the school year. Although they may not be able to devote as much time to certain aspects of their wellness, they continue to nurture their wellness in other ways. For some participants, the pursuit of the doctorate became part of their wellness and spending time with their thoughts producing academic work fulfilled the areas they described as mental and intellectual wellness.

#### *Combating the Negative Narrative*

Many participants heard about the negative narrative and to some degree, most experienced it as well. They each took a different approach to combating the negative narrative. Some decided to take responsibility for their experience by either changing what they had control of, considering their doctoral education as part of their wellness, or viewing their learning as one part of their wellness, but not allowing it to overtake other aspects of their life. Previous research has not explored doctoral student wellness and thus has not addressed the mindset students employ to understand their wellness within the context of their lives as doctoral students.

*Taking responsibility.* Viewing their wellness as their responsibility helped participants address challenging situations. By taking control and not allowing external forces to dictate their experience, participants could make choices congruent with how they wanted to pursue their degree. Personal responsibility is frequently connected to choices about healthy living (Wikler, 2002) and it seems participants of this study have

translated the responsibility they take for their physical, social, intellectual, and emotional wellness into how they respond to academic challenges.

Participants noted unfulfilling relationships with faculty members as challenges to their wellness. Leah's perspective on her education, which she shared specifically in relation to her relationships with faculty members, is to take responsibility for what is occurring:

So, overall I feel like I have a value of taking 100 percent responsibility for creating any experience in my life and so I try to do that with faculty members. If I am not getting what I need from them, I feel totally responsible for that because I will ask for more or different, so I would say overall my interactions with them have been positive.

Leah took responsibility for an unsatisfactory course experience when she had an instructor who she thought was arrogant and an ineffective teacher. She was concerned about his attitude toward teaching the class, the types of assignment given, and the lack of feedback provided to students. As she continued in the class, Leah recognized she was complaining as opposed to taking action to address the issue. Instead of faulting the instructor, Leah decided to remain in the class and made the best of the situation.

As Robin reflected on a classmate's negative experience that was expressed during a class, she presented her philosophy for addressing similar situations:

Nobody has responsibility for that but yourself and at this point in my life, I think if I had had such horrible experiences as she was talking about, I would have been making noise. I would not wait until my last course to say, wow, this has been horrible. So probably age does something for how I understand they are not necessarily going to make me feel better or worse. It's up to me to take care of me.

Lucy shares Leah and Robin's approach by saying "I tend to think more about what I can do to make the best of my situation, than necessarily what somebody else should be doing to make it better." Relying on others in the environment to make their experience what

they anticipated or expected will not satisfy students. Each student has unique needs, which can contradict the concerns of another student, making it challenging for faculty members and higher education administrators to meet all students' needs. Thus, these participants were comfortable clearly expressing their needs or addressing situations themselves, as opposed to allowing them to inhibit their wellness. Robin summed it up: "I really think that my wellness is my responsibility so."

*Doctoral education as part of wellness.* The evasive nature of the negative narrative of doctoral studies is long-standing and difficult to challenge. However, one by one, participants of this study created a new doctoral student experience for themselves. The mindset of participants, whether they realized it prior to beginning their studies or in the midst of them, was the strongest contributor to their wellness. By making conscious choices and addressing the areas of wellness most challenging for them, participants were able to feel they were thriving in both their learning and other areas of their lives.

For many participants, a portion of their approach to remaining well included considering their doctoral studies as a contributor to, as opposed to a detraction from, their wellness. Achieving a doctoral degree is was a long-held goal of several participants and despite the challenges, they were grateful for the opportunity to pursue it.

In Leah's case, she deferred her admission to the program because of opposition from her previous partner from whom she is now divorced:

And so I think when I deferred my admission, I somehow knew that over the next year, probably our marriage would dissolve. But, when that relationship officially ended and I was able to do it, it was very much like a re-claiming of myself. And so it's just a goal I have kind of always had. And I just really wanted to write a dissertation. Coo coo. To me that is really what separates it from a master's degree or an Ed.S. It's really that in depth exploration and your contribution to the field.

She reflected further about her purpose and how doctoral education contributes to it:

Yeah, and I think of it too in a spiritual sense. Like I do believe that we each do have some sort of unique essence to contribute to the world and whether I was born in Mongolia or Africa, this need to express creatively and produce something would be there. I think it would look a little different in those different times or places, but it does feel like a piece of who I am.

Cassie shared a similar passion to Leah as she recounted what she told her admissions committee and friends about her desire to pursue a doctorate:

I am a material girl. So, I like my nice things. I like having my disposable income and they just started laughing because I came across as so intense. The other thing I told my friends who think you are nuts to do this, I said to them, I do not have children, but I can only liken the desire to do this to someone who really wants to start a family. You really have to want it that badly to be good at it. So, that is really how I can explain it to people.

Cassie continued:

All I remember starting the program was just this incredible euphoria of ‘oh my gosh, I am really doing this?’ I have wanted to do this for 15 years. No one in my family has a Ph.D. and my husband’s family has a lot of Ph.D.’s and, I am doing this later in life than usual and I can still do this. And people are flabbergasted. ‘You are doing what?’ ‘Yeah! No, I am not thinking about retiring, I am starting over.’

Cassie’s wellness was supported by her doctoral studies. She recognized challenges come with the academics, but was appreciative of the opportunity to pursue her degree:

I have been well in my program since I started. Because I am just on this high. I mean do not get me wrong, I have stress. I do not think I have cried. It hasn’t been that kind of stress. I could be cranky, I could be sleep deprived. Even on the worst days, I still say to my husband, there is no place I would rather be and nothing I would rather be doing. So I think that lifts you up out of the doldrums or out of the bottom of the barrel where you are.

“Euphoria” is not often a term associated with doctoral studies in the traditional narrative, however Cassie’s strong desire to learn evoked those feelings. “Delight” is a word Robin used to describe her doctoral studies. “Of course once I got here, it was unlike my

masters program. The doctoral program has been such an intellectual challenge and so much information I have learned. It has just been a delight.”

Robin’s husband commented on the excitement he saw in her once she began her doctorate. After challenges in the workplace, doctoral education has given her creative license to pursue her interests. As she discussed, “this program has caused me to be able to put it all together. That is why my husband says I ought to get another doctorate. He said, you are having such a great time.” While many people who pursue a doctorate do so to obtain a specific job, because of her stage in life, a position is not Robin’s ultimate goal; the learning process is her pursuit:

I do not know what I want to do so I came to get my doctorate because I needed it, but not for what the job is. My husband’s attitude is you have enjoyed learning and he has enjoyed learning from me. So, he thinks we ought to think about the next area in which we would like to get another doctorate. So, that I could just continue to get another doctorate and he can learn from me. He’s thinking anthropology might be good. But his feeling is, if I do not get a job, that is ok.

Lucy’s perspective is one of making her doctoral work a part of her life, not a distraction or roadblock to the rest of her life. When she begins to feel stress or pressure, her approach is the following:

Every now and then I have to kind of regroup and remind myself what the point is and remind myself that there is a life after grad school and how do I hope that this fits into that. Will I look back and say gee, I wasted five years of my life in grad school? No, I am hoping this is a part of life.

Elizabeth is doing exactly what she loves as a doctoral student and even when times are tough, she thinks, “so for me, it’s all, even on the worse day, I know I brought it on myself, whereas someone else on the worse day, they may feel like someone else is putting them up to this.” Because it is her choice to pursue the doctorate, Elizabeth takes responsibility for her situation.

*Doctoral education as one of many components of wellness.* Other participants took a more defensive perspective. Abigail optimized this theme by saying “And so I think that really helped me to know that going to school is something I do, it’s not who I am. Yes, I am a doctoral student, but that is just what I do. It’s not who I am.” Helena’s approach includes not allowing her studies to be the only component of her life. As she considered making time for different parts of her life, she found it important to put joy into her work and not allow doctoral studies to overwhelm her life:

That is always something that everybody struggles with, which is being able to make time for everything in life. You need to make sure you are still enjoying it because I have learned life’s too short just to be able to worry about the boring kind of things in your life. Being able to enjoy life instead of always just being work, work, work.

Both perspectives of doctoral education as fulfilling a part of wellness and viewing doctoral education as one of many areas of their life requiring attention are presented to demonstrate the multiple approaches to addressing the negative narrative of doctoral studies. While Abigail desired learning like the other participants, her mindset was one of balance and not allowing her academics to overtake her sense of wellness.

#### Remaining Well Through Non-Academic Challenges

A common challenge for doctoral students is role conflict, which is seen when a person’s responsibilities overwhelm them. As mature students, doctoral students’ lives frequently include responsibilities to their jobs, families, friends, and non-curricular interests or community involvement (Anderson & Mietzitis, 1999; Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Brus, 2006; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Hite, 1985). While participants did not discuss role conflict specifically, a common theme among them was needing to address challenging life situations, which often pose a threat to wellness. Many participants

acknowledged times during their doctoral program when life situations put their wellness in jeopardy, but through self-awareness and conscious choices, they managed to continue on their path toward wellness. These experiences are highlighted to demonstrate that participants encountered challenges, yet were able to overcome them and not allow them to negatively influence their wellness or academic goals.

Family situations were mentioned as causing stress and challenges to wellness as students were pre-occupied with other areas of life while pursuing their degree. Leah dealt with her mother's health issues:

I had some major family stuff this semester. My mom had three surgeries. One was to remove cancer and there were some complications with that and she ended up with another health issue and then she just had surgery last week to reverse the first procedure. And every single one of my other classes, I had to either ask for an extension or miss a class, which I hate doing.

Elizabeth also addressed family issues when one of her children was deployed to Iraq and another was working through a personal issue. During those times, she struggled with concentrating on her academic work because her "mind really was somewhere else." She became accustomed to her child's deployment, but once again experienced anxiety as his homecoming drew closer as she worried about how he had changed as a result of his overseas service. Her perspective of what she would be doing in the meantime was enlightening; she continued pursuing her degree because she believed there would always be another challenge around the corner to address:

And so those big events still happen in people's life and that is what I tell anybody interested in going on in their education is life happens. It happens no matter what you are doing, so you might as well be doing something productive because life is still going to happen.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Katie worked through a personal issue she had not addressed from a prior period of her life that resurfaced under the stress of

graduate work. Devoting time to self-exploration did not prevent Katie from being successful in her academic life. Dedicating emotional energy to her concern resulted in Katie becoming a more productive and self-aware student.

Helena dealt with breaking up with her boyfriend, which took a great deal of time away from her studies. Kyle experienced the death of two friends when he first began his doctoral studies. He found it difficult to connect with people at the institution because he was dealing with emotional strife.

As a member of the “sandwich” generation, Lucy presented several challenges outside the realm of her academic responsibilities that she experienced during the first year of her doctoral program. Along with caring for her developmentally disabled teenager and ailing parents who lived out of state, another of her children became involved with substance abuse. Her husband went in for surgery and needed extended care following the surgery. Additionally, he was not able to secure a job in his career field and his father passed away that year. Lucy recognized where wellness played into her ability to address these challenges. Instead of becoming overwhelmed by the stresses of doctoral work coupled with helping her family members, she decided to “take a deep breath and remember what ultimately is important. And yes, this is a huge undertaking, but the undertaking itself is not the goal.”

Lucy used her consciousness to deal with the challenges in her life:

And choosing to do art with [my daughter] over the holidays instead of getting my reading done because art is part of how she reconnected with who she really is. Those things are part of wellness. Were they painful? You bet. Did they have consequences? Yes. Watching her reconnect to who she was, was so worth it. Was it a difficult and painful time? You bet. But I still think there is wellness involved in coping and dealing and making positive changes as opposed to saying life is not all good, therefore I am not well. Well does not mean that everything is cushy, smooth. Well means that I am functioning within the situation to do what I



can and understanding what I can do and what I cannot do and making choices to make this as good as it can be.

Lucy's view of wellness was reaffirmed as she coped with her family situations.

Everything being in perfect harmony is not wellness; rather, knowing how to deal with challenges and make conscious choices to improve situations to make them the best they can be is important to wellness:

I think it is even good for us to sit and think about what is wellness. I mean for me, this has been a really hard season of my life in a lot of ways. But that does not mean that I cannot be well. Challenge is not necessarily a threat to wellness. Even personal difficulty does not have to be...I cannot say I cannot be well until everything else is well.

### *Financial Concerns*

Doctoral students accept a financial sacrifice when they begin their education. Each participant, with the exception of Laura who worked full-time, worked part-time as a graduate or teaching assistant, or was supported by a spouse's income. Without full-time employment, finances became a concern that challenged participants' wellness. Findings from several studies of graduate and doctoral students echo the financial challenges experienced by this study's participants (Forney, 1999; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Hyun et al., 2006; Kluever, 1997; Lipshutz, 1993; Longfield et al., 2006; Moyer et al., 1999). Limited availability of financial resources can lead to stress on students' emotional wellness and can also result in choices that inhibit promotion of their social and physical wellness.

While currently being supported by loans, as discussed in the previous chapter, Ruby recognized finances may surface as a concern after she graduates and must repay what she owes. Although she had not considered money as part of her wellness, but once she began worrying about her finances, Ruby recognized how her emotional wellness

was connected to her financial wellness. As Helena thought about what comprises her wellness, she included financial wellness. Only a few other participants noted the potential financial struggles of undertaking doctoral education. She understood how financial concerns could cause stress and affect other areas of wellness:

Another area I would like to address is being able to set priorities with financial obligations and things like that. They were talking on the morning show about the current economy and what to do and how to have better credit ratings, so that just kind of sparked that idea of having financial wellness in your life because that definitely is a big part of not being well. You know that is a big stressor in life. That is a big stressor on relationships and things like that.

The financial struggle is apparent in Lucy's life as not only did she sacrifice her job to pursue her doctorate, but her husband did as well. Her husband is a teacher by training, but has not been able to secure a teaching position. Although he had a job, Lucy's husband was not making as much as he would as a teacher, nor was he using his training and education.

In the next section, I will discuss challenges participants face in the academic environment that challenge and support their wellness. While there are numerous recommendations and suggestions, Lucy does not attribute the challenges to the academic environment, rather she thinks "the structure of the program itself is not as crazy as the fact that I really need to work and I have all these other like family stuff going on:"

I do not think it is the program itself. I think it is trying to be responsible for family, trying to deal with aging parents, trying to have to work and go to school. It is not really the program itself that does that. I think the program is structured for those who are not working or taking care of parents or mom and dad are even footing the bill at this point in their life. I think the program is reasonably well structured. And then the demands of the program are just one of many demands clamoring for my attention, so it's easy to think that the program is it, but I do not think it is.

## Structural and Interpersonal Supports and Challenges to Wellness in Academia

Many participants' statements and perspectives on wellness could be echoed in other studies about wellness. A study of well faculty members or well student affairs professionals could yield similar experiences with and beliefs about wellness. The relevancy of this study is its exploration into the lives of doctoral students and the ways in which the structure of doctoral education contributes to and detracts from their wellness. Golde (2005) explored structural components of doctoral programs' contribution to student attrition by focusing specifically on four academic departments. While the focus of this study was not on departmental structure or culture, participants' experiences were frequently grounded in the academic structure. Through the following sub-themes, transition, coursework, academic requirements, peers, faculty, and stress, the experiences specific to doctoral students' wellness are discussed, which can provide an insider perspective to faculty and administrators seeking to contribute to the wellness of their students.

### *Transition*

Socialization is one of the major purposes of doctoral education (Austin, 2002; Weidman et al., 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, 2009a; Hockey, 1994), as was further supported 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 ten pounds in the first semester.

Similar to Dave's experience, Abigail was challenged to meet the expectations of her writing, which resulted in a bit of 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 her first semester as she re-entered academia and learned the expectations for her work:

So, then 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 and every course and 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 their 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 more incompetent and unknowledgeable 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 confounded 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 her wellness improved, describing 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 graduate students was 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 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 because I feel a lot more well now than I did during my first semester where I think I was not really managing my time very well and/or I just was overwhelmed and disgusted with the whole thing and just did not see the point and so I think 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 and 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 because she had chosen to take four graduate level courses and began her new role as a teaching assistant. Since her first semester struggles, Ruby took three courses and continued teaching, which was more manageable.

While most of the challenges during the transition period were academic, Lucy's transition included an academic one, but also a cultural one since she had not lived in the United States consistently for several years prior to beginning her program. She spent the first semester building the foundation upon which her future success as a doctoral student would rest. Adjusting to the culture of graduate school required her to learn about systems and processes, as well as how to navigate relationships within the institution and her program. She did not find the academic rigor to cause the most challenging part of her transition as other participants have noted. Rather, her emotional wellness was tested as she experienced re-entry shock from living overseas. After spending the first semester adjusting, Lucy became more comfortable with the culture of doctoral education.

Students transition to doctoral studies in different ways. When discussing their history with wellness as a student, the transition time was frequently noted as most challenging as participants 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.

*Coursework*

Because of the variability in the courses taken by doctoral students, previous research has not explored the influence of course type on doctoral students' experience. As a case study, despite the various degree programs of the participants, similarities with their experience in research classes arose from the interviews. The variety in the courses and course requirements for doctoral students, specifically qualitative research classes, were highlighted as contributing to students' sense of wellness. Doctoral students, in general, enjoy learning and seek out knowledge they can incorporate in other areas of their studies.

Ruby confessed she is a student who does not want to stop taking classes despite completing her coursework requirements. Variety in her coursework contributed to Ruby's intellectual wellness. By including opportunities to pursue qualitative research and additional electives, Ruby felt she was able to develop a more holistic view to assist in her future role as a researcher. Ruby also acknowledged the importance of diversity in terms of philosophy and teaching style among her faculty members as further contributing to her ability to learn multiple perspectives. Dave also found the variety in his program's coursework allowed him to choose courses to meet his intellectual curiosity:

So let's see, one good part of it is that it has a mix of areas and they are so different. And also like methodology. So like, I learn about qualitative methods. So you know we have those two flavors; this very quantitative thing and this softer, educationy thing. And those two things, just from an intellectual point of view I think support my wellness. Beyond that, the program is structured in a way that we have quite a bit of choice. That certainly is helpful.

The only course participants mentioned specifically as supporting their wellness was their qualitative research course. Laura sought out social connections in the classroom and found them in her qualitative course:

It is what I thought doctoral level classes should be. We had a great community in the class. Just this feeling of cohesion and that everyone in the class liked each other and talked and it was just fun. And I never had that in my other classes. And I do not know if it was because of the instructor at the helm or if it was just the unique chemistry of that class.

Leah felt her values and life perspective were acknowledged and supported through her qualitative coursework and readings:

So, probably the most well I have felt was in my qualitative class. I feel like that class was just so affirming of who I was as a student, as an individual. It really resonated with my life philosophy outside of my academic pursuits, so going to class was a pleasure.

#### *Unclear Academic Requirements*

Flexibility in program requirements was considered 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. She 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 considering she was 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 mentioned 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 the 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, 2009a). Receiving the information too early can challenge students' emotional wellness as they began to worry about components of their program that were several years in the future. Understanding where each student is and asking them about their readiness for information may prevent anxiety from both students who desire more information early on and those who prefer not to be bombarded with information they will not use for three or more 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:

So, I really feel like from my second semester and I think it is that transition of oh, that is what they were talking about now looking back. It was like, 'ok, now I see what you were trying to do' and it is making sense now, whereas it made no sense then.

Cassie also shared frustration over the dissemination of information as she reflected that “there are a ton of procedures over 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 ten 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).

### *Peer Relationships*

For doctoral students and undergraduate students alike, peer culture and support are integral to students' academic success (Gardner, 2009a; Tinto, 1993). In a study of doctoral student attrition, Golde (2005) found attrition occurred because students were structurally, not socially, isolated. In his study, Golde stated that doctoral students do not require social integration. However, in regard to wellness, participants discussed the importance of peer relationships. Many other studies presented a similar finding of the importance of social integration for doctoral student success (Goplerud, 1980; Guentzel

& Neshiem, 2006; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Longfield et al., 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Regardless of whether participants have strong peer networks or would like to have them, it is clear participants feel positive peer relationships contribute to their wellness for several reasons. Various structures, including cohort models, out-of-class social activities, and student organization meetings, contribute to the development of a strong peer culture and the participants advocate for such structures.

A frequently-mentioned challenge to participants' wellness as a doctoral student was the lack of information about educational processes, which caused anxiety and worry. However, mentoring opportunities between students could alleviate much of the anxiety as students further along in their degree share their experiences and provide advice to help prevent newer students from making similar mistakes (Gardner, 2009a).

Laura, a part-time student, did not feel a connection with her peers and made suggestions for a stronger peer culture:

I think there could be more of an effort made to have some sort of community and a feeling that I have peers. That there are other people out there because there is a doc listserv, but it is a listserv. I do not know who else is out there. Where are these people? Where are they in their programs? Maybe if I have a question, I would like to ask someone who is a few years ahead of me. Where are those people that I could ask a question, like what's a good apprenticeship? Have you had this professor for this class? Who is a good statistics person? Those are the things that are not in the doc handbook.

Ruby also did not feel a strong sense of community, but after experiencing a small college community during her undergraduate career, she expressed the importance of a doctoral student community:

I am all about the sense of community and having small groups of people who are close. And so I do not think it helps very much to have university-wide seminars even though that seems like a good idea. The ones I have been to have not been really helpful. So if they could have more guidance and mentorship in pairing you

up with another student or something like that within your program, I think that would be very helpful.

The student government for graduate students was noted as helpful for disseminating information, but Helena would like more opportunities to build community within it:

I think it is nice that we have the graduate student alliance and they help people. And a little bit more of community would be nice. They do like one barbeque. So, maybe like another thing like that. Like an end of the year thing.

Academic collaboration also supported participants' intellectual wellness and confidence in their studies as they could share ideas and answer each others' questions when a faculty member was not available. Collaboration among students on academic projects and writing groups contributes to the development of learning-focused programs and students (Gardner, 2009a; Walker et al., 2008). Katie found developing working relationships within her program to be seamless. The cohort model assisted with her ability to get to know her peers and determine with whom she could best study:

I have found it very supportive. In fact, I would say besides my motivation, the fact that professors and peers created such a supportive environment and I wonder at what point, if it was really antagonistic or competitive, where I would be. So it was very easy to find people to study with. It's not that you love everybody in the program, but there was at least enough of a selection that you could carve out a comfortable niche. And we tended to go through classes with the same group of people. I generally enjoyed that.

Ruby was hoping for more academic support and peer interaction in her program, but it did not manifest itself because of the demographics of her program that included working adults and students with families. To promote interaction, she thought having research labs would promote collaboration and study groups.

Peers also provide emotional support to each other who may not have family members or friends who understand the journey toward the doctorate. Additionally, when feeling isolated, the social network of peers can make doctoral studies less lonely. Robin,

who moved away from her husband to pursue her degree, sought out friends in her academic community because she was accustomed to having a supportive peer group in the workplace. Because of her program's cohort model, Robin quickly developed friendships with peers in her courses as they progressed from semester to semester together. She recalled a conversation with her husband at the beginning of her first semester:

I remember calling my husband after about the third week. He said, I am so lonely when you are gone and I said, honey, I am among hundreds of people and I am lonely because there was so much I did not know. Now I feel like I have developed some very good, close friendships with lots of people.

Isolation and loneliness for Robin was confounded by her lack of knowledge about doctoral education and her new environment. Dave also enjoyed the peer culture of his program, which developed through the cohort model and social gatherings. He appreciated the financial support his program provided to facilitate their social interactions because it translated into connections in the classroom.

Abigail felt well in her program after developing closer relationships with her peers. For her, it took a year for that to happen because she considers herself "not very open." The positive peer relationships "made it less stressful for me just to share my paper." When asked about why she began to open up, Abigail said, "time in class together, mutual projects, and those multiple connection points helped that." Now, Abigail's relationships can contribute to her academic success through the peer review process of her work and discussing ideas with classmates.

Leah found both academic and emotional support in a peer who also entered the program with several doctoral credits from another program:

I definitely feel like I have a couple of close allies. Especially one person who entered sort of similar to me with the same number of credits. So, we are not actually in a cohort because the incoming Ph.D. cohort that started this fall. They all have five years to go. And this classmate of mine, we are really at a similar place. And we actually joke about sharing the letter, P, H, and D. Like if you really need to be a good thinker this week, you get the P and the H. And if you need the clout of the doctorate, you get the D because we really have supported each other in getting things done, in studying for statistics tests and that kind of thing.

While most of the participants shared positive stories of their program's peer culture, Lucy, a non-traditionally-aged student, experienced an inhospitable environment. Fortunately, the classroom environment improved after the first semester, but the transition was more difficult for Lucy because of the mix of ages and the fact that some of her classmates were younger than her children. As a non-traditional student, Lucy's perspective was different from her traditionally-aged peers. She experienced generational-bias from her younger peers who she perceived viewed her knowledge as less valuable because she learned it several years before. Lucy did not feel the knowledge gained through life experiences and international travel was honored by her peers.

### *Faculty*

The role of faculty members in the personal and professional lives of doctoral students is paramount as faculty are responsible for students' academic and professional socialization (Austin, 2002; Barnes & Austin, 2009) and hold much of the information required for students to progress in their degree. Faculty influence, either positive or negative, can deeply support or deeply challenge students' academic goals and progress (Gardner, 2009a). In a study of graduate student mental health, students' relationship with their advisor both supported and challenged emotional well-being (Hyun et al., 2006). Because of the close relationships faculty and doctoral students have, any

interview with doctoral students will include a discussion of faculty and thus could not be omitted here. Both how faculty positively influenced students' experiences, as well as how they challenged students' wellness, were presented by the participants. Previous research with a focus on attrition cited advisor and student mismatch as one possible contributor to student departure (Golde, 2005).

*Positive faculty influence.* Many of the challenges students experience in graduate school can be counteracted by supportive relationships between students and their advisor (Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983). Participants provided several positive experiences with faculty that promoted their wellness and supported their intellectual pursuits. Laura, only one of two participants who acknowledged she questioned her ability to complete her degree, had an instructor in a course outside of her discipline who explained the doctoral process differently than other faculty members. As a recent doctoral graduate, Laura's faculty member related to the dissertation process from both the student and faculty perspective. Because of Laura's desire to have an impact, she wanted her line of research to make a difference and not just become an academic exercise to allow her to achieve her degree. Her faculty member shared how research can be useful, which Laura credits for keeping her from leaving her program. Laura's unique experience with a faculty member exemplifies how the negative narrative of doctoral studies can inhibit a student's progress. In Laura's case, her faculty member provided a view of the importance of research. Additionally, research became understandable and given the amount of time spent learning about and conducting research as a doctoral student, if the purpose of research is unclear, students may begin to question their reason for pursuing the degree. The dissertation can be the most challenging component of the doctorate

because it is a new academic challenge students have never experienced. When Laura's faculty member spoke about the dissertation process in a different way, she began to see it as a worthwhile endeavor.

Robin found her professors interesting and caring. Her wellness was supported with organized courses when assignments were planned in advance, which allowed students to manage their time and projects. Robin also appreciated when assignments contributed to a larger project, potential research article, or dissertation. The availability of faculty members was important to Katie, who often needed assistance in her subject-specific education program. She acknowledged the different strengths of her faculty members and found each to be approachable and helpful in office hours. Regardless of the extent of her academic needs, Katie felt supported which allowed her to nurture her intellectual wellness.

Having faculty members who understood all aspects of her life as a student was important to Helena. She experienced positive interactions with her faculty because of their openness and flexibility. Helena appreciated how her faculty members cared about her out-of-class life and the faculty and students shared about their families and interests to develop positive relationships.

Abigail's instructors have challenged her, but also provided her with the foundational knowledge to be successful:

I have had a positive experience with faculty. The faculty really laid the stepping stones out and really helped me walk the path. Sometimes that path may not have been the one I would chosen either from insecurities or just I do not want to end up there. But I am retrospectively thankful for the skills and opportunities that I have had.



*Conflict within the faculty.* A very difficult theme to present, though necessary because it was apparent in the experiences of several participants in different programs, is within faculty conflict challenging students' wellness. Tense relationships within the department, which are sometimes verbalized by faculty were visible to students, and subsequently involved students in departmental politics (Gardner, 2009a). Such tense environments challenged students' emotional wellness as they worried about how these relationships would influence their ability to progress in their degree program.

As Cassie began to choose a committee, she needed to consider what she knew about the faculty relationships and made choices carefully to ensure her committee would get along:

Unfortunately, there is a huge rift in the faculty. Where they do not talk, do not work together. I am afraid it will affect my ability of who I can have on my committee. I will give them the benefit of the doubt. They try to be professional about it, but when it comes down to the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, i.e. preparing for comps and/or the dissertation, or even trying to work with someone to mentor people to help you get published that first time, it can be difficult. So I have seen one person go through this as she's trying to get her committee together, it is not good. So, I do not know how I am going to deal with that right now. If the faculty do not get along, who is looking out for the student?

Cassie's concern has not manifested itself into an actual problem, but it was causing her anxiety she would rather not add to other concerns.

Kyle also expressed concern over the collegiality of the faculty in his department as he recognizes rifts among them:

I think actually the biggest problem is there appear to be all these little factions in the faculty and I think of it as one of those books or movies where there is a ship and there is a mutiny. It is like they are all stuck on a ship because they are all tenured, nobody's going anywhere and they just have to learn how to get along with each other for 40 years, which is probably hard to do. And then how do they address that? It seems a little bit passive aggressive in that they never seem to really acknowledge that they have problems, but they are there.

Lucy's professional field relies on collegiality to be effective in the education system. However, she witnessed a lack of collegial relationships among the faculty, which made her worry about the survival of her profession. Within the small group of faculty in her department, Lucy recognized how the lack of collegiality influenced her learning environment as her cohort also mirrored the competitive relationships seen among the faculty members. She hoped her faculty would be role models to her and her peers as upcoming professionals. From his experience, Kyle thinks:

Being well themselves would contribute a lot to allowing the grad student to be well. I mean if you, if you are in a situation where you are like always lashing out, how are the grad students supposed to be well if that is what they have to live with.

*Challenges with faculty.* Problems with faculty were noted as contributing to the attrition of female doctoral students (Moyer et al., 1999) and three female participants shared problems with faculty. Doctoral students have high expectations of their faculty members in the classroom and with advising and mentoring because they consider faculty the experts in knowing the information. When those expectations are not met, the students' mentioned challenges to their wellness as they decided how to proceed. In a study exploring the perceptions 25 exemplary doctoral advisors have of their responsibilities, they believed their roles were to contribute to students' success and their development as researchers and professionals (Barnes & Austin, 2009). However, there are likely two opposing perspectives of advisement of doctoral students; one which holds doctoral students are on their own and should be relatively independent and the other view more often held by students that the doctoral degree is different from previous degrees they have earned, so guidance is needed. While there is agreement among the

advisors interviewed in Barnes and Austin's study, differing experiences with doctoral advisors were presented by participants in this study.

Laura was challenged by her advising relationship because there was little outreach. As a part-time student who did not have an opportunity to interact with her advisor on a regular basis, she felt alone and unsupported as she pursued her degree. Although her questions would be answered when they were asked, she did not experience her advisor inquiring about her experience or how she was doing in her degree program. Laura recognized her responsibility for maintaining contact with her advisor, but would have appreciated similar investment of his time into her success.

Cassie also felt some of her faculty members were unavailable. As a student in a small doctoral program, she expected more interaction between students and faculty members. Unfortunately, she experienced faculty who she perceived as uninterested in developing meaningful relationships with students. Cassie felt her expectations were reasonable because as a doctoral student, receiving mentorship and advising from faculty members, is the crux of the educational experience.

In the classroom, several experiences with faculty members caused frustration on the part of the students. Laura "expected just a little more heart from the professors." Robin was challenged by a faculty member's lack of personal connection in class. "Well, I will tell you, when you go through a whole semester in a class of ten and the professor does not learn anybody's name, I would say that is bad." Dave described interactions with one of the faculty in his program as "somewhat hostile, but in a very typical way, for the way that she interacts with others."

Elizabeth had two negative course experiences, but used both as learning opportunities about what not to do as a future educator and how to address challenges to her wellness. She was in an online class where her internship supervisor did not participate in the dialogue or provide feedback. Elizabeth took the negative and turned it into a positive experience as she learned about the components of a good and bad internship. After failing a required course, Elizabeth experienced doubt in her ability to be successful in her program, which compromised her emotional wellness until the issue was resolved and she developed a plan with her advisor to continue to progress in her degree. Doctoral students, like Elizabeth, are often known as high-achievers. However, when situations external to their control arise, oftentimes students feel anxious and seek immediate resolution.

Fortunately, students shared that although they had a negative experience with a faculty member, each relationship with each faculty member is different. Since faculty members are autonomous individuals, relationships vary dramatically from the positive to the not-so-positive from one office to the next.

*Approach to dissertation topic.* The main area where doctoral students need guidance and direction is during their dissertation research beginning with choosing a topic. Participants discussed the process by which faculty assisted them in choosing a topic with mixed feelings. Some participants appreciated choosing a focus early on and continuing with that focus throughout other courses and assignments, whereas for other participants, the pressure of choosing a dissertation topic at the beginning caused unneeded anxiety.

This theme provides new insight into the beginning stages of the dissertation process. A majority of the research concerning the dissertation phase can lead one to think the dissertation process is separate from coursework (Green, 1997; Kluever, 1997). Participants' experienced the beginning stage of choosing a topic as intermingled throughout their educational experience. A majority of the participants were not yet involved in the dissertation process, so the discussion of wellness during data collection and writing is not explored here:

Robin was overwhelmed by the pressure of understanding theories and choosing her theoretical perspective during her first semester of courses. Since Robin was only beginning to explore theoretical options, she was unprepared to make a choice about a dissertation topic at that time:

And so that was my frustration. The fast pace. You walked into that first day and you were behind. And you never were going to get ahead and then one of my courses was the literature review course. And of course if you do not have a doctoral dissertation topic, it is really hard to do a literature review.

Laura was also frustrated with the speed with which the dissertation topic was introduced. "I am being asked in the first semester, ok now what do you want for your dissertation topic? I do not know. I just felt so stupid. I never felt so incompetent in an academic setting in my whole life."

For Elizabeth, however, the guidance was appreciated and noted as a contributor to her wellness:

They are grooming you from day one to be successful with your dissertation. They get you thinking on day one about what is your dissertation topic going to be and all of that is, all of that is important. They are with you through the process and that supports your wellness.

Needs and preferences vary by student and must be recognized by faculty members so as not to hinder some students from progressing, but also not to overwhelm others.

### *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 et al., 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 of procrastination, stress often accompanies deadlines. Particularly at the conclusion of the first few semesters, participants were challenged in their maintenance of wellness. Since each of the participants completed at least two semesters of coursework at the time of data collection, they were able to reflect on their feelings of stress and found ways to overcome 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. Her advisor's view allowed Robin to "disconnect from the stress and make a conscious decision not to worry about how it gets done." Robin's approach to end of semester stress was one she planned 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.

Although he considers himself well, Dave experienced stress at the end of his first semester around finals time. He recalled the initial transition into academic reading and writing as the most challenging part of his doctoral career. Katie's husband recognized her stress at the end of the each semester, but yet her ability to successfully complete each term. Her husband began to tease her about her stress because of its cyclical nature and her continually ability to achieve despite her worries.

### Making Choices to Support Wellness

Being conscious about seeking wellness and making choices to move toward wellness was part of each participant's experience. Their challenges with wellness and approaches to addressing their struggles were unique. However, they each discussed taking control of the situation to improve their wellness and not allow their academics to engulf their lives. Consciousness and addressing the reality of their experience was important to participants' ability to pursue wellness. Instead of allowing the situation to overwhelm them, they recognized the challenge to their wellness and made a conscious decision to change it.

### *Social*

Isolation is commonly cited by doctoral students as one of the major challenges they face during their studies and several participants shared the same concern (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Hyun et al., 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Moyer et al., 1999). Separating themselves from family and friends, either physically or mentally to pursue their degree occurred. Participants sought to maintain social wellness and

relationships with those important to them by making conscious decisions to address this concern. Robin was concerned about her social wellness being outweighed by her intellectual wellness since she was living apart from her husband and many of her social connections were formed through her previous work. By recognizing this as a potential challenge, Robin and her husband decided to have a weekly dinner with colleagues. She found this time included sharing what she was learning and assisted friends who were working with problem-solving. In this way, Robin remained connected to the field and her social network. As a newlywed when he first began his program, Dave reserved specific time for him and his wife to spend time together outside of the house where his work surrounded him:

I think I quickly discovered that it is still really important for me to get all this school work done and spend time with my wife and she and I said, every Friday night we are going on a date. And we did that for a long time until I sort of got everything else really organized.

Imposing structure helped Robin and Dave continue to nurture important relationships in their lives.

Kyle's social support is also very important to him and moving an hour away from his home to be closer to the institution meant sacrificing the time he previously spent with friends. Although he continued to teach twice a week at Armfield University during his fourth year, his dissertation data collection allowed him to move back to the metro area near his friends. As Kyle thought about his life living closer to his friends, he reflected, "My life is so much better when I am down there, so I am just going to move down there and for my research, I am collecting my data in [a nearby city], so it just makes more sense to live closer to friends." Lucy originally set out on an ambitious



timeline to complete her degree, but soon realized that although she could achieve her goal quickly, relationships with her family would suffer as a result:

And I am in the process of redefining what full-time means for me because I took on a lot my first year. My original plan was 42 credits hours by the end of the summer and I bumped that down. That is a little ridiculous. I had this idea that I was going to get done quickly because of family concerns. Somewhere along the line, I thought, I could get done quickly and not have any contact with my family for those four years. Why not take it back to the original five? I did 14 [credits], 16, and then 11. And I paired my 11 down to five or six.

### *Physical*

Physical wellness was a frequent challenge noted by participants and their concern is supported by two studies, which explored graduate students' struggles with incorporating physical activity into their lives (Longfield et al., 2006; McWhorter et al., 2002). Although guilt for taking time to exercise instead of working on their academic pursuits was not explicitly expressed by participants as it was in Longfield et al.'s study, the idea that they would be taking time away from their academics if they were to spend time engaged in physical activity is linked to feelings of guilt. Time is most often the concern when participants discussed not participating in physical activity. When responsibilities continued to be added to their pile of tasks, participants found that physical activity was the first time-consuming activity to be sacrificed. Many of the participants recognized, however, by not continuing physical activity, they were not as productive. Lucy was constantly challenged by the physical part of her wellness, but recognized its connection to her emotional wellness:

I think the wellness times were times where I would sit down and make conscious choices to do what was best, as opposed to what was most urgent. Conscious choices to get back into exercise because when I am more physically fit, which is obviously not my forte, I am more mentally and emotionally fit as well...So, I think it is fairly a conscious choice. Choosing to go to the gym when I am not the world's most enthusiastic athlete. Because I know it takes care of me and when I

am taking care of me, I do a better job at everything else. I did not do it for several weeks and I can already tell.

### *Graduate Assistantship*

Graduate assistantship experiences are intended to support students during their studies, but Lucy found the environment of her assistantship not conducive to her goals, so she decided to pursue an opportunity in another department. Although her first graduate assistantship supported her need for flexibility in her schedule from semester to semester, Lucy did not feel her supervisor allowed time to complete coursework when needed. Time for academic work is not a stated component of graduate assistantships, however, students frequently are provided time when needed for school work. Lucy and her supervisor had different expectations of her role, but she hoped her decision to work in her department brought about more congruency:

I think not having the same set of expectations as to what my life is really going to be like. It's not like I sort of just waltz in and work 20 hours a week and then go home and polish my fingernails or something. And it was a good experience and I am glad I did it, but I had to make some choices that were more in line with my goals.

### *Self-Awareness*

Originally conceptualized in 1972 as objective self-awareness, this concept involves the understanding of one's own feelings, values, attitudes, and issues (Duval & Wicklund). Self-awareness is frequently promoted in the training of social work, medical, and counseling students and professionals because of their work caring for others (Gardner, 2001; Jack, 2008; Saunders et al., 2007), but self-awareness also promotes wellness for many participants. Working toward self-awareness and addressing the reality of their situations contributed to participants' wellness, or some participants would say, is integral to their wellness. As they continually made choices about how to live a well life,

participants noted self-awareness as the tool that allowed them to do this. In her view of wellness, Katie saw “consciously rejecting self-awareness or self-reflection or purposely pursuing destruction just for the sake of destruction” as being not well. Katie was initially challenged when she began her program and after seeking therapy, began to understand herself better:

Sometimes this semester when I confronted some of the same old challenges of self confidence, or lack thereof, or just managing time. I felt well when I recognized I was in that situation and could pull out my coping tools. So, rather than letting it overwhelm me, it is like ok, you are facing situation X, go get the things that you need to deal with situation X. And those are the times where I have felt I have really made some progress. You know you feel a crisis coming and you know you can avert it. And able to get by it. That is been very joyful. Lucy’s self-awareness allowed her to reflect on her experience and make changes when needed to promote her wellness:

And that is where that kind of self-awareness made me realize that I need to back off a little bit. Because if you are so busy that you are running from point A to point B all the time, then you do not have time to be reflective.

Understanding herself and not letting the core of her being get lost in all of her reading and writing was Lucy’s approach to wellness:

Staying connected and grounded to who I am and why I am here. And what’s really important. Almost did not take time for that reflection and then went, that was kind of dumb. I think those things make you more effective with what you do with the rest of the time. Time spent reconnecting with that is far more worth whatever you could’ve gotten done in that time.

Lucy’s maturity and life experiences prior to beginning her doctorate provided her with self-understanding and an ability to face challenges head on when she experienced them:

There are more demands of life in some senses that makes this a dumb time to do this and makes it smart to do this when you are younger and do not have kids. But, I think that I would have been almost obsessive and I had to learn to find balance and so when I find myself going off balance I recognize it quicker and say, wait a minute, wait a minute in the greater scheme of things...That little phrase, in the greater scheme of things, solves me a whole lot of problems.

Dave shared a similar sentiment to Lucy: “For me, it’s self awareness. And a lot of it is moderation, trying not to spend so much time on one thing because that almost always results in problems, well for me anyway.”

The self-awareness Dave gained from not being well during his master’s degree program allowed him to reflect on his experience in the doctoral program. His choices were conscious as he sought to better his life by pursuing wellness:

And I kind of realize that, I am not in balance right now, but I do not really have much of a choice. That is kind of how I feel about it. And it’s usually not for that extended of a period of time. For me it was very conscious, I think. I do not think it just happened because I was not raised in a very healthy home. And I certainly was not in a very good place when I started graduate school. So for me it was very conscious. I had to make the decision to be better...

Dave highlighted that students can succeed academically without wellness, but may be able to do even better and reach their true potential if wellness is part of their pursuit:

I think in order to really do this well, to really do graduate school in the sense of learning as much as you can and excelling at it, I think you really have to have a lot of different coping skills in a lot of different things. So you have to be willing to do things that you are not comfortable doing and you need to be willing to push yourself in certain areas. And those kinds of things I would not have done as well. So, I probably would have gotten good grades, because that was my personality already, but I do not know if I would have been able to really do the best that I could do.

### *Remove Perfectionism*

Each participant has been successful in academia, otherwise they would not have been admitted to their programs in the first place. While they continue to strive toward academic excellence, several participants also acknowledged that they relinquished their need for perfection in their academics to be able to attend to other areas of their wellness. A study of doctoral student completers and non-completers of the dissertation found perfectionism to be a detractor from non-completers ability to finish the degree (Green,

1997). Perfectionism was found to relate to procrastination in a study of 135 graduate students (Onwuegbuzie, 2000), which lends support to the idea that by removing perfectionism, participants were able to allow themselves more time to devote to their pursuit of wellness. The following excerpts provide an understanding of the participants' decisions.

Laura shared how switching her thinking from being perfect in her schoolwork allowed her to become a healthier person:

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. I drank a lot of coffee, I did not get any sleep. And then the second year I thought I have to stop trying to be perfect because when you can check your grades online so easily and get that immediate feedback, I became addicted to wanting to get 100 percent of the points. And then along the way, I realized an A is an A, regardless of if it's a 100. Maybe you can go for like the 95. So I think that I took some of the pressure off myself.

Laura's positive experience with a faculty member also contributed to her realization that she does not need to be perfect because the instructor began to demystify the process, which allowed for a sense of calm.

During her first semester, Katie had an interaction with a classmate who pointed out her perfectionism when she was frustrated because she was unable to complete a problem in a given time period. When her classmate, also a non-traditionally-aged student reminded her how few points she was worrying about, she began to reflect on her approach to her studies. She recognized that she did not prioritize her work in a manageable way, but rather approached her work as if "every little thing was life or death and had to be done perfectly well." Katie continued to work hard on every assignment given to her, but by learning to prioritize, she was able to put time into wellness activities, such as exercise. She thought about her decision in the following way:

And what I found was I do not think my papers were as good, but they were not bad either. They were good enough. And that was a little hard for me because I sort of feel like I lose face. But it turned out to be an important compromise to make.

The students did not advocate not completing work or not trying their best, but they encouraged balancing academics with other important components of their wellness.

Lucy's competitive nature may have gotten her into the doctoral program, but with a multitude of responsibilities in addition to her academics, she realized her tendency to seek perfection would cause failure in other areas she did not want to sacrifice:

A lot of the things that I feel like I have learned about myself and learned about healthy choices, are very easily reversed in the pressures of a graduate program. And then you have of sort of grab yourself by the scruff of your neck and say alright, you have had a couple of decades of adult life to teach you that this is not necessary. I was highly competitive academically when I was younger. I found that other non-traditional students were as easily sucked into that as I was and kind of laughed about that...I gave myself permission not to get straight A's the second semester. The healthiest thing I ever did... And what will happen if I do not get A's? It is kind of a pride thing to have all A's. Who cares really? I think giving myself permission to be less than perfect is not only a survival method, but it is sensible. And I feel like I got what I needed to out of it and it is not like I am a slack and I do not care.

Abigail never claimed to be a perfectionist in her doctoral program. She took the realistic view that an assignment or paper will never be perfect or done, so she designated certain time to projects, which then allowed time for other things areas of her life. She used scheduling as an approach to success and chose "not to stop the rest of life, even though it was highly recommended by some of the faculty." Abigail knew there would always be more to read and more to learn. However, trying to be an expert on everything was not her goal. "I just need to finish the courses laid before me to the best that I can. Even knowing that for sure, if I read five more books, I probably could've written a better

paper. But I could not have too.” Dave’s also recognized his tend toward perfectionism. “I tend to take on more than I should, which goes with being a perfectionist I think. I tend to take on too much and then try to do it like perfect. It’s just kind of a recipe for disaster.”

Along the same lines as recognizing and removing the need for perfection is the recognition of needing to let some things slip. As described in the “some truths” section of the negative narrative of doctoral education, doctoral students often must sacrifice aspects of their pre-student life once they begin their program. Some have the mindset of things being taken away from them, whereas other participants made conscious choices to not continue certain components of their lives in order to pursue their degree. Once again, mindset and perspective are important in participants’ work toward wellness.

Laura recognized she cannot do it all. Once she came to that realization, she felt more at peace with herself:

Figuring out that it does not have to be either the program or maintaining the family was eye-opening. You still have to do the laundry and house cleaning and stuff like that sometime. So when does that get done? And it is not either/or. Let some of everything slide. So now I am sort of back to where I was when I only had a full-time job, which is pretty good? I cannot do it all.

Laura also allowed herself to not put as much time into her full-time teaching job as she had been:

And then the other part of it is, just realizing that my teaching job does not have to be 24-7. I am allowed to leave and if I do not get everything done, there is always tomorrow. And though I am very dedicated to my students, I am entitled to a life too.

As Elizabeth so aptly put it, “something’s gotta give, something’s gotta go. You cannot do it all. Some people can, but I am not one of them.” Lucy allowed her academics to slip a bit when her non-academic life called her attention:

I feel well during times where I decided to sit and laugh with my kid instead of getting that paper done. I did get the paper done, but I did not put as much into it as I maybe in the past would have. And since I am still doing ok in school, I think that I have a good argument for the fact that I am not sluffing off. I am just making choices that bring balance back into it. Making choices that maintain my relationship with my kid as opposed to saying I will have a relationship with you in five years. Five years from now she goes, 'oh yeah, try.'

### Continually Striving toward Wellness

The experience of feeling well through the challenging time of doctoral education encouraged participants to continue to seek wellness when making future career decisions. Through their heightened self awareness, participants have come to understand what is important in their lives, both professionally and personally, and will more critically examine their environments before choosing to become a part of them. Certainly the participants are highly motivated and succeeding academically, but as they consider wellness as a high priority in their futures, they do not strive for as high-paying or high-powered positions as they may have prior to this experience.

Katie's experience as a doctoral student and learning about future professions both inside and outside of academia lead her to reflect on her future choices and how they will either support or detract from her pursuit of wellness:

When I began graduate school, I assumed that once I survived being a grad student and was working as a professor, I would have more reasonable demands upon my time. When I realized that that was not true, I began to consider careers in government and in private research or consulting firms. However, I now know that pretty much all work I would be interested in doing will be demanding. The challenges I face now balancing my home and work life and balancing the demands within my work will persist as long as I choose to work. Therefore, I know that my efforts to strive for wellness will be a never-ending process.

Katie discussed how being a well doctoral student will lead to asking new questions when considering a position:



I think one of the ways that it is affecting me is that I am going to be very conscious about what career I choose and what position I choose because wellness is a factor now. Can I get into a position and maintain wellness? What is the environment? The people environment? What are the workloads? What is the flexibility? I do think I will want to evaluate as much as I can the environment of any potential employer before I accept a job.

As she considered her past experiences in work places that challenged her wellness, Robin will also seek a job where her wellness and balance do not easily become off-kilter:

Well, I certainly will be much more conscious of being deliberate in balancing my life. Being successful in my studies has rebuilt confidence that had eroded and made me hunger for more. Although I still do not know what I will be doing a year from now, I can approach a new career with confidence and a sense of wellness. I have always allowed my job to unbalance my life, but I think I can approach a new position with a better sense of balance.

Dave's self-awareness allowed him to articulate the type of position he will seek post graduation and the aspects of higher education from which he hopes to remain relatively separate:

I guess my goals for my life, I am really shooting for a fairly small university and I will be mostly teaching. So, I have a kind of vision for what kind of job I will have and I do not think it will be the type of job where you have all this external pressure to get grants and to publish and things like that. I am hoping to do the things that I have been wanting to do. I will mostly be teaching.

Dave also looks forward to having a family in the near future and is considering his expanding family as he anticipates a well professional life. What Abigail hopes to move away from is the constant need to prepare for the next level or achieve the next goal:

I think I want to be content being where I am instead of striving. Of course if I am at a university, then it is tenure, and it is that constant. Why do I have to keep climbing? I want to keep playing here for a while.

In her first journal, Abigail concluded:

Wellness also includes a vision for the future. I do not know if I will land in a school of teacher education or a first-grade classroom, but I do know that where I

am going will be home. Home because it will be a place for me to continue to grow and develop and share the magic of the journey.

Lucy's view of wellness as requiring sacrifice to add new experiences, such as being a doctoral student, and completing her responsibilities well, is consistent with how she intends to incorporate wellness into her future. She recognized the constant striving toward wellness amid new and emerging challenges. Wellness is a choice Lucy will continue to make:

I think that making conscious choices to keep life in balance will be necessary after doctoral training as well. For instance, my career choices will always be balanced with family choices, and personal wellness (in all of its physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, relational aspects) will need to fit into the picture. Maintaining that balance while in the doctoral program is just setting the stage for the next phase.

Ruby is confident wellness will continue in her post-doctoral career. By experiencing her doctoral work as a well person, she intends to remain in a similar state of mind:

It seems that being a doctoral student is a chronically stressful experience, so if I can commit myself to wellness while I am in the crux of it, I think that absolutely will influence my future career and life choices. Life is full of stressful events, and I feel I am better equipped to deal with them because of my experiences as a grad student. It seems my perception that I am well while working on my degree make me feel as though I can take on equally, if not more, stressful jobs. I do not feel as though working for my career will be much different than working on my degree.

Helena recognized a similar confidence that being well as a doctoral student will transfer into her next career situation:

My experiences as a well doctoral student will undoubtedly positively influence my future career and life choices. Year after year, life becomes increasingly complicated as responsibilities develop and grow. Having the ability early on in life to be a well balanced person is important in order to be so in the future. Having the ability to balance multiple priorities in my life will serve me well in the future as I pursue my personal and professional goals.

Cassie will prioritize her, family, friends, and wellness in the future as she has done throughout her doctoral student experience:

As I think about my health and wellness, it means I have tried and been mostly successful with balancing school, family, friends, and wellness; in the future I will substitute the word *career* for school. Being aware of these four elements of my overall wellness during grad school has shown me that I can do this...this balancing act, as long as I keep a strong, positive attitude and take care of my body and soul...All of this is a fine balancing act, reminiscent of the juggler who can keep 15 plates spinning simultaneously a top 15 poles. This delicate balance is one I need to be mindful of everyday in order to keep my physical and mental health clear and strong. My mindfulness to balance these four elements will influence my future career and life choices, of that I am sure.

Laura's thoughts connect wellness to her ability to achieve her doctorate because she will remain conscious of her personal needs through the process. She shared two rules for supporting her wellness:

I think if I am a well doctoral student I will actually finish the program. It is a struggle at times, and it's helpful to remember that I do need to take time for myself and my family. Future career choices...I hope to be able to continue to incorporate my ideas of wellness into my future—and not take on more than I can reasonably accomplish, and say “no” occasionally.

Elizabeth's goals of wellness are most related to the physical components. Through the timeline of the study, she has experienced fluctuations in the amount of time she devotes to her physical wellness, but her desire to work towards wellness has not, and will not, change:

My hope is that I will maintain a certain level of wellness however in the past month I have seen my 'wellness' activities diminish. I am less active, eating more junk food, and spending more time off track (such as watching TV or distracting myself with non-PhD reading). My desire is to stay healthy but I am currently not acting on that desire. I really want to experience my career as a person with a healthy BMI and not as someone overweight or obese.

### Conclusion

The themes presented by participants highlight the process of wellness from the beginning with the negative narratives heard prior to beginning their studies to the end as

they shared thoughts of incorporating wellness beyond their tenure as doctoral students. Participants reflected on their ability to remain well through non-academic challenges. Additionally, structural and interpersonal components of the educational experience both supported and challenged their wellness. Finally, participants made choices to support their wellness despite challenges. Recommendations for research and practice grounded in the participants' experiences and words are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER VI

### RECOMMENDATIONS & DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings identified in the previous chapters highlight the experience of doctoral students who remained well through their studies. Participants' perspectives of wellness, as well as the successes and challenges they face as students, provide considerations for changes to be made in doctoral education. This section presents recommendations for change in doctoral education based on participants' experiences that both supported and detracted from their wellness. Although some of these recommendations may be in place sporadically at institutions across the country, they are stated and justified here to further promote their implementation at all doctoral-granting institutions. Recommendations for academic and student affairs administration, faculty, and current and future doctoral students are presented to promote doctoral students' ability to thrive both in and out of the classroom.

#### Recommendations for Academic and Student Affairs Leadership

Doctoral students are often not the main student population considered by university leadership because of their smaller numbers in comparison to undergraduate populations and the assumption doctoral students can address their own needs (Gardner,

2009a). Faculty members in doctoral programs are frequently considered the main point of contact for students (Golde, 2005), but both academic and student affairs leadership should also take responsibility for the retention and education of students pursuing a doctorate because students' success requires both cognitive and psychosocial developmental opportunities. Recommendations for academic and student affairs leadership include the creation of a Graduate Student Advocate position, promotion of faculty and staff wellness as they serve as role models for students, planning a doctoral student orientation, and securing financial support for students.

#### *Graduate Student Advocate*

One of the most applicable recommendations for addressing many of the concerns presented by participants is the creation and support for a Graduate Student Advocate (GSA). A similar 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). The professional in this position could help students address struggles of conflict with faculty and unclear academic requirements, as well as provide a central location for doctoral student advocacy across campus.

The GSA position can assist doctoral students with academic issues, but could also provide professional development and social opportunities. Among the many roles the position could fill include advising the graduate student government organization, coordinating teaching assistant workshops, providing career development advising and job search skills sessions, gathering and disseminating financial aid and scholarship information, 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, the GSA could serve on various committees and decision-making bodies within the university to ensure graduate student needs are considered. The GSA could also provide consultation to student affairs professionals who do not have experience working with graduate students or an understanding of the process toward a graduate degree. Most importantly, as participants referenced challenges with unclear academic requirements and relationships with faculty members, the GSA could serve as a confidential resource for doctoral students to problem solve and process their feelings, experiences, and decisions. The GSA would provide options and advisement and encourage students to develop ways to address situations of conflict themselves. As I conceptualized this position further and considered the needs of the study participants, it would be important for the GSA to have experience in doctoral education, preferably holding a doctorate themselves. The degree would allow the GSA to establish credibility with faculty, administrators, and students, and ensure the advocate is aware of the various processes and culture of graduate education. Overall, the GSA 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.

Although many of the responsibilities of the GSA may be currently absorbed into other departments on campus, such as the Faculty Development Center for teaching workshops or Career Services for job search assistance, considering doctoral students' limited time, the GSA provides them with a one-stop-shop to have all their needs met. Limiting the number of university personnel a graduate student must contact to resolve an

issue to one, the GSA, would reduce frustration and possibly increase satisfaction. The professional serving in the GSA role would need to be approachable, knowledgeable, and trustworthy for doctoral students to utilize their expertise. Otherwise, their questions would be better answered through the current decentralized model.

In regard to the role as a conflict manager for students, many institutions no longer have an ombudsperson to provide guidance for students attempting to negotiate conflicts with others. While a counseling center may provide services to assist students with developing strategies to address conflicts, many students may not view such situations as requiring counseling and thus feel unsure where to obtain guidance. Finally, the GSA can serve as the expert on the needs and issues of graduate students when institutions are making decisions about policy and services. The Graduate School office may be aware of the academic issues graduate students encounter, but the GSA would be able to represent the personal and social needs of students as well. Because of the confidential issues doctoral students would be able to share more readily with the GSA, this position would be able to supplement the Graduate Schools' information with the knowledge they have obtained in their unique role.

#### *Doctoral Student Orientation*

Doctoral students are beginning a new educational experience and may be feeling confused and anxious similar to when they began their undergraduate careers (Rosenblatt & Christensen, 1993). Considering 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, 2009a). 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.

Typical models of doctoral student orientation programs include combined master's and doctoral student orientations as one campus-wide graduate student orientation program and/or a departmental or programmatic orientation. As discussed in the literature review, the nature of the doctoral student experience differs from other graduate degrees and thus their unique needs should be met through a separate doctoral student orientation. The information provided at orientation can promote doctoral students' emotional wellness as they begin to feel more comfortable with and knowledgeable about the institution where they will spend many hours in future years. The most common topics discussed during graduate student orientations include graduate school and university policies, student services, computer and library facilities, health care and health insurance, academic advising, student organizations, and registration (Poock, 2004). Additionally, topics of childcare, housing, and spiritual, social, and recreational activities recreation should be addressed to promote physical, social, physical, and emotional wellness (Poock). Both areas commonly discussed, and the additional topics suggested by Poock, should be included in orientation programs for doctoral students.

As participants shared, peer and faculty relationships are integral to their academic success and social wellness. Providing opportunities for doctoral students to begin developing relationships with both peers and faculty members during orientation is important (Gardner, 2009a). Each department could host a luncheon for their new students to meet each other and begin interacting with their faculty members. 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. Considering the needs of part-time students and students with children when planning social gathering will encourage feelings of belonging for all doctoral students (Gardner).

In terms of structure, considering 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 (2009a) suggested 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.

#### *Financial Support for Doctoral Students*

As is a concern in every level of higher education, continuing opportunities for financial support in the form of graduate assistantships, teaching assistantships, research assistantships, grants, scholarships, and loans contribute to doctoral students' financial

well-being. Three-fourths of this study's participants, who are full-time students, hold an assistantship to support their education and living expenses. The participants appreciate these positions for the teaching and practical experience, as well as the financial benefits.

Beyond the financial benefits of tuition and a stipend, graduate teaching, research, and administrative assistantships provide doctoral students with professional development opportunities, a work environment that understands their scheduling demands and time constraints, further integration into the university, and increased interaction with faculty, staff, and peers. Although doctoral students could obtain part-time work to support their education, those opportunities are scarce and do not provide the additional non-financial benefits of assistantship positions. Gardner (2009a) found that assistantship opportunities provide professional development and experience for students' future academic careers. The flexibility of assistantships, coupled with the financial support and professional development involved, afford doctoral students with the opportunity to place academics as their highest priority. Through assistantship opportunities, doctoral students are able to solidify their career aspirations, develop skills and experiences to enhance their teaching, research, and leadership abilities, and improve their marketability as future professionals once they graduate.

#### *Promoting and Supporting Faculty and Staff Wellness*

A recommendation mentioned by three participants to promote doctoral student wellness is support for faculty and staff members' wellness from university leadership. Faculty and staff serve as role models for doctoral students, so promoting their well-being creates a culture of wellness, which can then trickle down to students. Although many institutions may already provide some of the recommendations for wellness discussed

below, by no means are they universal benefits and as changes to benefits are continually reexamined, the often intangible influence of removing certain benefits for faculty and staff wellness should be considered.

The idea of faculty as role models of wellness to promote their students' wellness was important to participants. Considering doctoral students may pursue career paths similar to their advisors', faculty members' ability to experience wellness can influence students' future career choices. If a doctoral student who places value on their wellness continually interacts with their faculty members who do not feel supported in pursuing their own wellness, students may choose an alternate career path because of these interactions. Alternately, students who work with faculty and staff who lead balanced lives, may be further inspired to pursue a career path they had not initially considered when beginning their doctorate.

Support structures should be implemented to ensure faculty and staff that are interacting and serving as support systems for doctoral students can live well lives within the busy environment of higher education. Faculty and staff wellness can be supported with programs promoting physical health by providing opportunities for healthy eating through reasonably-priced meal plan options for campus dining facilities and setting minimal fees to utilize on-campus recreation centers. Policy considerations for family leave and flexibility in work hours can also promote wellness as faculty and staff members attend to both work and life priorities. Flexible work hours are currently in practice for faculty members, but staff members often continue to struggle with the demands of working typical business hours. Continual professional development opportunities for faculty and staff can promote their intellectual and occupational

wellness. Providing additional funding for research support for faculty can help them advance professionally. Finally, developing opportunities for social interaction among faculty and staff on campus can promote social wellness and collegiality. As students shared issues of conflict among faculty negatively influencing their wellness, support for developing positive relationship within departments may be one of the most important recommendations for faculty wellness.

### Recommendations for Faculty

As discussed in the literature review and throughout participants' reflections of their doctoral student experience, faculty members play the most important role in students' academic lives. Thus, it is not surprising that a large portion of the recommendations from this study are directed toward faculty. Under the current structure of doctoral education where student affairs professionals are minimally involved in the lives of doctoral students, faculty would be responsible for implementing these suggestions. However, collaborating with student affairs entities could allow responsibility of doctoral students' experience and development to shift to include student affairs professionals, thus more holistically meeting doctoral students' needs (Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006). Students expect to be challenged academically, but often do not anticipate challenges with faculty members that most often arise from the interpersonal component of the relationship. Participants also reflected on interpersonal and structural components of doctoral education that could better support their wellness.

#### *Interpersonal*

Education not only involves students' cognitive gains, but is also supported by the learning environment. Faculty members have the opportunity to develop a comfortable

and hospitable learning environment through their interpersonal relationships with students. Among the suggestions participants had for faculty members to support their wellness include discussing wellness in courses and advising meetings, as well as taking interest in their students' personal lives.

*Addressing wellness.* Broaching the topic of wellness in courses or advising meetings reminds students to nurture areas of their lives outside of academia. Provided this study is the seminal piece of research about holistic wellness of doctoral students, including wellness in the doctoral experience provides a new perspective and thus requires new approaches in faculty members' work with students. Addressing wellness requires consciousness of its value for students' overall success and satisfaction followed by providing a safe space for initiating the conversation about wellness.

The suggestion from participants for faculty to address wellness supports the previous recommendation of institutional support for faculty wellness as they serve as role models to doctoral students. If wellness is not a priority for faculty, it is unlikely they would voluntarily approach the subject in their interactions with students. Thus, this recommendation cannot be fulfilled independent of the need for support for faculty and staff wellness.

Multiple opportunities for addressing wellness exist, including during students' inquiry into doctoral studies, orientation, courses, advising sessions, and electronic communication. Prospective students often spend time with faculty members or current students prior to beginning their program, which provides a unique opportunity to discuss wellness issues with students through discussions about how they envision dealing with stresses involved with doctoral education. An orientation program is an appropriate time

and place to address the types of challenges students could face in doctoral education coupled with possible solutions and resources should they encounter such issues as isolation and personal conflicts. Articulating issues students may experience during their first semester or year of doctoral education, such as transitioning from the work place to the classroom, managing deadlines and developing time management skills, and challenges with teaching undergraduate students for those serving in teaching assistant positions, would be relevant for new students. As previously shared by participants, it is important not overwhelm students with issues they may not encounter for several years, such as the job search or the experience of writing a dissertation.

Academic courses provide another opportunity for faculty to address wellness among their students. A faculty member may witness physical signs of challenges to wellness in their students when they enter the classroom and should address the signs of lack of sleep and stress when possible. Encouraging students to take care of themselves as much as they tend to their academic work may be a welcome suggestion to students who may not see that as possible considering the demands of their courses. Additionally, advising sessions should include time for faculty to discuss how students are tending to other areas of their life beyond their academic requirements. When they recognize a student struggling, faculty members should address their concerns to alleviate their student's possible feelings of isolation and stress. Faculty members may need additional training and resources to work with students in this way and if they do not feel comfortable doing so, encouraging students to utilize counseling resources on campus may be an effective approach. Finally, many programs host a listserv for their students, which can be used not only to disseminate academic-related information, but also as a

resource by sharing articles about wellness and opportunities on campus and in the community to support their wellness, such financial workshops and options for physical activity and social interaction.

*Interest in students' personal lives.* Beyond giving advice about wellness, participants recognized and appreciated faculty members' interest in their personal lives. Faculty members' interest in their students' lives helps students build comfortable relationships and personal connections with them. Students seek this type of relationship because of the additional learning and mentoring it provides. Additionally, since doctoral students commonly have close relationships with faculty members from previous educational experiences, which is how they became interested in pursuing their doctorate, many doctoral students seek relationships with their faculty members.

Some faculty members may be concerned with creating unclear boundaries on their relationships with students. However, doctoral students should be mature enough to understand what is appropriate and not appropriate to share with faculty members. Much of the concern is also reliant upon faculty members' level of comfort with discussing issues of a more personal nature with students. Certainly, discretion and understanding from both students and faculty members must be exercised when discussing students' personal lives. However, the simple question of 'how are you doing?' or 'how have things changed since you began doctoral studies?' can provide an avenue to begin faculty members' interest in their students' lives. Additionally, if a faculty member does not feel comfortable with one-on-one discussion about a student's personal life, they could also provide time during their courses for students to talk with their peers about the questions suggested above. By dedicating a small amount of time to discussion of personal issues,



students may feel validated in their non-academic experiences and obtain advice and suggestions from others who have had similar challenges.

Coupled with the interest in non-academic subjects of their students' lives, several participants appreciated being treated like "human beings." It is not the case that they are being treated inhumanely. Rather, they do not want to be viewed as academic machines continually producing work. They want their personal lives to also be valued in the academic setting.

The training provided to faculty members varies but is most commonly focused on developing a strong grasp on their field of study and researching. Their education may not include how to develop relationships with students, but such training would support their productivity in terms of providing students with a satisfying learning experience.

#### *Structural Considerations*

In the next section, I present opportunities for faculty to promote students' wellness through structural considerations. I highlight five areas for faculty to consider, including readiness for information, structure versus flexibility, addressing potential challenges, peer interaction, and peer-to-peer mentoring.

*Readiness for information.* Doctoral students frequently have experienced graduate school while obtaining their master's degrees, however, either because they are under the pressure of being a doctoral student, new processes, or a new institution, students continue to need support and clear direction in regard to policies, procedures, and timelines. The transition of students to the culture, processes, and environment of doctoral education can be challenging. As discussed in the findings, readiness for information and the timing of expecting students to discuss potential dissertation topics

can cause anxiety. As seen in this group of participants, students' preferences for receiving information about graduate school and programmatic policies and determining a research interest vary. Faculty should approach these topics delicately so to meet more students' needs by devoting time to understanding their students' unique learning styles and goals for completing their degrees. Just as Gardner (2009a) suggested being cautious when determining which information to provide at an orientation to doctoral education, faculty members should also consider the developmental needs of students when determining when to discuss educational processes and dissertation topic selection.

As discussed in the findings, doctoral students are oftentimes expected to have an area of research interest upon entering their program. However, this expectation may cause undue stress for students who do not fully understand the development of a research area. Robin's experience shared in detail in the previous chapter about needing have a philosophy and topic to begin her first literature review assignment exemplifies students' frustration with readiness and faculty members' negotiations between readiness and providing a challenge to encourage students' progress. The pressure and importance placed on one's dissertation topic causes anxiety when students either do not know what to research or do not feel passionate about their chosen topic, as oftentimes is promoted by faculty. Since many participants were just beginning to consider dissertation topics, the overwhelming experience of choosing a topic was clearly a source of emotional and intellectual stress. While students understood the importance of choosing a topic and expected to be challenged to do so, faculty members should remain cognizant of each individual student's level of readiness and provide challenge and support accordingly.

*Structure versus flexibility.* Another issue that yielded opposing perspectives from participants was the preference for structure versus flexibility in course requirements. Some participants appreciated structure around when to take courses, whereas others appreciated the flexibility of designing their coursework to meet their unique educational goals. Program design and publication of course offerings in advance allows students to create a personalized educational plan to meet both requirements and pursue academic interests both within and beyond their field of study. Having clearly defined and articulated programs requirements assists students who appreciate structure. However, within the structure, providing opportunities for students to make choices about their education allows them to take ownership and pursue their individual interests. After synthesizing both views, a compromise would be a well-communicated structure with the option of making changes based on individual goals and interests. Faculty should be responsible for developing structure of courses and degree progression, and also communicate the opportunity for flexibility and when students have choice.

Providing clear information when students are ready contributes to students' emotional wellness and improves the transparency of the doctoral process. Providing information in written or online form for students to refer to at their leisure may ameliorate this issue as students can self-direct when they receive the information (Gardner, 2009a). Participants suggested more advising from their faculty members would address concerns about feelings of missing information. Particularly at the beginning of a students' doctoral experience, guidance can quell their anxiety and worry about their new educational experience.

One specific way structure can be imposed in doctoral education is through course design and organization. Well-thought out syllabi provide students with clear expectations of the semester and allows them to balance requirements for each of their courses by planning their workload accordingly. As students have multiple demands on their time between other courses, work requirements, and their personal lives, structuring courses contributes to doctoral student wellness.

*Addressing potential challenges.* Transparency in the academic process supports students' wellness as they have fewer unknowns about next steps and requirements to progress toward their degree. Participants found value in faculty being upfront about challenges they may face, but also carefully avoiding perpetuating the negative narrative. Several others also support the recommendation of clearly communicating what students should expect in their doctoral program (Gardner, 2009a; Golde, 2005). Dispelling rumors and addressing potential issues with possible solutions would benefit students without intimidating them through the sharing of horror stories. By stating potential issues doctoral students may face, they can feel less isolated when confronted with those challenges, but also know who to approach to assist them through the struggle. Sharing issues can demystify the process of doctoral education, but must be done so as not to perpetuate the negative narrative of the experience. Dave, Katie, and Elizabeth each described the large amounts of uncertainty involved in doctoral education and how discussing the types of stresses students may encounter and the resources available to address potential issues is beneficial to their emotional wellness.

*Peer interaction.* Participants note peer interaction and support as important for a satisfactory experience, a finding supported in several other studies of graduate students

(Goplerud, 1980; Hadjioannou et al., 2007). Often, doctoral students' main social interaction is with their peers in the classroom. Additionally, developing opportunities for peer interaction outside of the classroom further promotes students' connections to their program and supports their social wellness. From participants' statements about peer culture, faculty members should structure social interactions among students both in and out of the classroom to provide students with an additional layer of support.

Within the classroom opportunities for interaction include collaborative assignments and research projects, which Brus (2006) stated can decrease isolation among students. The cohort model was supported by several participants as contributing to their ability to develop strong peer relationships. In online courses, students can post pictures and biographies to introduce themselves to each other and begin building community. If faculty members do not want to devote limited face-to-face classroom time on promoting social interaction among students, they can create an online forum for students to share about themselves. Students would be able to initiate personal relationships with peers with whom they share common interests based on information shared online.

In addition to cohort-based programs, developing opportunities for out-of-class academic interaction supports both students' social and intellectual wellness. Creating requirements for group research provides a common purpose for doctoral students, which oftentimes develops and strengthens relationships. Collaborative assignments may then promote further partnerships in coursework and research efforts, thus integrating students into their programs, providing support, and potentially increasing work quality as multiple students share ideas to create the best product.

To provide balance to the educational experience, doctoral students desire opportunities to socialize with peers outside of their immersion in academic work. Faculty members should encourage peer interaction by planning social opportunities for students (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). By providing financial support for social activities and participating in them as well, faculty members demonstrate the value of collegial relationships, which are important not only in the classroom, but in their future workplaces as well. Social interactions outside of the classroom can foster different types of relationships than those developed in the classroom setting. Students may be more comfortable sharing their experiences with peers and then together, students can problem solve issues related to doctoral education without involving their faculty advisor.

*Peer mentoring.* Beyond social interaction and developing collegial relationships, participants sought peer interaction to provide them with answers (Gardner, 2009a). While faculty members are helpful in providing guidance and information, participants also sought the perspectives of peers who were further along in their programs for advice. Several participants mentioned developing a mentorship program between new and seasoned doctoral students as an approach to supporting students' wellness by reducing anxiety about the unknown.

Multiple studies of graduate and doctoral students support the recommendation of developing a peer mentorship program (Gardner, 2009a; Hyun et al., 2006; Weidma et al., 2001) to provide support for students' social, emotional, and intellectual wellness. The role of the faculty in the development of a mentoring program would be to garner upper-level student volunteers and publicize the opportunity to new doctoral students. Matching of mentors and mentees could be either faculty or student-initiated. Once the

students are matched, minimal involvement on the part of the faculty members would be needed.

For institutions that implement any of these recommendations, developing a way to assess their effectiveness on student success, retention, satisfaction, and wellness should be incorporated. As addressing wellness in the doctoral student population is a new phenomenon, initiatives intended to support students' wellness should be extensively researched to understand their influence.

### Recommendations for Students

These recommendations are from participants to their peers, whether they are new or continuing doctoral students. Participants either put this advice into practice or realized after a negative experience to try different approaches to encourage their wellness. The purpose of these suggestions is to promote doctoral students' thriving, not only surviving, in their educational pursuits. The recommendations include the mindset students can adopt to combat the negativity often associated with doctoral education, approaches toward managing workload, and the importance of gathering information.

#### *Combating the Negative Narrative*

One of the purposes of this study is to provide a counter-narrative to the frequently shared stories of doctoral studies being the worst time of students' lives. As presented in the previous chapter, several participants heard negative stories before beginning their studies and some had been admonished not to begin the degree because of the negative ways in which they would change as a result. Since wellness is viewed as a process and not a destination, each of the participants discussed at least one area of their wellness they are consciously sacrificing to nurture their intellectual wellness. While the

dominant narrative may be partially fulfilled in the lives of many doctoral students, the participants have found ways to make the loss not become an overwhelming reason for the remaining areas of their lives to be considered horrible.

### *Workload Management*

The main struggle for doctoral students in terms of wellness is finding the time to pursue activities to promote their wellness given the many academic requirements they must also complete. Participants implemented several strategies to assist them in maintaining their wellness, including employing time management skills, self-imposing structure, avoiding procrastination, and developing short-term focus.

*Time management.* One of the main reasons given for not participating in more wellness-promoting activities is a lack of time. Doctoral students often have varied responsibilities to manage, including multiple courses and their subsequent requirements, conducting research, maintaining personal relationships with partners, family, and friends, pursuing hobbies and personal interests, and for participants of this study, participating in activities to support their wellness. Not only does actively addressing each of these areas of their lives take time, but so does the thought process required to manage them. Developing approaches for managing time will allow students to participate in wellness activities, as well as fulfill their academic responsibilities.

Part of managing time involves structuring workload and responsibilities. One approach to time management is by self-imposing structure. Doctoral coursework, and particularly post-coursework requirements, are not necessarily structured. Participants shared their experience of imposing their own structure on their work to avoid chaos and an inability to finish tasks. Along with self-imposing structure comes the ability to



prioritize academic work among other responsibilities, as well as prioritizing what work is completed first among the many assignments.

*Avoiding procrastination.* When discussing time management with students, inevitably, procrastination is mentioned as a deterrent to effective use of one's time. Doctoral students are not immune from procrastination and several participants mentioned it as a challenge other students should be aware of during their studies. Previous research has documented the connection between procrastination and perfectionism (Ferrari, 1992; Saddler & Sacks, 1993; Onwuegbuzie, 1997). Participants' experience with procrastination may be related to perfectionism, which they realized was inhibiting their ability to be successful in their academics and remain well.

Robin, Dave, and Laura each found value in beginning work early and developed approaches to managing their workload among their multitude of non-academic priorities. Dave related addressing work demands and wellness; by developing an awareness of the challenges of his workload, Dave chose to avoid procrastination and begin to complete his assignments, as opposed to allow the looming work create emotional instability and stress.

*Short-term focus.* The doctoral journey can be long, so many participants discussed using the strategy of focusing on the next assignment and not getting overwhelmed with the larger requirement, the dissertation, at the end. Dave found the ability to focus on the task at hand and work on additional projects as they arose a helpful approach.

### *Gathering Information*

In the previous section providing recommendations to faculty members, participants suggested faculty provide clear information to students so they are not concerned with potentially missing vital information. The responsibility for understanding requirements is also on the student. Oftentimes, information is published, but students must take the initiative to learn the information rather than expecting their advisor to know what their questions are before they are asked. Using peer and faculty relationships when students have questions can alleviate emotional stress that often accompanies unknown information.

During a follow up interview, Dave suggested the recommendations suggested here for students be placed online or in an easily-accessible location because many new doctoral students seek this information prior to beginning their programs, but would not know to search for it in a dissertation. It is my hope that faculty members and student affairs professionals for whom this research may be more accessible, will view sharing this information to promote doctoral students' success as their responsibility as well.

### Directions for Future Research

Research on doctoral students has increased over the past 20 years, but this population remains understudied (Gardner, 2009a). This study was the first effort toward developing an understanding of the experience of well doctoral students. The purpose of the research was to gain perspective on how to improve the overall experience of doctoral students through exploration of students who consider themselves well.

As a case study, these findings and recommendations may be applicable to faculty and administrators on their campuses. As such, future research should explore institutions

of different sizes based on Carnegie classification and with different doctoral degree-granting programs. For example, Armfield University did not have science-specific programs involving a great deal of lab work. The difference in the type of work done by doctoral students depending on their degree type should be explored as well because of the unique environmental and peer influences in research laboratories.

Several studies of the doctoral student experience call for research on underrepresented populations as their presence in doctoral education continues to increase (Anderson & Mieztis, 1999; González et al., 2001; Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006). In terms of wellness research, the absence of non-White participants in this study must be noted. Possible reasons for their absence include a limited number of underrepresented doctoral students at Armfield University and the confounding social issues underrepresented students must face in terms of racism and discrimination making wellness a privileged concept. Additionally, identity development and changes in doctoral students require additional research (Gardner, 2009a; González et al.). Future studies should include different demographics of participants, such as part-time students, non-White students, and male students.

The doctoral student experience is frequently separated into three distinct phases: entry, integration, and candidacy (Gardner, 2009a). Ten of the 12 participants had not yet reached candidacy and wellness specifically in regards to the stage of 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.

A commonality among participants as they discussed their wellness involved their interpersonal relationships with peers and the positive influence they could provide to each other. Additional research should explore the benefits of peer relationships on the doctoral student experience and its influence on emotional and social wellness. Learning more about peer mentorship programs, as well as cohort-structured programs, could be beneficial. An interesting outcome of the study's sampling was the presence of six non-traditionally- aged women in their late 40's and 50's. The older students shared unique experiences with faculty and peers they attributed to their age and life experiences. Further exploration into the experiences of non-traditionally-aged women should be explored.

Surprisingly absent from most participants' interviews was discussion of contemplating leaving their degree program. Only one student, Laura, acknowledged thoughts of departure. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of well doctoral students and the lack of inclusion of experiences considering stopping pursuit of their doctorate may provide a bridge between wellness and low attrition rates. This study is not prepared to infer the connection, but future research should continue to explore the influence of wellness on outcomes such as graduation rates and time to degree.

### Conclusion

This study sought to address five research questions, which are restated below with a summary of the conclusions.

Q1 How do doctoral students make meaning of wellness as they pursue their doctoral degree?

The meaning of wellness in the lives of participants varied. For some, wellness was an integral part of their lives before pursuing the doctorate and continued as they

added doctoral studies to their responsibilities. Since wellness is a holistic concept, becoming a doctoral student provided opportunities for participants to nurture their intellectual wellness because of the cognitive development involved in advanced studies. For other participants, wellness became a means of survival and success in their program. Had they continued to feel unwell and unfulfilled in others areas of their lives, they may have either become part of the attrition statistic or have an unsatisfactory experience leading to future unhealthy behaviors and a perpetuation of the negative narrative of doctoral studies.

Participants understanding of the components of wellness included physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, and financial. Although financial wellness is not specifically a component of many wellness models, the inclusion of it by participants highlighted its importance to the doctoral student population. Additionally, wellness was consistently considered a process, as opposed to an outcome. Participants' sense of wellness changed throughout their degree programs as they encountered various challenges and made decisions to address those issues in ways that promoted, as opposed to detracted from, their sense of wellness.

Q2 How do doctoral students pursue wellness in their degree program?

Relying on self-awareness, making choices to support their wellness, taking responsibility for their education and wellness, figuring healthy ways to address non-academic challenges, and removing perfectionism were approaches participants took to pursue and maintain wellness. The initial way participants pursued wellness was by developing a realistic mindset of the role of doctoral education in their lives; the two approaches to incorporating academic work into their wellness included either viewing it

as tending to their intellectual wellness or consciously not allowing it to overwhelm other areas of their wellness by limiting the amount time devoted to academics.

As participants addressed challenges in their lives, whether academic or non-academic, they utilized their understanding of themselves to subsequently make decisions to continue to lead a well life. Employing self-awareness was an overarching concept that allowed participants to made choices congruent with their value of wellness. Participants discussed making choices regarding their social, physical, and occupational wellness when they began to experience stress or frustration.

The idea of removing perfectionism was necessary for doctoral student participants to pursue wellness. Because perfectionism led participants to spend extreme about of time on their intellectual wellness, they began neglecting other areas of their lives. By consciously choosing to do their best, but not obsess over their assignments, participants were able to maintain their sense of wellness and succeed academically.

Q3 How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' sense of wellness?

Q4 How does the structure and culture of the doctoral program contribute to students' ability to pursue wellness?

As themes emerged, many of the participants' responses provided similar insight to both research questions three and four. By virtue of pursuing a doctorate, participants enrolled in coursework that contributed their sense of intellectual wellness. The extensive time and energy spent learning new ideas and developing perspectives of their own based on multiple sources of information provided participants with ample opportunities to support their intellectual wellness. Specially, the variety of courses available, including

program-specific, research, and electives, promoted wellness as students continued to learn and develop new interests.

A lack of social interaction is a common concern among doctoral students who spend significant time with their thoughts. However, cohort-based programs, opportunities for collaborative work with peers, and out-of-class social interactions with both faculty and peers contributed to participants' sense of social wellness. Although they may not have as much time to spend with friends outside of their programs, by developing relationships with those in their program, participants felt they were sacrificing less than if the isolation overwhelmed their experience.

In terms of approaches to emotional wellness, decreasing worry, anxiety, and stress promoted participants' wellness. Through positive faculty interactions, participants gained information about their academic requirements, as well as their faculty members' expectations for their work. Devoting extensive time and energy to their academics and not knowing if they are progressing appropriately caused undue stress on participants. Thus, programs with clear requirements and effective lines of communication contributed to students' sense of wellness.

Q5 How do doctoral students' choices around wellness influence their academic pursuits?

The interconnected nature of wellness was frequently described by participants, which demonstrates how wellness supports their academic endeavors. Participants shared how their physical wellness promoted their ability to develop ideas and feel confident in their pursuits toward intellectual wellness. Although participants did not directly contribute their academic success to their choices about wellness, most of them did not

discuss considering leaving their programs. The lack of mention of quitting may promote the idea that wellness can positively influence doctoral student attrition rates.

Several recommendations for both research and practice have been presented from this study. In terms of research, as a case study, participants' rich experiences leads to a multitude of areas of exploration needed to further understand and enhance doctoral student wellness. 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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APPENDIX A  
CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

Hello UNC Doctoral Students,

My name is Patty Witkowsky and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership program. My dissertation research is about the experiences of doctoral students who identify themselves as “well” during their doctoral program. The purpose of the study is to illuminate the experiences of self-identified “well” doctoral students within a specific institutional setting.

You will be asked to explain your background, your experience in your doctoral program, as well as how you define wellness and maintain your sense of wellness as a doctoral student. Wellness could include, but is not limited to nor must it encompass, areas such as intellectual, emotional, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual.

I would like to request that you be available to participate in two individual interviews for approximately 60 minutes each occurring between May and December 2009. Additionally, you will be asked to submit two journal entries between the time of the first and second interview discussing your experience with wellness at those times of the academic year. If you would like to participate and this timeline does not work, I can work around your schedule, so please do not let this anticipated timeline deter your participation.

Your identity will be completely confidential and no one but me will be able to connect your experiences with your name or degree program.

You will receive a \$20 gift card to a local dining establishment in exchange for your time in the interviews. It is my hope that participation in this study will not only benefit you as you reflect on your experience, but also university administrators who may use the study's findings to further inform decisions about graduate education.

Should you be interested in participating or have any questions about the study or the time commitment, please contact me at [pattyarmfield@hotmail.com](mailto:pattyarmfield@hotmail.com). Please also contact me if you believe one of your doctoral student peers could be a potential participant for the study.

Thank you in advance for considering participating.

Sincerely,

Patty Witkowsky

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH



Researcher: Patty Witkowsky, Ph.D. student in Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership, phone: (240) 338-0145

Research Advisor: Dr. Katrina Rodriguez, Assistant Professor in Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership, phone: (970) 351-2495

I agree to be interviewed by the researcher listed above about my experience around wellness as a doctoral student. I understand that I will be asked about my personal experiences and the ways I make meaning of wellness during my doctoral student experience during two 60 minute interviews to occur between May and December 2009, which will be audio recorded and transcribed for use in the data analysis component of the research. Following the first interview, I will be asked to submit journals about my experience as a “well” doctoral student. During the research, my identity will in no way be attached to the answers provided. I will choose a pseudonym to be used in place of my name and will work with the researcher to change any identifying characteristics and experiences, including but not limited to the title of my degree program. Finally, I understand that the audio recordings will be disposed of upon transcription of the interview.

Because I will be discussing my doctoral student experience, by signing below, I acknowledge that there are limits to confidentiality including:

- Statements that disclose that I am a threat to myself or others will be shared with appropriate University officials
- Statements that disclose I have committed a felony will be shared with appropriate University officials

Upon completion of the two individual interviews and two journal submissions, you will receive a \$25 gift card to a local dining establishment. The findings from this study will be used for a dissertation, may be shared with University administration to enhance doctoral education, and may also be used in a manuscript to be submitted for publication.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Sponsored Programs and Academic Research Center, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.

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Participant’s Signature

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Date

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Researcher’s Signature

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Date