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# Returning Counselor Education Doctoral Students: Issues of Retention, Attrition, and Perceived Experiences

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A phenomenological research design was utilized to illuminate the experiences of counselor education doctoral students who had voluntarily departed from study and successfully returned. No studies exist in the counselor education literature examining this phenomenon. Themes derived from the data suggest a common experience across participants, including the salient nature of leaving and returning to study, the importance of faculty-student interactions, and that departure is informed by personal factors and academic culture. The findings have implications for student retention and attrition, as well as counseling departments, counseling faculty, and counselor education doctoral students.

*Keywords:* retention, attrition, doctoral students, student departure, academic culture

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Colleges and universities around the United States invest millions of dollars each year attracting and recruiting potential students at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Stover, 2005). Many doctoral programs in the United States offer their students monthly stipends and tuition remission. Despite this financial support, high rates of doctoral student attrition have persisted for the past 40 years (Lovitts, 2001). Although a precise figure has proven elusive, estimates across disciplines (education, engineering, humanities, sciences, mathematics, and social sciences) have been placed between 40 and 70% (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Nettles & Millett, 2006). In addition to the large financial losses, low retention rates reflect poorly on the quality and credibility of the academic institution. Retaining students has increasingly become the duty of the academic institution (Stover, 2005), and high student attrition is no longer a mark of

academic rigor but “a sign of doing something wrong” (Richmond, 1986, p. 92).

The financial, professional, and personal costs of attrition to the doctoral student are immense. Many doctoral students who depart from study have significant debt from student loans, accept less esteemed jobs as a result of diminished self-esteem, and experience emotional consequences such as depression, anxiety, and hopelessness (Lovitts, 2001). Faculty members are negatively affected as they invest time and energy in their doctoral students through teaching, academic advising, and mentoring (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). Although student retention has been placed at the forefront of higher education issues, no consensus for improving retention is present in the literature, the doctoral student attrition rate remains high, and most research has focused on undergraduate, rather than doctoral, student retention (Berger & Lyons, 2005).

Current doctoral student retention and attrition research examining the disciplines of geology (Golde, 2005), biology (Golde, 2005), history (Golde, 2005), English (Golde, 2005), and counselor education (Cusworth, 2001; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009) has been qualitative and focused on the experiences of doctoral students attempting to persist to degree completion (Golde, 2005; de Valero, 2001). Golde (2005) conducted a study interviewing doctoral students who had withdrawn from study at the same university. Reasons for departure included poor fit between advisor and student, isolation of the student from the department, and a mismatch of expectations between the student and the department. Similar reasons for departure were articulated by Nerad and Miller (1996), who interviewed doctoral students who had left study and cited reasons of poor faculty advisor-student relationships, lack of financial support, and “a chilly departmental climate” (p. 71). De Valero (2001) conducted a study asking doctoral students and faculty what factors had a positive effect on degree completion. De Valero (2001) reported financial support, doctoral student-faculty advisor relationship, doctoral student participation in department activities, and peer support as factors positively impacting degree completion.

The studies by Cusworth (2001), Protivnak and Foss (2009), Hoskins and Goldberg (2005), and Hughes and Kleist (2005) were the only counselor education studies encountered in an exhaustive online database search relating to student retention and attrition. Cusworth (2001) conducted a study interviewing first-year counseling doctoral students after acceptance and orientation into their doctoral program. Cusworth (2001) found doctoral students were distressed about lack of funding and departmental disorganization, interpersonal

difficulties with faculty and staff, and the quality of their relationship with their mentor. Protivnak and Foss (2009) explored the themes that influence the counselor education doctoral student experience. Protivnak and Foss (2009) surveyed 141 counselor education doctoral students from programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and non-CACREP programs ranging in age from 24 to 67 years. Using an open-ended survey and a qualitative analysis, Protivnak and Foss (2009) reported that departmental culture, mentoring, academics, support systems, and personal issues were variables that could both positively and negatively affect the doctoral student experience. Departmental culture included faculty being responsive to doctoral students (positive impact on doctoral student experience) and departmental politics (negative impact on doctoral student experience). Protivnak and Foss (2009) reported that doctoral students were positively impacted by mentoring from faculty, and academic factors influencing the experience of doctoral students included orientation programs, clear course requirements, and information regarding funding (all positive influences). Finally, the personal issues cited by doctoral students impacting their experiences included maintaining motivation to complete the Ph.D., lack of money, time management, and transitioning to the role of doctoral student (Protivnak & Foss, 2009).

Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) interviewed 33 counselor education doctoral students from CACREP accredited programs. The preponderance of participants were Caucasian females ( $n = 28$ ) enrolled in study full-time. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) examined what helps students persist to degree completion and reported a student-program match, including experiencing quality relationships with faculty members

and feeling a sense of community, was a factor in a doctoral student's decision to persist. Hughes and Kleist (2005) examined the first semester experiences of four counselor education doctoral students in CACREP accredited counselor education programs (three female students, one male student). Hughes and Kleist (2005) described the emotional turbulence students experienced when beginning study and suggested that counselor educators could affirm and empower doctoral students by giving them responsibilities that engender beliefs in their capabilities to be in doctoral study, such as teaching and presenting at conferences. Hughes and Kleist (2005) also suggested that doctoral students might benefit from better knowing what to expect from doctoral study, including the initial emotionality that comes with beginning a doctoral program.

No specific data exists regarding attrition rates in counselor education programs. However, the longstanding high doctoral student attrition rate across academic disciplines (Lovitts, 2001) indicates that it is unlikely counselor education programs are exempt from this problem, and more likely that counselor education programs experience undesirable levels of attrition. In addition, recent (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Golde, 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006) and past (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Zwick, 1991) research has shown that the highest rates of attrition exist in the humanities and social sciences, the latter being the area most aligned with the curriculum of a Ph.D. in counselor education. Most doctoral programs in counselor education are housed within education departments, and doctoral student attrition rates in education are also problematically high (Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Considering this research, it would be ill

advised to dismiss inquiries investigating retention and attrition or to conclude that counselor education programs experience doctoral student attrition at uniquely low levels. Rather, it behooves counselor education programs to conduct research that examines this phenomenon.

Doctoral student attrition raises clear implications for programs in counselor education. The previously mentioned financial costs to the institution and the professional costs to the student are well documented (Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2001), as are the personal costs for faculty who invest in counselor education doctoral students (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). Research aimed at reducing attrition can mitigate these consequences. The growing counselor education research pointing toward academic factors as powerful influences on the doctoral student experience (Cusworth, 2001; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009) has demonstrated that counselor education doctoral programs can negatively impact doctoral students in a variety of ways, including departmental politics, being unresponsive to doctoral students, and not being clear about what doctoral study involves and what will be expected of them as doctoral students. Counselor education doctoral students are being trained to be future leaders of the counseling profession and advanced practitioners, pointing to the possibility of negative implications for the counseling profession as a whole and further reinforcing the value of this research.

Recent student retention and attrition research has targeted doctoral study, but counselor education research is sparse and focused on the experiences of doctoral students enrolled in doctoral study or permanently departed. The literature review revealed no studies focused on doctoral students who had departed from study and

successfully returned. Therefore, the guiding research question for this study was: What are the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and successfully returned to the same programs? The purpose of this singular research is to provide a first glimpse into this phenomenon and capture the shared experiences and central themes of counselor education students who have departed and returned. It is hoped this research will inclusively examine student attrition, student retention, and student experiences in counselor education doctoral programs to provide new information to assist these programs in retaining and graduating their students.

### **Method**

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was chosen to illuminate the experiences of doctoral students who have voluntarily departed from programs in counselor education and successfully returned. The phenomenological approach analyzes all sides of a phenomenon and emphasizes descriptions of experiences and core meanings, not explanations, analyses, or generalizations (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this research is to capture the shared experiences and central themes of counselor education students who have departed from and returned to study. This purpose mirrors Kline's (2008, p. 212) assertion regarding the choice of phenomenology: "a study that has the purpose of describing the central theme that emerges from the lived experiences of persons who share an experience...would use phenomenological assumptions." Moustakas' description and Kline's rationale confirm the appropriateness of the phenomenological approach as the best match for the purpose of this study.

### **Sampling Procedure, Setting, and Sample**

After securing the institutional review board's approval, purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2005) identified participants for this study. Participants were chosen based on having experienced the phenomenon under investigation to supply information that could not have been obtained from other individuals. Participants were recruited for this research through an email sent to the counselor education and supervision electronic mailing list (CESNET-L). Participant criteria were stated within the email, namely that each participant needed to have experienced voluntarily departing from a doctoral program in counselor education and then to have successfully returned to that same program. Departing was defined as having formally withdrawn from study for at least one semester (Berger & Lyons, 2005). The retention literature does not address what constitutes a successful return to study; therefore, the researcher defined successfully returning as resuming study for at least one year with no additional departures. The researcher concluded that one year demonstrated serious intentions to finish and provided adequate time for reimmersion into doctoral study and to experience being a doctoral student again. Individuals who were interested in participating contacted this researcher by email, resulting in a sample of six women between the ages of 30 and 50, with a mean age of 36 years. The sample size of six was determined through saturation (Creswell, 2007). Saturation occurred when there was redundancy in participant responses during the interviews, and no additional insights into the phenomenon emerged. Participant six did not provide new insights beyond the previous five participants; therefore no more participants for this research were solicited. Participants will be referred to in the results

section as Anne, Gem, Daphne, Jackie, Alexis, and Diane (all names are fictitious). One participant was located in the southeastern United States (Gem), one participant was located in the south (Jackie), and four were located in the Midwest (Anne, Daphne, Alexis, and Diane). All six participants were enrolled in public universities with high research activity. Three participants estimated their doctoral programs consisted of between 20 and 30 students with eight faculty members (Anne, Gem, and Daphne), two participants estimated their doctoral programs consisted of between 15 and 25 students with eight faculty members (Jackie and Alexis), and one participant estimated their doctoral program consisted of 30 students with ten faculty members (Diane). Five described themselves as Caucasian; one described herself as “racially mixed” (Gem). One participant had recently completed her doctorate (Jackie) and the remaining five participants had passed comprehensive exams and were in various stages of working on their dissertations. Protivnak and Foss (2009) recommended that future research on doctoral student completion include a small qualitative sample with multiple interviews. Since the goal of phenomenology is to understand the essence of participants’ experiences and not to generalize results (Moustakas, 1994), this small sample size was appropriate.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Process**

Two rounds of individual interviews (conducted in person and via phone calls) and a follow-up email were utilized to (a) produce enough data to generate a comprehensive description, and (b) demonstrate adequate interaction with participants to establish credibility (Kline & Farrell, 2005). Both rounds of interviews with each participant lasted between 60 and

90 minutes. All participant interviews were audio recorded and immediately transcribed and checked for accuracy by this author. A follow-up email containing the final themes was sent to each participant after both rounds of individual interviews (typically one week after the last interview) to provide participants with an opportunity to review the final themes and provide feedback. Initial interview questions were guided by Moustakas’ (1994) recommendation that, “The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). The preliminary questions were designed to prompt participants to provide a complete picture by discussing their experiences in their personal and academic lives while departing and returning, as well as the experiences of departing and returning. Specific questions were: (a) How would you describe the experience of departing? (b) How would you describe your program prior to your departure? (c) How would you describe your personal life prior to your departure? (d) How would you describe the faculty in your program relevant to your decision to depart? (e) How would you describe the experience of returning? (f) How would you describe the faculty in your program relevant to your decision to return?

Data analysis began with the researcher examining the transcribed interviews of each participant and following the steps of a phenomenological analysis described by Moustakas (1994). These steps are described more fully in the following paragraphs and included: (a) treating every participant statement relevant to the research question as equal in value, and isolating significant statements; (b) comparing significant statements across participants and removing repetitive significant statements to eliminate redundancies; (c) formulating meanings from the significant

statements and grouping them into meaning units for each participant; and (d) isolating commonalities among the meaning units across participants and clustering these commonalities into themes. For example, one participant stated, "My world fell apart when my brother got sick; the Ph. D. was no longer as significant." This was selected as a significant statement. That significant statement was given a formulated meaning of "A family tragedy diminished the importance of school," which was clustered within the theme "Departure is Informed by Personal Factors."

Participant quotes were significant statements if (a) they were a direct response to an interview question, and (b) if they illuminated the experience of departing from or returning to doctoral study. These significant statements were circled in the transcription document and then entered into a table in Microsoft Word. Horizontal mapping (Creswell, 2007) was used by the researcher to create a non-hierarchical list of distinct significant statements. This was achieved by comparing significant statements with one another to eliminate any statement that overlapped or repeated another significant statement. Formulated meanings were generated which represented the underlying implication of each participant's significant statements. The creation of formulated meanings is the duty of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994) and is finding meanings through imagination, taking different perspectives, considering alternative reference points, and considering the opposite. Based on similarities, formulated meanings across participants were grouped into meaning units.

To promote accuracy and conduct member checks, formulated meanings and meaning units generated from the first interview were emailed to each participant prior to the second interview. Each participant was asked how the formulated

meanings and meaning units matched their experiences, and participants emailed this author their responses to this question prior to the second interview. New and/or germane information gathered from participant responses was utilized to generate specific questions for specific participants for the second interview to provide clarity and a thicker description of the participants' experiences. The second interview was conducted with each participant and transcribed and analyzed utilizing the same procedures described for the first interview. Participants were emailed the data analysis from the second interview prior to the final follow-up email to provide an additional opportunity to confirm that the analysis demonstrated fidelity to their experiences of departing from and returning to study.

When the researcher had completed the two in-depth interviews with each participant, the researcher identified commonalities among the meaning units across participants and clustered these commonalities into themes. These themes represented the participants' shared experience of departing from and returning to doctoral study. The final follow-up email was sent to each participant after both rounds of individual interviews to provide participants with an opportunity to review the final themes and provide feedback.

### **Researcher and Researcher Bias**

The researcher is a Caucasian male who was a doctoral candidate in counselor education and supervision when the research was conducted. The researcher voluntarily departed from his program of doctoral study after the fall semester during his first year and then successfully returned the subsequent fall semester. The researcher recognized that his experience of departing and returning generated assumptions that

would be present during data collection and analysis. Several assumptions held by the researcher were: (a) doctoral students having difficulty persisting with study should experience faculty expressing values consistent with the counseling profession (e. g. being equitable, caring, respectful, warm, flexible, honest), (b) departing from study is intensely difficult and has negative psychosocial effects for the doctoral student, and (c) returning to doctoral study presents doctoral students with a set of challenges unique to each student. The researcher applied principles discussed by Moustakas (1994), who reported that phenomenology demands that a researcher suspend prior knowledge to recognize a phenomenon at a purer and deeper level. The researcher applied these principles throughout the study by documenting prior knowledge and assumptions about the experience of departing and returning to study and maintaining a constant awareness of these assumptions throughout data collection and analysis. This permitted the researcher to bracket out assumptions and protect against researcher bias.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the notion of trustworthiness and its mechanisms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as a more suitable structure for assessing qualitative research than the quantitative properties of reliability and validity (Kline, 2008). Credibility was established through member checks, prolonged engagement, literature triangulation, and peer debriefing. Lincoln and Guba identified member checks as the most essential method for ascertaining credibility. Member checks occurred after the first interview, after the second interview, and the follow-up email, as participants were presented with formulated

meanings, meaning units, and themes, and asked if the data analysis was congruent with their experiences. Participants confirmed that the analysis of the data resulted in accurate descriptions of their experiences. Prolonged engagement with participants involved communication with each participant prior to and during the study, and intensive interaction with each participant in two comprehensive individual interviews. Literature triangulation consisted of comparing and distinguishing the emergent themes with the current relevant literature. Peer debriefing involved soliciting a peer's feedback regarding the data analysis. The researcher met with the peer debriefer, a female counselor education doctoral student with experience in qualitative research, after the completion of the second individual interview. The peer debriefer was not involved in this research prior to the meeting, and reviewed the data collection and analysis process while probing the researcher's biases and interpretations of the data. The peer debriefer was consulted after both rounds of interviews to allow for a complete review of the data collection and analysis process.

Transferability of the research findings was achieved by providing a substantial amount of participant data. This resulted in a comprehensive description of the experience of departing from and returning to study, which is presented in the results section. Readers must evaluate the results and make their own judgments of the transferability of this research to their own setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the use of an outside auditor "can be used to determine dependability and confirmability simultaneously" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318). The outside auditor for this research was a counselor education faculty member who was not on the researcher's dissertation committee and not involved in any discussions regarding the development of

this current study. The auditor reviewed the researcher's transcripts, significant statements, formulated meanings, meaning units, and themes. The auditor also reviewed the literature used to support the research question, the choice of methodology, research design, documents articulating the researcher's assumptions, the sampling procedures and the selection of participants, data collection and analysis processes, and the methods employed to assure trustworthiness and credibility. The auditor verified the dependability and confirmability of this study.

### **Results**

The four themes describing the participants' experiences of departing from and returning to study were: (a) departing and returning are salient personal events, (b) faculty-student interactions are noticed and important, (c) departure is informed by personal factors, and (d) departure is informed by academic culture. Supplementary data from participants will also be presented to provide counselor educators and counseling departments with explicit suggestions for dealing with doctoral students struggling to persist with study.

#### **Departing and Returning are Salient Personal Events**

Departing from doctoral study evoked intense reactions from all participants. Anne began describing her reaction to departing from study with "I think I became a little despondent, you know, maybe a little depressed." Anne reported feelings of failure, stating "I link if I don't finish something to failure, or not working hard enough." In addition to feeling depressed and a failure, Anne described several other negative reactions to departing

from study, including "A level of anxiety I've never experienced in my entire life," and "I really went into myself and became isolated." Similar to Anne, Gem experienced feeling failure for the first time in her life: "The departure felt like I quit, and that wasn't something that I ever knew before." Gem also echoed Anne's feelings of depression and anxiety, stating, "There was lots of sadness, depression, and anxiety...all that stuff." Another participant, Daphne, departed from study amidst "acute anxiety" brought on by a "traumatic event" in her life. For Daphne, the overriding feelings associated with departing were shame, failure, and insecurity:

Here I was, just yanking myself out of the program, having to tell faculty that I wasn't well, and some students too. When I finally made the call to my advisor, telling her I was leaving, I remember hanging up the phone after that conversation and lying on my bed and just sobbing...feeling ashamed and like I was a loser...I definitely felt worse about myself.

Jackie departed from study "because more and more things in my life were unfolding, I fell further and further behind." After making the decision to depart, Jackie recalled feelings of sadness, loss, and diminished hope, remarking, "I think sadness, for me. It was a loss, because I started to lose hope about completing it." Alexis departed from study after experiencing poor physical and mental health and like Jackie described departing as "a sad time, for that span of time that I was out." Similar to Anne and Gem, Alexis identified a feeling of failure when she departed, commenting, "I felt a sense of failure that I didn't complete something, and that I couldn't somehow figure out a way to manage and survive an experience." Diane,



like many of the other participants, experienced a sense of failure and disappointment in herself after departing from doctoral study, remarking, "Complete disappointment in myself, for sure...and I felt like a failure, definitely a sense of complete self failure."

Participants also articulated intense reactions to returning to study. Anne experienced feeling hurt when she returned to doctoral study, commenting "Life totally went on without me...beyond what I ever could have imagined...I was a little bit hurt that there wasn't more concern." Gem described returning to doctoral study as emotionally difficult, reporting "it just took everything, every fiber of my being to walk back on campus, to walk back to my college, to walk to my floor, to walk back to my department, to look at people again." Additional feelings Gem reported when she returned were fear, anxiety, and overwhelming pressure:

I felt very nervous returning, I felt anxious, I felt fear, then I did feel fear, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to make it...I felt pressure, I mean I took a full load in the summer and I had all these incompletes...that was a lot of pressure.

Like Gem, Daphne experienced fear and anxiety when returning to doctoral study:

I had my first meeting with the department chair after I had emailed him I was returning. I was so on edge that morning I threw up. I was so nervous and afraid about funding, what he would say to me, you know, the questions he might ask, all of it.

Jackie and Diane, like Gem and Daphne, both experienced anxiety when returning to

doctoral study. Jackie stated, "It was anxiety-provoking, I was not sure what the reaction was going to be." Diane commented, "I was anxious about the prospect of proposing and defending and all the hoops."

Two participants experienced positive reactions to returning to study. Alexis remarked, "The second time around there were different professors there and there was a different cohort there...not just different, they were better, more professional, in my opinion." Alexis observed that "the different professors and cohort made such a positive impact on my ability and ease of returning to school...it was a very happy time for me." Diane stated, "I was proud, that I went back and completed comps. It was a sense of I told you so, a sense of vindication. They believe me when I say I'm going to finish. I'm excited."

### **Faculty-Student Interactions are Noticed and Important**

All participants noted the importance of how counseling faculty members responded to their departures from and returns to doctoral study. Anne recalled that she was struggling with personal and health issues prior to her departure and that "some of the faculty, when they discovered I was struggling and considering leaving, really reacted in a, what should I say, a non-counselor manner." Anne observed:

If you can't model empathy, or unconditional positive regard, then stop teaching it in your classes. Because I don't see it coming from you in terms of modeling...so, that really helped me to make my decision, because I was angry. I felt invalidated.

Alexis also experienced uncaring faculty when she departed from study, reporting, “This has been my impression of the faculty, of the program, all along, is, people are busy, they’re just surviving, they don’t have time or energy to give really to their students...it just felt very noncaring.” Jackie did not recall how faculty responded when she departed, but recalled feeling “unsettled” by the faculty when she returned to doctoral study, observing, “They walked past me and said hi as if I had been there last week...it was just bizarre.” Gem described a portion of her faculty “making comments about my departure behind my back” such as “she better not come back” and “if she comes back we’ll make sure she doesn’t finish.” Gem reported that “those comments were a motivator for me, but obviously not helpful.” Diane described the faculty as “grumpy” relevant to her decision to depart from study and “they were incredibly disappointed with me and felt I was making excuses.” Diane discussed that her faculty advisors were also unhelpful when she made the decision to return to study: “When I made the decision to return, they said, no you’re not. They were skeptical of me being able to do it, and that made me angry. That was really unhelpful.”

Some participants experienced responses from faculty that were helpful. When considering her departure, Anne reported one professor said, “I don’t want this to happen.” Anne commented, “What struck me...that day was how genuinely concerned she was about my success.” Gem pointed to her program coordinator as being pivotal in her return to doctoral study: “He was working with me in terms of my financial needs, and he’s been just amazing, like, navigating my course load so I can finish up and all that other stuff.” Alexis also experienced helpful responses from some faculty members upon her return to study, stating “Before I left, you could pass

a professor in the hall and they wouldn’t acknowledge you. When I returned at least they would say hello, how are you doing?” Daphne was the only participant who experienced exclusively helpful responses from faculty. Daphne observed:

The faculty and department were awesome. When I first told them I was leaving they listened and expressed caring for me, telling me that I needed to take care of myself. When I contacted them to tell them I was coming back, they welcomed me with open arms. And I got full tuition remission and a fellowship again.

Daphne remarked how important the helpful responses from faculty were: “If they hadn’t been so positive, leaving and coming back, I really don’t know how I would have gotten to where I am today.”

### **Informed by Personal Factors**

All participants encountered events in their personal lives that negatively impacted their ability to persist with doctoral study. Anne discussed dealing with “very, very serious female problems at the time...they thought I had cervical cancer.” Anne reported that she had been experiencing health problems prior to her departure, suffered significant physical pain, and underwent an emergency hysterectomy and experienced surgical menopause. Also, Anne observed that although she had never identified with being a mother, “when I had the surgery that was it, not even an option anymore, so I was grieving that as well.” Gem stated that she went through an “existential” period of confusion and inner conflict prior to departing from study, commenting “I was just inexplicably

confused. I needed to take a leave to figure out what was going on.”

Daphne discussed her life prior to departure as “traumatized.” Daphne iterated experiencing a personal trauma “that made all the wheels fall off.” Daphne recalled that “the psychological and emotional pain became so huge for me. There was no way to stay in school.” Daphne described her personal trauma as “overwhelming” and “it consumed me...things were so intense that school became a distant thought.” Similar to Daphne, Jackie experienced trauma in her personal life. Jackie stated that a combination of personal tragedies brought her to a point of “just not being able to do school anymore.”

Alexis, like Anne, experienced significant health challenges prior to departing from study. Alexis stated, “I was having physical difficulties, which was confusing at the time and didn’t get straightened out until later on.” Alexis reported she was not eating and not sleeping and “I went into what I thought was a depressive funk.” Alexis stated that her annual physical found what was wrong, “and after the physical side got straightened out everything became much easier.” Like Alexis, Diane also experienced physical health problems. She stated, “Right before the end of the semester...I had a really bad relapse...it was messing with my mood and emotions.” Diane reported at the time, she was not aware of how much of an impact her poor physical health had on her departure, “but looking back, that was the biggest factor.”

### **Informed by Academic Culture**

The fourth and final theme revealed that academic culture also played a role in influencing some participant’s departures from study. Many of the participants discussed their perceptions of the counseling

departments they were associated with. Anne recalled that prior to her departure:

There was actually a lot of departure of faculty at the time. And, I had really become close with my dissertation advisor, and then she left, in her words, for a better opportunity. And I really struggled with that.

Anne reported the counseling department also experienced the death of one of the faculty, commenting “I saw him on a Friday and he died that Saturday...that was a shock to say the least. And then from there, in terms of advisor, I was in limbo...and I didn’t like it, to be very honest.” Anne concluded by remarking “it was a very tumultuous time for the department.”

Gem remembered, “the department was short staffed...we’ve hired since then three or four new faculty members...and like I said earlier, I was experiencing some faculty members being nasty about my leaving.” Gem reported that not having enough professors and lack of support from some faculty members “was not great in keeping me to stay.” Alexis described her academic struggles in terms of an “out-of-control cohort,” a “nonresponsive faculty,” an “unhelpful advisor,” and an “unprofessional department chair.” Alexis described an overall lack of professional behavior on the part of her cohort, her faculty advisor, and the chair of the department. Alexis stated that she went to members of the faculty for help, but was told, “Oh, it’s just your religious convictions, and I said, no it’s not, I see there is a professional behavior standard that needs to be upheld.”

Diane also experienced discomfort with her counseling department prior to departing from study:

I felt unappreciated and disrespected. I was active in the honors society, and faculty came to me for everything...so then there was another student who won't do anything like that, and just chooses to not be involved in anything...but when the time comes for students to be recognized, that student is recognized...that was a slap in the face.

### Supplementary Data

Additional data were gleaned from participant interviews that were of importance. Because these data were not directly related to the research question of this study, they were not categorized as a theme. However, the data are useful to present as all participants voiced their importance and because of the implications the data have for counselor educators and counseling departments.

Anne spoke of "not seeing anything in my department programmatically" to assist students struggling to persist with doctoral study. Anne reported that many students she had spoken with, including participants from her own dissertation, told her "they just wanted someone to check in with them." Anne explained, "Students want something intentional, like an ABD support group meeting, with a faculty member...some mechanism...but the bottom line? They wanted faculty to be involved." Anne also reported that "I really think...it's an issue that faculty, department chairs, need to discuss because it could be something so simple."

Gem spoke in generalities regarding what counseling faculty may do to assist struggling students, but suggested that faculty involvement is important. She stated, "I think just being supportive...be available to your students." Gem further

reinforced the importance of faculty availability:

Be available. Faculty members are so busy doing a plethora of things, and I remember I tried to speak with one of my professors for two weeks before leaving. I just could not get in touch with him. I could not connect...to me, that was ludicrous.

Daphne observed that her faculty members "did all the right things, at least for me." Daphne reported that if she were to give suggestions for faculty, "it would be for them to do what my faculty members did: be supportive, be understanding, and of course non-judgmental." Daphne reported that "every faculty member I encountered during that time was helpful and understanding...from when I first told them I was leaving to when I came back." Jackie also suggested that faculty should be supportive, stating "it's nice to feel like you're being supported and people understand...so I think it's important to respect a student's situation and decision." Jackie also spoke about the need to feel connected, reporting, "Working on your dissertation is an isolating experience, so just being around people who understand what I am trying to do would be great. Somehow linking folks together, create a way for students to be connected." Jackie concluded by saying that "faculty should encourage balance...doctoral study isn't set up that way...there should be some sense of balance, and I think that programs should do that more and encourage students to do that."

Alexis spoke pointedly regarding how faculty should approach students struggling to persist, encouraging faculty members to take time with their students:

Treat students like human beings, be cordial to them, and say hi, how are you doing...as a professor now, I take the time to say something. If I sense things are not going well, I pick up on that and I'll ask if there is any way I can help. Maybe I can't, but the response I've got back is, thank you for at least asking.

Diane discussed that counseling faculty may want to consider other ways of looking at their treatment of students:

Recognize that there are some students where doctoral study is the number one priority in their life, but there's another group of students that have other stuff that is fulfilling, and they have other responsibilities. There is another group of students that has health issues and all that has to be considered when you think about what kind of student that person is. You can't measure by one measuring stick. I think that faculty thinks they are doing that, and maybe they are, but they aren't doing it well enough. When faculty focuses the most on those first types of students, other students become disillusioned. I know this from both sides of the coin, because I was both of those students.

Diane reported that "I was the preferential student, yeah, and it feels good to be that student, but if you fall off the pedestal it's a long way down." Diane commented that counseling faculty may also want to consider "checking in" with students who are struggling or have departed. As Diane discussed this point, she admitted that her advice to counseling faculty may not be realistic: "And maybe it's unrealistic to have those expectations, you know, maybe

faculty would say, you're a doctoral student, find your own way to motivate yourself, we're going to focus on our new students. Call me when you want to meet." Finally, Diane discussed the importance of keeping doctoral students engaged:

Find a way to keep students engaged once they finish coursework. I don't know how you do that...if they can just find a way to keep you engaged, even if they make it, you have to present once a semester, or give us a syllabus. It would keep me involved and I'd have to see them and it's going to make me want to be doing something...if you want high completion, higher retention, you may want to consider this.

### **Discussion**

This study's findings are reflective of the findings of previous research on doctoral student retention, attrition, and student experiences. Personal and academic factors were the primary reasons participants cited for departing from study. This confirms what has been previously reported in the counselor education literature (Cusworth, 2001; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009) about attrition, retention, and student experiences. Participants reacted to departing from study with anxiety, depression, feelings of failure, shame, and insecurity, reinforcing what has been previously reported in the literature about departing from doctoral study (Lovitts, 2001). Data from the current study describing the participants' successful returns to doctoral study is singular among the existing literature and provided a first look at this phenomenon. Similar to departing, returning to study was an experience that incited strong emotions. Participants were significantly affected by

their interactions with their faculty when departing and returning, experiencing both helpful and unhelpful responses from faculty, which is consistent with the research literature identifying the importance of student-faculty interactions (Cusworth, 2001; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009).

Counselor educators bear particular responsibility to demonstrate the humanistic values that are the bedrock of the counseling profession (Hansen, 2003) with their students, and counselor education doctoral students who are struggling to persist with study or returning to study should directly experience these values on both the departmental level and the level of individual faculty. Calls for counselor educators to heed the importance of interactions with students and to embody the values they teach are not new (e.g., Hazler & Carney, 1993; Kottler, 1992), and this current research reveals that faculty who fall short in this area have significant negative impacts on their students. The impact faculty responses had on the participants' departures and returns, positive or negative, demonstrates that faculty members are uniquely positioned to mediate the experience and ability of a student to persist and return to study. While counselor educators cannot always prevent the departure of a doctoral student, the ways in which they interact with students who are struggling will have a significant impact on the experience of that student and the student's perception of the faculty member and the department as a whole. The same holds true for doctoral students who return to study after departure.

Counselor educators can begin to address this issue by interacting with doctoral students in a way that communicates genuine interest in a student's progress and welfare, academically and personally. Counselor educators can

consider the recommendations from the participants of this research, who wanted faculty to be supportive and available, to respect students' decisions, to encourage students to be balanced, and not show any students preferential treatment. Alexis, now a professor, captured some of this when she stated:

I take the time to say something. If I sense things are not going well, I pick up on that and I'll ask if there is any way I can help. Maybe I can't, but the response I've got back is, thank you for at least asking.

Counselor educators should also not minimize the impact personal issues have on the ability of students to persist, and encourage students to properly address personal issues. Doctoral students may sometimes perceive that departing from study will be counted against them, and counselor educators need to communicate that personal issues significant enough to interfere with study are a priority and okay to attend to. Counselor educators also should be aware of the ramifications students may experience when departing from study so they may appropriately respond to students struggling to persist. This research suggests that counselor educators should be particularly aware of the culture and climate of their department and how students may be impacted. Counselor education departments that intentionally addressed issues related to department climate would decrease the chances of doctoral students being negatively impacted by academic factors.

Lastly, counselor educators should consider some of the suggestions from the participants of this research aimed at decreasing student departure. These included programmatic interventions in place to address students struggling to

persist, having a formal mechanism for consistently checking in with doctoral students, and having a program requirement that would keep students connected and engaged after comprehensive exams. Adopting some or all of these recommendations would communicate to doctoral students that their department was interested and invested in them completing doctoral study, and likely increase the completion rates within their doctoral program.

This research had several limitations. Despite the assurance of confidentiality, three of the six participants expressed cautious attitudes and nervous feelings about sharing negative descriptions of their counseling faculty and counseling departments. Although all of these participants eventually relaxed and became more forthcoming, it is possible that some or all of these participants failed to provide complete transparency regarding their faculty members and counseling departments, possibly omitting essential information during the interviews. Another limitation to this study stems from the researcher's assumption that many individuals depart from and return to study and have positive experiences with their department and faculty, yet these individuals were less likely to participate in this research. This is perhaps evidenced by the fact that only one participant (Daphne) shared a completely positive experience associated with her department and faculty.

The participants in this research did not have any insight into the actions of their faculty members and were left to speculate. Future research could explore the attitudes and perceptions of counselor educators regarding doctoral student departure and

return. Such studies could begin to reveal how counseling faculty perceive and address doctoral students who struggle to persist and depart from study, and also assist doctoral students in better understanding the dynamics that exist between faculty and students. Another direction for future research echoes Protivnak and Foss' (2009) recommendation for a national quantitative study of student retention and attrition in counselor education programs. Identifying programs with low attrition rates could provide an opportunity to gather information about the qualities of such programs and the faculty who teach in them.

The results of this study illustrate the difficulty of departing and returning and highlight the positive and negative impact counselor educators have on students facing these issues. Counselor educators who model the values of the counseling profession with their students may diminish the painful aspects of departing and facilitate returning. It is hoped that this research will promote the development of helpful strategies for dealing with student departure and return and encourage additional studies on this topic.

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