THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY FOR PART-TIME DOCTORAL STUDENTS: EXPLORING HOW RELATIONSHIPS SUPPORT STUDENT PERSISTENCE

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According to the Council of Graduate Schools, approximately 33% of all Ph.D. students are enrolled part-time. In certain academic areas, part-time students constitute nearly 57% of all students enrolled (Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2012). Despite these percentages, part-time students are rarely included in the literature on the doctoral student experience. The increasing numbers of part-time doctoral students combined with attrition rates of up to 70% (Berelson, 1960; CGS, 2008; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Tinto, 1993), warrant special attention on this population of doctoral students. A line of research that holds promise to improve attrition rates revolves around a sense of community between the student and the academic department.

Accordingly, this study examined the ways that part-time Ph.D. students develop community within the academic department and how a sense of community is related to student persistence. This study included 12 participants (ten students and two program chairs) in two academic departments at one urban research institution. This qualitative study followed a descriptive case study design (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2003) and provided three levels of data: the institution is the bounded system; the academic departments are the cases; and the participants are embedded cases.

The participants in this study defined a sense of community as: feeling connected to the academic department, a sense of belonging and trust, being part of a scholarly community of
practice, and relationships with peers and faculty in the academic department. Positive relationships with peers and faculty served as a source of support and encouragement and supported persistence, particularly during challenging courses or semesters. However, it was often very difficult for the participants to develop and/or maintain peer and faculty relationships, due to issues of proximity, managing multiple life roles, and changing cohorts. Most of the participants did not consider full-time doctoral students to be part of their community, due to perceived differences between part-time and full-time students. The participants also perceived that faculty catered to full-time students and preferred to conduct research with them rather than part-time students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Since the 1960s, American institutions of higher education have experienced very high rates of doctoral student attrition. Projections of the number of doctoral students who leave their programs range from 40 to 70% (Berleson, 1960; Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2008; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Despite many national programs (e.g., Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate, 2008; CGS, 2004; Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2005) and institutional efforts to decrease attrition of doctoral students, there has been little to no change in attrition rates in the past 50 years. Many institutions have attempted to address the attrition problem by increasing admissions standards, assuming that higher academic entrance requirements would create a decrease in attrition rates. However, this response had little to no positive effect and possibly even made the problem worse (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001).

Attending graduate school as a full-time student is correlated with doctoral student persistence and degree attainment (Clewell, 1987; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Ott & Markewich, 1985) because full-time students have more opportunities to interact with faculty and peers. However, the number of part-time students pursuing doctoral degrees continues to grow. According to the Council of Graduate Schools, approximately 33% of all Ph.D. students are enrolled part-time. In certain academic areas, this number is even higher, up to 57% in some disciplines (CGS, 2012). Despite these percentages, part-time students are rarely included in the literature on the doctoral student experience.

Ph.D. students are assumed to be the most qualified, talented, and capable candidates for the highest level of education, so what is stopping these students from completing their programs? Many institutions attribute attrition to poor academic performance after students enter
a program. However, failure to maintain good academic standing accounts for only a small percentage of doctoral attrition. Two separate studies conducted 20 years apart indicated that students with less than a 3.0 GPA were almost as likely to complete the Ph.D. as those with GPAs above 3.0 (Benkin, 1984; Tucker, 1964). Completers and non-completers were found to be equally academically capable, so the authors concluded that dropout must be related to something else. Doctoral student attrition is likely a result of multiple factors that vary with each student and each academic department.

A line of research that holds promise to improve attrition rates revolves around a sense of community between the student and the academic department. Many researchers have found a strong link between attrition and a lack of community between the student and the department of study (Antony, 2002; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Departmental communities shape the doctoral student experience through academic and social interactions with faculty, peers, and professionals in the field (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). More studies are needed to examine how students build community and the ways a sense of community affects student persistence.

This issue is important to institutions because doctoral student attrition comes at a great cost due to loss of instructional revenue, assistantship funds, student productivity, recruitment spending, etc. The University of Notre Dame found that it could save over $1 million each year in stipends alone if doctoral student attrition decreased by just 10% (Smallwood, 2004). The cost of attrition is very significant for students as well and is often devastating. Because of the personal and financial investment a student makes in a doctoral program, graduate attrition can “ruin individuals’ lives” (Lovitts, 2001, p. 6). Doctoral students who do not complete their
programs have to reconstruct their personal and professional lives to pursue lifestyles and careers that are often very different from their original expectations.

**Statement of the Problem**

The increasing numbers of part-time doctoral students combined with attrition rates of up to 70% (Berleson, 1960; CGS, 2008; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Tinto, 1993), warrant special attention on this population of doctoral students. Many researchers have attempted to understand the factors that contribute to attrition, but there are still substantial gaps in the literature when it comes to part-time students.

There are three main gaps that are particularly significant. First, part-time students have been excluded from most of the research on the doctoral student experience. Existing studies that incorporate part-time students often include them as merely an afterthought or mention this group as a population for future research (Austin et al., 2009; Deem & Brehony, 2000; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 2000). Studies involving part-time doctoral students are necessary in order to understand this population and their unique needs and experiences. Second, the existing literature indicates that the development of community during doctoral study is important to student persistence and overall program satisfaction. However, existing studies do not address how doctoral students develop community within their academic departments and many researchers have identified this as a significant gap in the literature (Antony, 2002; Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Research focusing on the ways in which doctoral students develop community is needed to better understand how students connect with faculty and peers in their departments. Lastly, most of the existing research on the doctoral student experience focuses on the negative aspects and what is missing from the experience; very few studies address success factors or interventions that can be implemented within departments or
institutions. More research is needed to investigate departmental efforts and how they affect doctoral student community and student attrition/retention (Golde, 2000, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). These three gaps in the literature indicate a need to study the ways in which part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community during doctoral study.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the ways that part-time doctoral students develop community within their academic departments and to investigate how a sense of community is related to the persistence of part-time doctoral students. This purpose was developed based on the gaps in the literature and authors’ recommendations for future research. This study is one of very few studies that includes part-time doctoral students (Austin et al., 2009; Deem & Brehony, 2000; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 2000), and one of the first studies that limited the population to part-time students only. The existing literature also points to a need for studies that address how doctoral students develop a sense of community within the academic department (Antony, 2002; Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). By exploring the ways in which students develop community, the results of this study address how this process occurs. Lastly, research is needed to address departmental influences on student community (Golde, 2000, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). This study explored the ways that part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community in their academic departments through investigating student experiences with faculty and peers.

The concept of community during doctoral study is often addressed from a negative perspective in environments where it is deficient or missing, leading to student attrition (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993). This study is unique in that it focused on student persistence and the results provide information about practical strategies academic departments can
implement to help students develop a sense of community. The results of this study will be of interest to university deans, department heads, chairs of graduate programs, and graduate faculty at many institutions. The results may be of particular interest to departments that are struggling with doctoral student attrition and/or departments that accept part-time doctoral students.

**Research Questions**

After a thorough review of the literature, the gaps in existing research became evident and informed the research questions for this study. When combined, the gaps pointed to a need to study the ways in which part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community during their pursuit of the Ph.D. This study addressed two main research questions:

1) In what ways do part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community within their academic departments?

2) How does a sense of community influence the persistence of part-time doctoral students?

This research study followed a descriptive case study design (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2003) with embedded subcases and multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten part-time doctoral students from two departments (four from Nursing and six from Education) at one urban research institution. This case study provided three levels of data: the institution is the bounded system; each department is an embedded case; and each student is an embedded case within each department.

The students were at or near the qualifying examination phase of their program in order to participate in this study (they were allowed to have up to two courses remaining). The department heads (Department Chair or Graduate Program Chair) from both cases were interviewed prior to the student interviews to provide context and information about
departmental culture, norms, and values. While this study included 12 interviews, the two interviews from department heads were used for context only. Including two departments in this study provided data for comparisons between the cases and led to a set of implications and recommendations for administrators, faculty, and students in both departments. Limiting the sample to one institution controlled for differences based on institutional type and made the departmental comparisons clearer since they were part of the same institutional culture.

Descriptive case studies use inductive data analysis to identify common themes or patterns that emerge in the data (Janesick, 2003; Merriam, 2009). Transcriptions of interviews were continuously reviewed for emerging themes and data were grouped into categories for each theme using open coding, axial coding, and then selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) and entered into the NVivo qualitative software database. After themes were identified and developed, they were linked to form empirical conclusions. The findings were summarized and discussed and I referenced existing literature to highlight data that support or dispute previous studies.

**Conceptual Framework**

The existing literature informed the sample, provided operational definitions of important terms to be used in this study, and built a theoretical foundation to support this research.

**Doctoral Student Attrition**

First, the literature on doctoral student attrition provided an understanding of the ways in which the absence of community during doctoral study may contribute to a student’s decision to leave a program. Research indicates that the highest attrition rates are found in the humanities and social sciences, where programs of study are typically individualized and students are expected to conduct research independently. Conversely, the lowest attrition rates are in the
sciences, where students are often required to conduct collaborative research and meet regularly with laboratory groups (Baird, 1990; Deem & Brehony, 2000; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Based on these findings, the sample for this study included part-time doctoral students from two departments to provide comparisons and similarities between departments.

**Social Networks (Relationships)**

Second, the literature on social networks (relationships) led to a definition of community for this study and provided a framework to understand how students interact and connect with others to establish and maintain relationships (Kadushin, 2004). Social network theory also explained how relationships with peers and faculty may be used as student resources to develop a sense of community during a doctoral program.

**Defining Doctoral Student Community**

The term *community* is used very broadly and is conceptualized in many different ways, so it was important to use the existing literature to develop an operational definition for this study. Community in educational contexts is frequently associated with foundational ideas of belonging and mattering as they relate to meaningful relationships with others and becoming a valued member of a sustained, collective group (Tinto, 1993; Wenger, 1998; White & Nonnamaker, 2009). Developing a sense of community requires frequent interactions with other members in the departmental community, including faculty and peers. For this study, *community* is defined as the development of social and professional networks through relationships.

According to Kadushin (2004), social networks are personal relationships that one can draw upon as resources during graduate study. Social relationships with faculty and peers serve as resources for students when working through social, emotional, and academic problems they are likely to encounter while pursuing the doctorate (Golde, 2005; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001).
This is important to the development of community during doctoral study because sources of support have been shown to positively influence student adaptability, motivation, and perseverance, ultimately affecting degree completion (Golde, 1998, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2008).

**Integration into Program Culture/Community**

The research on program culture helped define the boundaries of the community to the academic department instead of the entire institution. The academic department is the environment where community begins for doctoral students since the majority of their interactions take place there (Berleson, 1960; Gardner, 2007; Tinto, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Frequent interactions and common attributes among students and faculty in a department often lead to a set of shared norms, values, and attitudes, often known as a program culture. Many studies indicate that the extent of a student’s integration, or fit, into the social and academic culture in a department is strongly connected to persistence and the quality of the overall doctoral student experience (Gardner, 2008; Hall & Burns, 2009; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Watts, 2008).

Researchers have found that incongruence, or a lack of fit, into the social and academic culture of a department may lead to a decision to leave the program (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Conversely, when student characteristics are aligned with the valued norms of the academic department, their level of fit increases (Lewin, 1935; Sweitzer, 2009) and they integrate successfully into the doctoral community. The degree of integration increases through frequent supportive interactions with faculty and peers in the departmental community who share common interests, common attributes, and common challenges (Lovitts, 2001).
Doctoral Student Socialization

Next, the large body of literature related to doctoral student socialization provided a framework to describe the complexities of the doctoral student experience and demonstrated how identity development influences program culture and the degree of integration into the departmental community. Socialization is widely accepted as a framework to describe the experiences and development of doctoral students in graduate study (Antony, 2002; Austin, 2010; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 1998, 2000; Weidman et al., 2001), during which “a newcomer is made a member of a community of an academic department or a particular discipline” (Golde, 1998, p. 56). The models of doctoral student socialization point to the significance of community during doctoral study by emphasizing program culture and the development of supportive relationships with peers and faculty in the department. While the socialization literature is important to consider when discussing the concept of community, this body of literature does not separate socialization to the student role from socialization to a professional role. For this reason, this body of research is included in the literature review, but it does not provide a foundational definition of the concept of community during doctoral study.

Multiple Life Roles

Lastly, the literature on life/role interaction illustrated the ways in which multiple life roles, role balance, and role conflict influence the development of community during doctoral study. Doctoral students experience role conflicts while managing their commitments as students, academics, peers, researchers, and many other roles they assume in their academic communities (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). The challenges of balancing multiple life roles are particularly significant for part-time students who manage multiple commitments and identities due to professional and familial responsibilities while pursuing the doctorate (Deem & Brehony,
2000). For part-timers, doctoral study is likely to be their second or third priority and they often have more roles to balance than full-time students (Evans, 2002).

**Definition of Terms**

There are four important operational terms that need to be defined for this study.

**Community:** As described in the conceptual framework, *community* is defined as the development of social and professional networks through relationships. This definition was developed for this study based on the foundational ideas of belonging and mattering, the importance of meaningful relationships, and the idea that relationships can serve as connections and resources during doctoral study (Kadushin, 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Wenger, 1998; White & Nonnamaker, 2009).

**Part-time:** The definition of a *part-time* doctoral student varies by institution and academic department. Since part-time students have been excluded from most of the research on the doctoral student experience, the definition of exactly what makes a student part-time or full-time is unclear in the literature. At the institution where this study was conducted, full-time graduate study is defined as eight or more credit hours in a semester and part-time is defined as enrollment in less than eight credit hours. These guidelines led to the definition of *part-time* enrollment for this study: a doctoral student enrolled in less than eight credit hours. If a student completed coursework on a full-time basis for one or two semesters but was part-time for the majority of his/her program, the student was eligible for this study.

**Faculty advisor:** The role of a faculty advisor varies widely in academic programs and departments, so it is important to provide a definition within the context of this study. In both cases in this study, the *faculty advisor* provides academic support, approves courses, and ensures that students complete requirements for the degree. In Education, Ph.D. students are assigned to
a faculty advisor at the point of admission. The student is typically not involved in choosing his/her faculty advisor, but can request to change to a different advisor after admission. In Nursing, Ph.D. students must identify a faculty member who matches their research interests prior to being admitted to the program. If the faculty member agrees to support the student, he/she writes a letter of support for admission and serves as the primary faculty advisor throughout the program.

**Faculty mentor:** The recent literature on the doctoral student experience differentiates between faculty advisors and faculty mentors as these can be two very distinct roles (Golde, 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). Advisors are usually formally assigned by the academic department to discuss and approve coursework, whereas mentors are typically selected based on interests or personality similarities and often provide advice, encouragement, and support (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, a faculty mentor is defined as a faculty member a student identifies and selects based on his/her academic or personal interests during the program of study.

**Limitations of the Study**

All qualitative research studies carry limitations of a smaller sample size and results that cannot be generalized. Small purposeful samples are chosen specifically because the researcher seeks to understand that sample in depth, not to find out what is generally true of a larger group of people (Merriam, 2009). However, this does not mean that lessons cannot be learned from this study. This research sought to provide rich descriptive data that will lead to transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and extrapolations (Merriam, 2009) that will cultivate a greater understanding of the experiences of all part-time doctoral students. Further, I ensured that a point of saturation was reached in the data through a repetition of concepts and consistent themes.
It is also important to note the unique nature of the sample included in this study. Utilizing Department Chairs to help identify participants may also be a limitation. In some cases, the Department Chairs may have had close relationships with certain students, which could have made students feel that they must participate in the study. However, students were anonymous participants and department chairs did not know who participated and who did not, so this was in fact a voluntary study. The researcher emphasized confidentiality and identities were protected at all phases of the study. No identifiable information was included in the data collection or results.

In addition, since I was a doctoral student when I conducted my research, I had my own ideas and assumptions about doctoral study. In order to address this limitation and ensure that my own experiences did not affect the data, I set aside, or bracketed (Creswell, 1998), my own judgments about this topic through personal reflection and journaling about the research process. Respondent validation also addressed this potential limitation by ensuring I interpreted and represented the participants’ stories accurately and without bias.

**Overview of Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters: Introduction, Review of the Literature, Research Methodology, Results, and Discussion and Implications. Chapter Two is a critical analysis of existing research related to the development of community during doctoral study. The Review of the Literature will identify and tie together the major conceptual and theoretical constructs that informed this study. Gaps in the literature are highlighted to illustrate how this study contributes to existing research and fills the gaps. Chapter Three describes the methods that were used to execute the study, including identifying the research sample and procedures used to collect and analyze data. In Chapter Four, I summarize, analyze, and interpret the data.
from this study. Chapter Five concludes the dissertation with a summary of the major findings, conclusions, limitations, and implications for research and practice.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which part-time doctoral students develop community during graduate study. A summary of the literature from three main areas is presented in this chapter. First, the literature on doctoral student attrition is examined in order to illustrate the ways in which the absence of community during doctoral study may contribute to a student’s decision to leave a program. Various reasons for doctoral student attrition are evaluated and the connection between attrition and community is explained.

Second, the literature on social networks (relationships) is presented to provide a definition of community for this study. This section discusses the ways in which relationships may be used as student resources to develop a sense of community during a doctoral program. Vincent Tinto’s (1993) model of doctoral student persistence is also examined as a foundational lens to view integration into the social and academic community.

Next, the large body of literature related to doctoral student socialization is presented as a framework to describe the complexities of the doctoral student experience. An overview of the literature on doctoral student identity is provided to demonstrate how identity development influences program culture and the degree of integration into the departmental community. Then, the literature regarding interactions with faculty and peers is included to illustrate the ways in which relationships with community members affect the doctoral student experience. The last section explores how multiple life roles, role balance, and role conflict influence the development of community during doctoral study.

In each section of this chapter, the need for more research focusing on part-time doctoral students is highlighted. This population has been essentially excluded from the literature.
focusing on the doctoral student experience. Therefore, very few studies existed for incorporation into this chapter.

**Doctoral Student Attrition**

For many years, doctoral student attrition was considered solely an individual issue; research studies failed to address the possibilities of departmental or institutional involvement in a student’s decision to leave a program. However, as attrition rates continue to rise (Berelson, 1960; Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2008; Hawley, 2010; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Tinto, 1993), there has been a recent shift and researchers are beginning to consider the ways in which institutions, departments, and faculty influence student attrition.

Graduate deans and faculty have traditionally attributed student attrition to low academic ability, poor motivation, lack of financial support, or an uncontrollable event such as family or personal illness (Berelson, 1960; Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). These explanations remove departmental and institutional responsibility and inaccurately frame the attrition process as an issue solely affecting the student. However, recent studies do not support these interpretations.

In fact, academic ability and success have no impact on a student’s decision to persist or leave a doctoral program (Gardner, 2008; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Smallwood, 2004). Research indicates that there is no meaningful difference in the grade point average or Graduate Record Exam scores of doctoral students who complete a degree and those who do not (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Additionally, studies show no link between financial support and doctoral student attrition (Hawley, 2010; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). In a multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional study by Lovitts and Nelson, students at greatest risk for attrition were those receiving full fellowships. These students were less likely to have an
office on campus or have daily contact with other graduate students. Despite their strong financial support, the students felt neglected and isolated because they were not connected to faculty or peers in the department. These examples demonstrate that, for most students, attrition is not a result of academic or financial difficulties and additional aspects of the doctoral student experience must be considered as factors in the attrition decision.

**Link Between Attrition and Lack of Community**

Doctoral student attrition is likely a result of multiple factors that vary with each student and each academic department. However, many researchers have found a strong link between attrition and a lack of community between the student and the department of study (Antony, 2002; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Departmental communities shape the doctoral student experience through academic and social interactions with faculty, peers, and professionals in the field (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

A lack of interaction with faculty and peers can lead to a graduate student experience characterized by loneliness, stress, isolation, and confusion (Gardner, 2008; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Lovitts & Nelson, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001). However, frequent positive interactions with community members produce strong connections to the department and create a system of supportive relationships (Weidman et al., 2001). The highest attrition rates are found in the humanities and social sciences, where programs of study are typically individualized and students are expected to conduct research independently. Conversely, the lowest attrition rates are in the sciences, where students are often required to conduct collaborative research and meet regularly with laboratory groups (Baird, 1990; Deem & Brehony, 2000; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006).
The concept of community during doctoral study is often addressed from a negative perspective in environments where it is deficient or missing, often contributing to student attrition (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993). This research generally indicates that a sense of community is important to promote student retention, but existing studies do not address how it influences student success or the ways in which students develop a sense of community.

Another significant gap in the literature is that part-time doctoral students are very rarely included in the research. Existing studies that incorporate part-time students often include them as merely an afterthought or mention this group as a population for future research (Austin et al., 2009; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 2000). Since this group is essentially excluded from the literature, studies are needed to address how part-time students develop a sense of community.

**Defining Doctoral Student Community**

The term *community* is broadly used in higher education to encompass departments, institutions, classrooms, and subpopulations of students. Community in educational contexts is also frequently associated with foundational ideas of belonging and mattering as they relate to meaningful relationships with others and becoming a valued member of a sustained, collective group (Tinto, 1993; Wenger, 1998; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Developing a sense of community requires interacting regularly with other members in the departmental community, including faculty and peers. Though there are multiple ways the concept of community is applied and defined in higher education, explanations of community customarily include the concept of shared experiences and supportive relationships among members. For this study, *community* is defined as the development of social networks through relationships (Kadushin, 2004).
Social Networks as Community

According to Kadushin (2004), social networks are personal relationships that one can draw upon as resources during graduate study. Social relationships with faculty and peers serve as important resources to assist students in working through social, emotional, and academic problems they are likely to encounter while pursuing the doctorate (Hawley, 2010; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). When graduate students experience challenges, they frequently turn to faculty and peers in advanced stages of the program for assistance since they have already experienced the difficulties of doctoral study and may be able to help (Weidman, et al., 2001).

Each student and faculty member in an academic department establishes multiple relationships with other community members. In turn, these relationships build upon each other to form extended social circles including even more community members. As a student’s number of relationships and intersecting social circles increases, the student’s ability to draw upon resources expands because the student can receive support from even more constituents in the department (Kadushin, 2004; Lovitts, 2001). This is important to the development of community during doctoral study because sources of support have been shown to positively influence student adaptability, motivation, and perseverance, ultimately affecting degree completion (Golde, 1998, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2008).

To create and develop strong relationships and support networks, doctoral students need consistent opportunities to connect with faculty members and peers in the community and cultivate a sense of belonging and mattering (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Belonging and mattering in relationships increase the student’s feelings of being appreciated, important, and valuable to the community (Kadushin, 2004). Meaningful interactions with faculty and peers
contribute to a shared sense of purpose, a collective sense of trust, and a deep commitment to the departmental community (Wenger, 1998).

**Community in Online Environments**

The literature provides many definitions of community within online learning environments at the graduate level. While these definitions differ slightly from the explanations of community within face-to-face environments, many of the common elements remain the same: trust, shared goals and values, connectedness, collaboration, and a sense of belonging within the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1996; Misanchuk & Anderson, 2001; Rovai, 2002; Shea, et. al, 2002). While community exists in some online courses, many scholars have found that weak social connections in online and distance courses often lead to lower rates of student persistence (Carr, 2000; Eastmond, 1995; Sweet, 1986). Primarily, the lack of connections resulted from limited contact with peers, faculty, and student services within the academic department (Exter, et. al, 2009; Liu, et. al, 2007; Morgan & Tam, 1999).

**Tinto’s Theory of Doctoral Student Persistence**

Tinto’s (1993) book on student attrition includes a foundational model of doctoral student persistence and describes community during doctoral study. While Tinto did not intend to explain the development of community, this research provides a foundational lens to view social and academic systems (the department) as the student’s primary community throughout graduate study. Tinto’s model proposes that doctoral student persistence depends on how individuals function within social and academic systems. The extent and quality of the interactions in these systems determine the degree to which doctoral students become integrated and ultimately persist to complete the program. When students are full participants in their academic and social systems, they become valued members of the departmental community. In turn, this also
increases their feelings of belonging and mattering and they are more likely to persist to degree completion.

One criticism of Tinto’s model and other existing models of doctoral student persistence and socialization is that all students are assumed to fit the model in the same way (Golde, 2000). This “one size fits all” approach fails to address the needs and experiences of certain groups of students. Tinto’s model does not include part-time students, so this is an example of the large gap in the literature. More studies focusing on the experiences of part-time doctoral students are needed in order to understand this population.

Golde (2000) challenged Tinto’s model and suggested a revision that includes students who take breaks from doctoral study. Tinto’s model indicates that students who fail to become integrated into departments may not persist to degree completion, but Golde’s study of doctoral student attrition demonstrates that even well integrated students can experience a temporary break that is equally disruptive to their degree completion.

Though Tinto’s model has drawn criticism from others in the field, it created a foundational understanding of the importance of community during doctoral study. Many researchers have built upon Tinto’s model to describe the ways in which doctoral students are socialized into the department and the profession.

**Doctoral Student Socialization**

Socialization is widely accepted as a framework to describe the experiences and development of doctoral students during graduate study (Antony, 2002; Austin, 2010; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 1998, 2000; Weidman et al., 2001). According to Golde (1998), doctoral student socialization is a process in which “a newcomer is made a member of a community of an academic department or a particular discipline” (p. 56). Similarly, Weidman et al. (2001) define
socialization as a process in which doctoral students obtain the knowledge, skills, and values that will help them succeed academically and professionally. Through sustained interactions with faculty, advisors, and peers in the department, doctoral students learn values and norms regarding what it takes to succeed or fail during graduate study.

Since doctoral programs prepare students to be professionals in the field, most of the literature on this topic combines socialization into the roles of student and professional (Antony, 2002; Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 1998, 2000; Weidman et al., 2001). However, doctoral education should not be viewed solely as a stepping stone; it is a specific role in itself. Students are socialized into, assume, and then leave the role of graduate student (Golde, 2000). As individuals assume the role of doctoral student, they develop personally in many ways that are specifically related to their experience at the degree level, not the professional level. They learn to express ideas, think independently, balance multiple responsibilities, and develop integrity and a sense of purpose as a student (Gardner, 2010). They begin to view themselves differently as they develop autonomy and identify as a creator of knowledge instead of only a consumer of knowledge (CGS, 2005).

Very few studies focus on the socialization of the individual at the degree level and researchers have noted this as a significant gap in the literature (Austin, 2010; Gardner, 2007, 2010). This gap is particularly significant for part-time students who are rarely included in studies of doctoral student socialization. Many part-time students have been working full-time for many years prior to beginning doctoral study, so they often find the transition to being a student again very difficult and they may struggle to become integrated into the departmental community (Austin et al., 2009; Deem & Brehony, 2000).
Doctoral students are often perceived to be proficient navigators of processes and systems of higher education, having completed their undergraduate degrees successfully. Consequently, it is falsely assumed that doctoral students require only limited support in cultivating community and developing ways to belong and matter (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). This incorrect assumption sometimes leads to a failure of university systems to socialize students properly about differences between doctoral study and previous educational experiences. While pursuing the undergraduate degree, most students experience a highly structured and collaborative learning environment, but graduate programs require students to quickly become independent, self-sufficient researchers (Gardner, 2007). Without the proper support, students navigate these changes alone without being socialized effectively into the role of a doctoral student. This situation often contributes to doctoral student attrition (Golde, 1998; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001). The model of doctoral student socialization developed by Weidman et al. (2001) describes these changes and categorizes them into a four stage process.

**Four Stage Model of Doctoral Student Socialization**

While there are several models of student socialization during graduate study, the model developed by Weidman, et al. (2001) has been cited widely as the most accepted model of the doctoral student socialization process (Antony, 2002; Gardner, 2007; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Sweitzer, 2009). The foundation of this model is that students experience a metamorphosis during graduate study and this process is accompanied by discomfort, insecurity, and uncertainty. While acquiring new information and accepting the role of doctoral student, individuals proceed through four interactive stages of socialization. In all four stages (anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal), members of the academic community act as socializing agents via observations, research partnerships, and/or mentoring.
The Anticipatory stage typically occurs when students enter the program and are unsure of what to expect. During this stage, students learn about their new role as a doctoral student and become aware of the expectations of this new role. Next, the Formal stage includes observing more advanced students to determine the ways in which those students meet the role expectations. This stage includes gathering information from peers and faculty in order to develop support systems and become integrated into the academic department. These observations and interactions continue in the Informal stage, but the student assumes the behaviors of others and begins to feel less like a student and more like a professional. Finally, during the Personal stage, the student’s “individual and social roles, personalities, and social structures become fused and the role is internalized” (Weidman et al., 2001, p.14). During this final stage, the student separates from the department and begins seeking his/her own identity.

Weidman et al. (2001) assume that all doctoral students will experience this socialization process in the same way, without making distinctions among different types of students. Part-time students were not included in the research to develop this model, so this is another example of this significant gap in the literature. This example supports the need for more research that focuses on the socialization process of part-time doctoral students.

This four-stage model points to the significance of community during doctoral study by emphasizing program culture and the development of supportive relationships with peers and faculty in the department. In order to advance through all four stages, students must cultivate and maintain strong networks to provide academic, social, and emotional support throughout graduate study. This model also emphasizes the importance of identity development during doctoral study. In the first three stages, the individual seeks to model the valued identity in the
department while assuming the role of doctoral student. Then, in the final stage, the student separates from the department and begins to develop his/her individual identity.

**Doctoral Student Identity and Development**

The identity development of doctoral students is strongly influenced by the beliefs, values, and experiences in the departmental community (Gee, 2000; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Sweitzer, 2008; Weidman et al., 2001; Wortham, 2006). Most of a student’s identity development occurs prior to beginning doctoral study. However, students may encounter developmental challenges that require them to revisit certain aspects of their social and academic identities while pursuing the doctorate (Gardner, 2010). In response to these challenges, doctoral student identities are constantly constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed over time (Hall & Burns, 2009; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Weidman et al., 2001).

Sweitzer (2008) notes a difference between fragmented identity (focused only on one role) versus integrated identity (connections across multiple roles). Doctoral students may identify with multiple roles and assume different identities for each role or maintain one identity in multiple roles. When two identities with contrasting meanings and/or expectations are active simultaneously, a student is likely to experience role conflict (Colbeck, 2008; Gardner, 2007; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Tinto, 1993). If role conflicts escalate or a student experiences a persistent role mismatch, the individual may decide to exit a role completely or look to others to help them redefine themselves (Cast, 2003).

Doctoral student identities are formed based on how students view themselves, but also how they are positioned in a community and how they are defined by those around them (Gee, 2000). Therefore, students are influenced by the valued models of identity that are most recognized in their academic community. Students who “fit in” with the community and embody
the valued identity characteristics of the department are often viewed as successful and their identities are legitimized, whereas those who do not are more likely to be marginalized and isolated (Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Wortham, 2006).

Integration into Program Culture

The academic department is the environment where community begins for doctoral students since the majority of their interactions take place there (Berelson, 1960; Gardner, 2007; Tinto, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Frequent interactions and common attributes among students and faculty in a department often lead to a set of shared norms, values, and attitudes, often known as a program culture. Many studies indicate that the extent of a student’s integration, or fit, into the social and academic culture in a department is strongly connected to persistence and the quality of the overall doctoral student experience (Gardner, 2008; Hall & Burns, 2009; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Watts, 2008).

Researchers have found that incongruence, or a lack of fit, into the social and academic culture of a department leads to feelings of isolation, disconnection, and/or marginalization (Gardner, 2008; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Hall & Burns, 2009; Hawley, 2010; Tinto, 1993; Watts, 2008). This marginalization can be particularly pronounced for part-time students who spend limited time in the department and have the most difficulty accessing peers and academic cultures (Deem & Brehony, 2000). If students are unable to become integrated into the dominant and valued models of the department, they may consider leaving the program (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001).

Conversely, when student characteristics are aligned with the valued norms of the academic department, their level of fit increases (Lewin, 1935; Sweitzer, 2009) and they integrate successfully into the doctoral community. The degree of integration increases through
frequent supportive interactions with members of the departmental community who share common interests, common attributes, and common challenges (Lovitts, 2001). As students recognize these commonalities and experience deep engagement with faculty and peers, they develop a sense of joining and integrating into a large supportive intellectual community (Jazvac-Martek, 2009).

**Interaction with Faculty**

Researchers consistently indicate that regular interaction with faculty advisors and mentors is a strong predictor of doctoral student satisfaction, persistence, and productivity (Golde, 1998, 2005; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). In fact, Lovitts (2001) found that a student’s relationship with an advisor is “probably the single most critical factor in determining who stays and who leaves” (p. 270).

The assignment of a faculty advisor is significant for doctoral students, but the quality of the advising relationship has even more influence on how students connect with their departmental community. The amount of time spent, frequency of the interactions, trust, and a sense of care from an advisor are crucial to student success and satisfaction (Austin, 2010; Barnes, et al., 2010; Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). Advisor mismatch or personality conflicts with an advisor may result in a failure to connect with the doctoral community and may contribute to a student’s decision to leave the program (Golde, 1998; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

Most of the recent literature on the doctoral student experience differentiates between faculty advisors and faculty mentors as these can be two very distinct roles (Golde, 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). Advisors are usually formally assigned by the academic department to discuss and approve coursework, whereas mentors are typically selected based on interests or personality similarities and are often “faculty to whom students turn for advice…or
for general support and encouragement” (Nettles & Millett, 2006, p. 98). Weidman et al. (2001) found that program completion often depends on whether the student has a faculty mentor who is more than just an advisor. A faculty mentor influences student persistence and connection with the doctoral community because of the student’s sense of personal obligation and accountability to the mentor (Weidman et al., 2001). Faculty mentors also encourage students when they doubt themselves during doctoral study by helping students recognize their skills, knowledge, and potential (Barnes et al., 2010; Jazvac-Martek, 2009).

For some students, the faculty advisor or mentor may become the only contact in the departmental community. This is especially true for students in later stages of the doctoral journey who are writing, revising, and defending their dissertation research (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Similarly, the faculty advisor may be the only departmental connection for part-time students who often do not spend much time in their departments outside of required classroom attendance (Deem & Brehony, 2000).

**Interaction with Peers**

Interactions with peers are just as important as interactions with faculty in facilitating doctoral student success (Gardner, 2007, 2008; Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Weidman et al., 2001; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Interactions with peers shape community during doctoral study by providing support, challenge, mentoring, and accountability (Gardner, 2007; Weidman et al., 2001). Doctoral students often find themselves at the bottom of the status hierarchy and can feel uncomfortable approaching faculty who are on a different professional level (Lovitts, 2001). Consequently, students often fill information gaps by asking their peers for academic advice rather than asking faculty (Gardner, 2007; Weidman et al., 2001). Peer interactions also blend social and academic components, whereas faculty
relationships can often be strictly academic in nature (Golde, 2000). As early as 1960, Berelson recommended that campuses create informal gathering centers specifically for graduate students to provide a social outlet, reduce anxieties, and enrich and broaden the social atmosphere for students.

Lovitts (2001) indicates that the frequency and quality of interactions with the peer community can either enhance the student experience or hinder engagement. Students who are not connected to the social peer community in the department often consider leaving their program because they feel they are missing a significant piece of the overall doctoral student experience (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001).

Peer interactions are often very limited or absent for part-time doctoral students. Many part-time students experience difficulty creating and maintaining peer relationships from each semester to the next due to academic demands and balancing other commitments in their lives (Austin et al., 2009; Smith, 2000).

**Balancing Multiple Life Roles**

Doctoral students experience role conflicts while managing their commitments as students, academics, peers, researchers, and many other roles they assume in their academic communities (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). Furthermore, students often carry nonacademic roles that are just as important, if not more important, than their roles within academia (Baird, 1990). Many doctoral students are also parents, spouses, professionals, caregivers, and friends. Students often find these non-academic roles to be important sources of support during their doctoral program. In fact, many students note support from family and friends outside academia as the most significant motivation for success during their program (Austin et al., 2009; Sweitzer, 2009).
The challenges of balancing multiple life roles are particularly significant for part-time students who manage multiple commitments and identities due to professional and familial responsibilities while pursuing the doctorate (Deem & Brehony, 2000). For part-timers, doctoral study is likely to be their second or third priority and they often have more roles to balance than full-time students (Evans, 2002). This creates significant barriers for part-time students when attempting to integrate into the academic and social community. Full-time students who work as graduate assistants interact frequently with faculty and peers, so they integrate and connect with the departmental environment to a greater extent than part-timers who spend less time on campus (Austin, et al., 2009).

Over time, part-time students have become defined not by how many credit hours they are taking, but by professional obligations and commitments they have outside the academic setting (Smith, 2000). Since part-time students have been excluded from most of the research on the doctoral student experience, the definition of exactly what makes a student part-time or full-time is unclear in the literature. Berelson noted this confusion when indicating that “the term full-time itself is quite ambiguous: it might be fair, as a quick summary, to say that full-time means half-time or more” (Berelson, 1960, p. 130). This is a substantial gap in the literature that needs to be addressed and clarified in future studies.

**Summary of Implications for the Study**

Many implications from the literature that are important to this study have been addressed throughout this chapter. However, three gaps in the literature are especially significant. First, part-time students have been excluded from most of the research on the doctoral student experience. Studies involving part-time doctoral students are necessary in order
to understand this population and their unique needs and experiences (Austin et al., 2009; Deem & Brehony, 2000).

Second, the existing literature indicates that the development of community during doctoral study is important to student persistence and overall program satisfaction. However, existing studies do not address *how* doctoral students develop community within their academic departments. Research focusing on the ways in which doctoral students develop community is needed to better understand how students connect with faculty and peers in their departments.

Lastly, most of the existing research on the doctoral student experience focuses on the negative aspects and what is missing from the experience; very few studies address success factors or interventions that can be implemented within departments or institutions. More research is needed to investigate departmental influences and how they affect doctoral student community and student attrition/retention (Golde, 2000, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). For these reasons, this study focused on part-time students and explored the ways they develop a sense of community during doctoral study.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This chapter describes the research design that guided this study and details the methods used to collect, organize, and analyze data. This chapter also covers the researcher’s perspective, measures to protect participant confidentiality, and the ways in which the integrity of the data were maintained throughout the research process.

Research Design

In order to investigate the experiences of part-time doctoral students, this research study followed a descriptive case study design (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2003). Case studies investigate a particular phenomenon within a specific context, particularly when it is difficult to separate the phenomenon’s variables from the environment. Descriptive case studies provide a rich, complete description and explanation of how participants make meaning of a particular phenomenon within a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). Case study researchers may choose to have embedded subcases within an overall case, creating multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2012). This study focused on ten student participants in two departments within a single institution. Thus, this case study provides three levels of data: the institution is the bounded system; each department is an embedded case; and each student is an embedded subcase within each department.

According to Merriam (1988), “case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis” (p. 10). This study used qualitative data collection methods to give the participants a voice and an opportunity to share their lived experiences. Through this study, I wanted to understand the ways in which part-time doctoral students develop community and if/how this is related to persistence in their program of study. In order to explore this phenomenon, this research followed the tradition of narrative inquiry by allowing participants to
share individual stories and recount their personal experiences during their doctoral program (Patton, 2002). Qualitative data analysis methods from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) were applied to develop, gather, and link themes that emerge in the data.

Since qualitative studies use the researcher as the instrument, it is important to consider how the researcher’s assumptions, values, and views of the world influence the theoretical framework and research methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010). The foundation of my research philosophy falls under the paradigms of Interpretivism and Constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam & Simpson, 2000). I believe that various sociocultural influences play an important role in individual interpretations of reality. Everyone creates their own reality and there are multiple versions of the truth based on individual experiences and how each person makes sense of the world. Through this study, I intended to represent students’ interpretations of their realities by explaining their individual experiences and how these experiences affect their behaviors, beliefs, and values during their doctoral program.

**Methods**

Semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field notes were used to collect data for this study. Interviews allowed participants to share their experiences through their own voices, based on their unique stories and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews include a mixture of more and less structured questions to allow the interviewer to be flexible and refine the questions, with the intention of complete exploration and discovery of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The interview guide included three types of questions: experience and behavior, opinion and values, and feeling questions (Patton, 2002). The experience and behavior questions provided an understanding of the participants’ actions, behaviors, activities, etc. For example, the guide included a question such as, “Tell me about a typical day in your academic
department. What is the first thing you do when you arrive?’’ Opinion and values questions focused on what a participant thinks or believes about a particular issue. For example, I asked, ‘‘What is the most important characteristic in a faculty member in your program?’’ The feeling questions provided information about the participants’ specific feelings or responses to particular questions or situations. Examples of these questions are ‘‘how do you feel about that?’’ or ‘‘what was that like for you?’’ Combining these three types of questions provided an understanding of the participants, their interactions, and experiences during doctoral study. Participants also completed a short informational sheet prior to the interview to provide background information and demographic data.

The document analysis portion of data collection included a review and analysis of documents, websites, pamphlets, etc. that are relevant to the research questions in this study. Any documents and websites that provide information for students about the academic department and/or institution were considered. The data provided from document analysis can produce descriptive information, confirm emerging hypotheses, and advance themes and categories provided by other data sources (Merriam, 2009). Document analysis also provides objective sources of data since the documents already exist and the presence of the researcher cannot alter the items being studied.

I also kept research notes throughout this study to add to the trustworthiness of the data in three main ways. First, I recorded general observations and conclusions from the interviews in order to compare these notes to the interview transcripts during the data analysis phase of this study. Second, I recorded detailed notes to create an ‘‘audit trail’’ (Merriam, 2009, p. 223) to capture decisions and activities regarding collecting, coding, and analyzing the data. Merriam indicates that these notes should be referred to throughout the research process to promote
reliability and validity of the study. Third, I maintained a journal of personal notes to reflect on
my perspectives and reactions to the research process. Merriam (2009) recommends keeping this
type of research journal as a means of critical self-reflection and limiting personal bias and
assumptions that may affect the study.

Sample

This study focused on ten part-time doctoral students in two departments at one urban
research institution in the Midwest. Because this is an embedded case study, there are three
levels of data: the institution is the bounded system; each department is an embedded case; and
each student is an embedded subcase within each department. The sample for each level is
explained in this section.

Embedded Cases: Academic Departments

The embedded cases are two academic departments within the institution. The
department heads (Department Chair or Graduate Program Chair) of both departments were
interviewed to provide context and information about departmental norms, activities, and culture.
Including two departments in this study provided data for comparisons between cases and led to
a set of implications and recommendations for administrators, faculty, and students in both
departments. Contextual information and detailed descriptions of the cases (academic
departments) are provided in chapter four.

Embedded Subcases: Students

The student sample served as the individual units of analysis (embedded subcases). The
participants at this level consisted of ten students, six from Education and four from Nursing.
The students had to be at or near the qualifying examination phase of their program in order to
participate in this study (they were permitted to have one or two courses remaining). Limiting the sample to students at the qualifying examination phase provided data regarding their persistence in their programs and controlled for differences based on current stage in the program. I used a purposeful sample of students for this study to allow for an in-depth and information-rich study of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). I requested that the Department Chairs send a participation request to doctoral students who matched the criteria for this study. However, the Department Chairs only facilitated the contact; they do not know which students actually participated. To ensure that students met the criteria of the study, individuals who indicated interest in participating were screened via telephone prior to arranging an interview. All interviews took place during the course of one academic year since students’ lives can change significantly from year to year. Limiting data collection to one academic year also controlled for any significant program or curricular changes within academic departments.

A sample size of ten students at one institution provided sufficient rich, descriptive data because of the longer in-depth interviews with the participants. The results of this study tell the stories of students in two disciplines at one institution, but the results will lead to a greater understanding of how students in all disciplines and institutions develop community during doctoral study. Patton (2002) recommends determining sample size based on “expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study” (p. 246). Similarly, Merriam (2009) indicates that the appropriate sample size for a qualitative study depends on the types of questions being asked and the amount of data gathered in the study. Sample sizes for many of the qualitative studies that informed this study ranged from three to 12 participants (Austin, et al., 2007; Golde, 2000; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Sweitzer, 2008; Sweitzer, 2009) so the sample size of ten students is in line with standards in the field. More importantly, the data
collected illustrated saturation through a repetition of concepts and consistent responses and themes.

Focusing my sample to a single institution followed the case study design of investigating a phenomenon within a single, bounded system (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2003) and controlled for differences based on institutional type (Golde & Dore, 2001). For example, the meaning of certain terms is more consistent within a single institution rather than across institutions. Studying a single institution also brought appropriate attention to my goal of highlighting specific disciplinary contexts and differences (Golde & Dore, 2001).

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are simultaneous (Janesick, 2003; Merriam, 2009). Throughout the data collection process, researchers constantly review emerging insights and results to refine the interview questions in order to provide the most trustworthy findings. Descriptive qualitative studies often use inductive data analysis to identify common themes or patterns that emerge in the data (Janesick, 2003; Merriam, 2009). Researchers use the inductive method to build concepts, conclusions, and themes while gathering data in the field. This type of analysis was appropriate in this study because it allowed me to build themes regarding how part-time students develop community during their doctoral programs. Inductive analysis during data collection also ensured that a point of saturation has been reached.

Transcriptions of interviews were continuously reviewed for emerging themes and data were grouped into categories for each theme using open coding, axial coding, and then selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) and entered into the NVivo qualitative software database. Open coding involved developing and assigning a system to tag any unit of data that was relevant to the study. Axial coding required linking the tags and categories together in order to develop and
refine general categories of data. Then, selective coding led to one core category, relating all major categories to it and to each other to form empirical conclusions and fill in any gaps in the categories. The conclusions and results are supported by direct quotations from the interviews. Finally, I compared the results to existing literature in order to highlight data that support or dispute previous studies.

**Researcher’s Perspective**

Lincoln and Guba (2000) recommend utilizing reflexivity, the process of critical reflection, in order to avoid misrepresenting a participant’s meanings and perspectives based on our own worldviews or perspectives as researchers. This process of critical reflection is one of several techniques I used throughout this study to ensure credibility of the data. Since I am completing my Ph.D. program as a part-time student, I carry my own biases based on my personal experiences. For example, there were times during my program when I did not feel a sense of community with my full-time peers because I could not identify with their experiences in the program. Secondly, I maintained connections with a few key faculty members in my program that I considered to be advocates for part-time students, but I did not feel connected to faculty through social interactions or experiences outside of the classroom. In order to ensure that these experiences and assumptions did not affect the data, I set aside, or bracketed (Creswell, 1998), my personal perspectives on this topic. I also engaged in reflective journaling throughout the study to monitor my personal reactions and protect the integrity of the data.

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers must ensure that they are retelling individual stories in a way that makes sense to each participant while also telling a larger overall story to create meaning for the audience (Jones, 2002). There are several strategies that may be used to increase the credibility of
findings. In this study, respondent validation, triangulation, and peer debriefing were used to protect the integrity of the results.

**Respondent Validation**

Since this study used interviews to collect data, I used respondent validation as a strategy to assure internal validity. Respondent validation ensures that the researcher is capturing the participant’s responses accurately and allows the researcher to consider and identify any biases in the interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Participants reviewed interview summaries from their own interviews to provide feedback on emerging findings and verify that my interpretation of the interview and the representation of their stories are correct. If changes were necessary, the participant received an edited version of the summary for review.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation of data sources increased the integrity of this study. The findings from the field notes and document analysis were used to cross-check conclusions from the interviews.

**Peer Debriefing**

A peer debriefing process was used to increase the trustworthiness of this study. If contradictory findings arose, a peer debriefer compared the findings to the interview transcripts to evaluate whether the findings are plausible based on the data (Merriam, 2009). The peer debriefer was someone who is familiar with the institution in the study as well as the qualitative research process. The peer debriefer also had access to the research journal and was able to ask questions about my research decisions. The peer debriefing process helped detect any areas that needed adjustment and ensured that the results were represented appropriately.
Protection of Participants

All prospective participants received detailed information about the voluntary nature of participation, protections of confidentiality, and the risks associated with participating in this research. When students were contacted for an interview, I introduced myself and the topic of study and informed them that they would be able to ask questions about the study at any time. Consent forms were required to participate in the study and students were advised that they could leave the study at any time, for any reason. Students reviewed transcripts of interviews and had access to the final write up of the study.

To protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms were used for the students and their institution. Confidentiality was emphasized at all phases of the study and no identifiable information was included in the data collection or results. All files, consent forms, and recordings were kept in a secure location that was accessible only to the researcher. Approval of this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board and any changes or issues with the study were reported.
Chapter Four: Results

This study examined the ways that part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community during their pursuit of the Ph.D. and students’ perception of the impact of community on persistence during doctoral study. In this chapter, I will answer two research questions posed in Chapter One:

1) In what ways do part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community within their academic departments?

2) How does a sense of community influence the persistence of part-time doctoral students?

To illustrate the unique experiences of part-time Ph.D. students, excerpts from the interviews conducted as part of this study are included as appropriate. As explained in chapter 3, I use pseudonyms for participants, but I am not including specific or detailed participant profiles in order to protect confidentiality (see Appendix I for a table of participant demographics).

However, in order to answer the research questions and understand the subcases (participants), it is important to provide some general contextual information regarding the cases (departments). Before moving forward to the discussion of the general themes of the study, I will discuss some key components of the cases that influence the culture of each academic department and provide context to the results.

Department One: Education

The student sample in Education is comprised of part-time Ph.D. students in the Higher Education program. According to the Program Chair, graduates of this program typically accept positions as “administrators, faculty members, researchers, and policy analysts in a number of different forms.” There are approximately 80 active Ph.D. students in this department, and
approximately 25 of them attend on a part-time basis. There are nine full-time faculty who teach at least some doctoral courses and serve on dissertation committees for Ph.D. students. This program is part of a dual campus structure, so courses are offered on a flagship campus as well as the urban campus that is the focus of this study. Therefore, students in this sample had to travel to a different campus for some of their coursework. Full-time and part-time Ph.D. students are admitted as one group each fall and take courses as they fit into each student’s schedule. The Program Chair described these incoming doctoral students (full-time and part-time) as one cohort group. These students take a professional seminar together in the fall semester to learn about the field and develop connections with peers and faculty.

**Structured supports.** Ph.D. students are assigned to a faculty advisor at the point of admission, but students must seek out and identify additional program committee members by the end of the first year. After completing 18 credit hours, students must go through a formal review process with their advisor. Each advisor receives feedback from classroom instructors, a reflection paper from the student, and the student’s transcript to review progress in the program. These pieces of information are used to discuss issues or challenges that the student may be facing. After students complete required coursework, they must pass written and oral qualifying exams in order to begin working on the dissertation proposal. There are three formal social events for students each year: orientation, a fall social, and a spring social – typically held at the flagship campus location, not at the urban location used for this case study investigation. In addition, there are also several impromptu academic and social events that take place on and off campus.
Department Two: Nursing

The student sample in Nursing consisted of part-time Ph.D. students in the Nursing Science program. This program focuses on preparing students to conduct research in academic and practice settings. There are approximately 40-50 active Ph.D. students in this program and approximately 50-60% of these students attend part-time. For the purpose of this study, the portion of part-time students was smaller due to the criteria of being at or near the qualifying examination stage and having no more than two courses remaining in the program. According to the Program Coordinator, there are 20 faculty members who are involved in teaching, advising, and directing dissertations for doctoral students in this program. This program is “distance accessible,” so students may take courses on campus or in online learning environments. Many students in this program take the majority of their courses via the online option. It is important to note that all of the students in the Nursing sample took at least some of their coursework online. The Program Coordinator noted that full-time and part-time doctoral students are admitted as one cohort each semester, so it is possible for part-time students to get off track from their original cohorts and move to a different cohort group.

Structured supports. In order to be admitted to this program, Ph.D. students must identify a faculty member in Nursing who matches their research interests. This process is left up to the student and is not facilitated by the faculty. If the faculty member agrees to support the student, he/she writes a letter of support for admission and serves as the primary faculty advisor throughout the program and dissertation process. After completion of the required coursework, students must pass written qualifying exams in order to proceed to the dissertation process. Students are expected to come to campus every summer for a two week intensive session. These summer sessions are required for the first two years of a student’s program, but students are
encouraged to come each summer throughout the program if possible. The intensive sessions include coursework, social activities, presentations, and sharing research ideas. In addition to the summer intensive, several reception events are organized each year to promote speakers and presentations.

This section provided contextual information about the cases within the bounded system. In the next section, I will discuss the themes that emerged in this study in an effort to answer the research questions.

**Emergent Themes**

The first round of data analysis revealed 26 emerging themes from the interviews with participants. After multiple rounds of data analysis and refinement, I identified four major themes and multiple sub-themes. While the major themes were present in the narratives of participants from both academic departments, some differences emerged between the two cases; comparisons will be noted below. The major themes from the data include: (a) the ways that part-time doctoral students define a sense of community within academic departments; (b) the impact of relationships with peers; (c) the impact of relationships with faculty; and (d) issues of life/role balance. The first theme answers research question one, while the other three themes answer parts of questions one and two. These themes are presented and described below.

**What is Community for Part-Time Ph.D. Students?**

The research questions are specifically designed to investigate the ways that part-time doctoral students develop community during graduate study. Before discussing the specific components that the participants considered to be most important to the development of a community, it is important to examine their general ideas/concepts related to their personal definitions of the term community. While concepts and descriptions of community varied
slightly, participants had relatively similar views regarding the attributes of a community and how a sense of community shapes one’s experience during doctoral study. Participants discussed several concepts of community: feeling connected to the academic department, a sense of belonging and trust, scholarly community of practice, and relationships with peers and faculty. The concepts presented in this section are multi-faceted and are discussed in more detail throughout this chapter, but I present them here to provide context to the meaning of community for this case study.

Feeling Connected to the Academic Department

All of the participants indicated that developing a sense of community must involve feeling connected to the academic department. This construct permeates all of the themes throughout this study because connectedness was cited by participants in both cases as a foundational requirement for the development of community. It is important to introduce it here because it initially emerged as students were discussing how they define community within the academic department. The participants noted that connections largely involve forming relationships with peers and faculty (also discussed in the next section as a main theme), but some students also described connectedness simply based on the culture of the academic environment. Frequent interactions and common attributes among students and faculty in a department lead to a set of shared norms, values, and attitudes, often described as the program culture (Gardner, 2008; Hall & Burns, 2009; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Watts, 2008). Interactions with other people are the key element in most descriptions of academic culture. However, in some ways, participants’ descriptions of connections based on the culture did not necessarily involve having a relationship with persons in the department, but stemmed from general feelings of a supportive space. For example, many students described a community
as a place where “it feels like you are not alone” or “an informal culture that tells me there is community.” These descriptions involved people, but did not necessarily involve knowing those people on a personal level. These statements suggest that the participants would know there is a community simply by walking through a space and observing the way that others behave there.

The following two sub-themes are additional conditions that influence a sense of community in the academic department.

**Sense of Belonging**

Many participants explained that feelings of belonging are very important to a sense of community. A sense of belonging was described as feeling valued and appreciated by others in the community. This includes mutual trust and encouragement and knowing that you genuinely matter to someone else. Henry described a sense of belonging in this way: “It feels like you have a group of people that empathize with you. They understand the struggles of finishing your doctorate which includes some, you know, self-doubt, fatigue, all that stuff. They can encourage you; you encourage each other.”

Other participants noted that a sense of belonging stems from finding a common purpose or collaboration around similar interests. Eric explained that a sense of belonging results from “mutual respect” and finding similar interests and values in order to support each other: “I think a sense of community would result in some sort of esprit de corps, like people saying ‘we are all in this together.’” Similarly, Elizabeth described a sense of belonging as an indicator of overall “happiness” in an environment, feeling as though you are “welcome” and “part of a team.” I interpreted the descriptions of a sense of belonging to mean that students wanted to feel valued and/or noticed by peers and faculty in their department. It was almost as if students just wanted
someone in the academic community to acknowledge them and appreciate their input, comments, or feedback.

**Scholarly Community of Practice**

Over half of the participants (in both cases) described a sense of community in the academic department as a scholarly community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Wenger’s definition of a scholarly community of practice includes learning together, relying on each other, and sharing similar values and goals. Students conceptualized this as an open environment where people of similar values and beliefs around a certain topic or field gather to collaborate with other scholars and share ideas related to research and practice. Feedback from faculty and peers was mentioned by several students as a function of a scholarly community of practice. According to Diane, a community is a space or place where like-minded people come together to share ideas, noting that this type of community continues to exist even after you complete your program: “In my world, the sense of community is a bunch of people that are doing lifelong learning and kind of putting together ideas, moving forward with them, and seeing if they work, and stuff like that.”

Megan’s conceptualization of a scholarly community of practice included discussions about theory as well as application to her professional work:

[Coming into the program.] I really hoped that I would have a space to have conversations about theory and the life of the mind and all those things. I think that there, certainly there were times in my course work that I wanted more theoretical conversation than perhaps what was happening, and so we created a space to make that happen. For those that wanted that kind of conversation, I think we (faculty and students) created a space to make that happen.
Megan also mentioned that her desire for theoretical conversations in the scholarly community sometimes created a challenge because her area of expertise was quite different from many of the students in the program:

“The thing that is hard is that for me because I am not a [field of study] person necessarily, there is a place where I feel like I can’t connect as well. Because I just don’t, I don’t have the literature base to do so. I have this background in [another area] and that’s primarily where I draw scholarly connections from. And so I, you know, I like to share those connections if I think that they would be valuable. In that way, I do feel like I have a community of scholars.

This subtheme is multifaceted in both cases: some of the participants described themselves as a member of a scholarly community of practice; others noted that this type of community was absent in their own academic department; and two participants (one in Education and one in Nursing) described it as something they experienced only at certain points during their program. Notably, all of the students who explained this as an absence attributed it to their status as a part-time doctoral student; they described this as a characteristic of doctoral study that only applies to the full-time student experience. Some of the participants in both cases indicated that they were part of a scholarly community once or twice throughout their experience, but became frustrated by the lack of consistency of opportunities for scholarly discourse. Henry described it this way:

People just kind of focus on their own work and periodically you may have moments of, you know, collaboration, you know, almost like a vision that everyone is just coming up with ideas and shooting ideas off each other. I think it happens but I think that it
probably happens in short bursts.

When asked what an ideal scholarly community of practice would look like, Henry responded,

[It] would be a place where you can share ideas freely and kind of build upon each other’s ideas, help each other sift out certain things and refine certain things. But…I think the community of scholars is easier to build amongst each other for the full-timers. They are around, I think they have more opportunities to be around each other which is important. And because that is what they do they can put all of their energies into their academics. And I think they can take advantage of the full experience of becoming a scholar. I think they can get to the point to where they feel more comfortable rattling off concepts and theories and all that other stuff. Where as important as that is, and I have a working knowledge of those things, that is not my vernacular during a given day. It is just not. And so if you don’t use it you lose a little bit.

Others agreed that there are structural barriers for part-time students that limit scholarly engagement, but the scholarly community of practice served as a resource to help them overcome those barriers. Jacob referred to this when he stated,

Some of the parameters of our program fracture us slightly, but I still think that the ability for us to rally together on important issues in [field of study] or important topics brings us together. It’s a group of peers coming together, or a community of learners or scholars coming together to better the field and the profession. I think my desire to do the work that I do got further fueled by being here and being in the presence of these people.
These narratives suggest that the differences between the cases are due to variances in individual participants and how each participant envisioned a scholarly community of practice. The participants who focused on scholarly interactions with faculty described an inconsistent or absent scholarly community of practice. Conversely, those who focused on scholarly discussions with peers (rather than faculty) described themselves as members of a scholarly community of practice throughout their program of study.

The participants’ conceptualizations of community (as described above) provide context to the definition of community as it relates to this case study. The concepts above provide the answer to research question one that addresses how part-time Ph.D. students develop community in the academic department. The results indicate that the participants in this study developed community through: connections in the academic department; a sense of belonging; a scholarly community of practice; and relationships with others in the academic department. In the next section, I will discuss one type of relationship with others that emerged with sufficient frequency and is distinct enough to be one of the main themes that emerged in this study – relationships with peers.

**Relationships with Peers**

All of the participants noted the importance of relationships with peers and faculty in the academic community. In some instances, students mentioned faculty and peer relationships together as one general supportive academic network (as in the examples listed in scholarly community of practice above), particularly when they were describing interactions inside the classroom. However, when describing one on one or small group interactions (both inside and outside the classroom), participants articulated clear differences between peers and faculty. In fact, participants referenced peer relationships more frequently (471 times vs. 347 times) than
faculty relationships when discussing the ways they felt connected to their program of study. I am not concluding that one type of relationship is more influential than the other, but it is important to consider that participants had a higher number of academic and social interactions with their peers than they had with faculty. In this section, I will discuss the dimension of peer relationships and the ways that these connections (or lack thereof) greatly impact a sense of community during doctoral study.

Peer relationships were an integral component of the educational experience for all of the participants. Connections with other students played a role in many different environments—in the classroom (as a class, group work, and individual conversations), outside the classroom in informal learning spaces, in social settings (meeting outside of the academic environment to discuss things that were unrelated to the academic process), as well as professional environments (conferences and work). Notably, almost all of the participants interacted with their academic peers in their career settings as well, so they knew their peers as professional colleagues in addition to their role within the academic program. Many of the participants had pre-existing relationships with their peers as colleagues prior to entering the program (and some even noted that they began the program because of a recommendation from these people). This phenomenon was viewed both positively and negatively by the participants because it was sometimes difficult to manage both of these roles simultaneously within the same environment.

The participants cited many reasons that peer relationships affected their sense of community within the academic department. The subthemes within the peer relationships category are: a) peers served as a source of support and understanding, b) it was often very difficult to develop and/or maintain peer relationships, and c) proximity had a profound impact on connections with peers. Peer relationships were regarded by all participants as a source of
support and encouragement, particularly in terms of having a mutual understanding of the challenges that part-time doctoral students experience.

**Support and Understanding**

Every participant discussed the importance of peer relationships and described their peers as one of the reasons for their persistence in their programs. All of the participants indicated that they experienced a stronger sense of community with other part-time students because they could understand the unique experiences and circumstances they encountered due to their student status. Peers served as personal and academic resources and provided encouragement and support to overcome challenges they encountered during doctoral study. In fact, most participants indicated that they “wouldn’t have known what to do” in certain courses or at specific points in the program, had they not been able to rely on their peers as a source of information. Caroline had to repeat one of her courses and became discouraged about the setback this would cause. However, after speaking with some of her peers, she realized that many students struggled with that course, yet those students had completed the program successfully. These conversations with her peers who had been through the same situation motivated Caroline and reminded her that she was not alone:

I don’t think you would want to get to that end goal unless you had had those relationships and had that time together. Because I could see that without that I probably would not have been able to get through some of the harder times. I also talked with other students from a previous cohort who had had a similar experience and that was very beneficial. That made me feel like you can still get through this and move forward, so that was helpful.
All of the Nursing participants specifically mentioned this class and noted that it was particularly challenging and discouraging. In every case, the students cited peer support and encouragement as the reason they successfully completed the course and developed a strong sense of community with their peers as a result of working through this challenge together. In the case of Nursing, it was clear that community with peers had a significant positive impact on persistence, especially during challenging semesters such as the one described by Caroline. Community with peers also supported persistence in the Education sample, but the Education students did not mention specific courses or particular semesters when this occurred; most of them described their peers as a constant source of support throughout many points in their program.

Six of the participants (from both cases) described the importance of developing peer relationships early in the program. They noted that students admitted together would likely be progressing through the program at a similar rate and experience similar challenges at the same time. Megan said,

> It was really important to me in terms of balance and being productive to find confidants in the program. Particularly building a relationship with…those folks that were in my [professional seminar] group because I knew that there were others that were dealing with some similar challenges. And sometimes it was really helpful just to say to someone, ‘it is really frustrating that I have all of this to do and not enough time to do it in.’”

Several participants also specifically mentioned supportive peers who were at a more advanced level in the program or had recently graduated. Because these peers had been in the program longer, they had already successfully completed many of their courses, knew the faculty well, and had an in-depth understanding of university processes that impacted current students. These advanced level peers served as mentors and were able to provide a specific type of support
and advice for the students. Henry mentioned a specific, thoughtful gesture from an advanced student who went out of his way to make Henry feel supported:

I felt a real sense of community from a peer of mine who, out of the blue, knew I was taking the qualifying examination soon and he gave me some tips on how to organize my information, you know, sent over some really cool articles to think about adding to my files in preparation for it. And it was just, he just felt the obligation to do it. And I just thought that was really big of him to do that. He had already passed the qualifying examination; he didn’t even have to remotely do anything like that.

Diane said that her peers were the main resource that “helped to get me through the PhD program.” She noted that peer relationships were a constant resource for support throughout the program, but perhaps mattered even more in the later stages of the Ph.D. as she was nearing the end of coursework and preparing for the qualifying examination. The students in the study who had finished coursework noted that, due to the independent nature of qualifying examinations, they had not interacted with their peers as much as they did when they were in classes together. As a result, they felt more isolated during a time when they needed significant guidance and support. Diane described that this lack of interaction led to feeling left out of communication and support: “I think we are all just, you know, getting to a point where we need another pick me up and it is going to be harder without each other almost weekly, knowing what is going on and stuff.” I interpreted this to indicate that the participants generally felt a weaker sense of community with their peers after they completed their coursework and were preparing for qualifying examinations, due to the independent nature of studying and preparing for this phase of the program. However, when peers made attempts to reach out to students individually during this time (e.g., Henry’s case), those efforts had a significant positive impact on one’s sense of
community. This suggests that, during periods of loneliness or isolation, the supportive actions of just one peer can create a sense of community not only with that individual, but with the broader academic community as well. Therefore, in response to question one, during periods of isolation or loneliness, the participants developed a sense of community in the academic department through supportive interactions with their peers, and in some cases, positive interactions with just one peer was enough to develop community.

**When Support is Removed**

Two of the students from Nursing (Diane and Cynthia) described specific points in their program when they felt a lack of peer support and an absence of community. In both situations, they had already established strong peer relationships, but specific circumstances challenged those relationships. Their stories are particularly poignant because they illustrate how painful separation from peers can be for a part-time doctoral student. Cynthia explained that her relationships with peers suffered because some of her friends left the program. She began the program with a cohort of seven Ph.D. students, but now is part of a cohort of only three people. She recalled when each person dropped from the program and the detrimental effect this had not only on her relationships, but her faith in her ability to complete the program. She described a specific moment after the first summer intensive session (see chapter 3) when a peer told her that she was leaving:

I remember after the first summer, one of the first people who quit, if you will… when she emailed us and told us she was quitting I just remember thinking ‘oh man I don’t know if I can continue.’ Not because I was so attached to her but it scared me because I looked at her as being super smart. And when the second one drops out you are like, oh man, you know? So each time I think that that has an impact on you because your support is
getting smaller and smaller.

Diane recounted a specific semester when she felt isolated from her peers because she was prohibited from taking a capstone course with the rest of her cohort. The course was near the end of the program and students were only allowed to have a certain number of credits remaining prior to taking the course. Diane had an incomplete in a class; therefore, she did not meet the requirements to enroll in the course. She described feeling left out and missing an opportunity to reflect on the program with the peers she had developed community with since the beginning of her program:

I was excluded from taking that class. So most of my cohort took that class together, and being that it did have an education piece to it, there was a lot of reflection. I wasn’t getting to participate in a class with a group that I have been with and that next summer when I get to take it, because it is only offered in the summer, I won’t be in a class with people that I have known all along.

Diane viewed that course as a culminating experience to look back on the entire program and reflect on personal growth and development with her community of peers. Because she missed the course last summer, she will take it this summer with a different group of students (a mixture of full-time and part-time students). She explained that this group of students does not know her as well and may not be able to relate to her experiences as a part-time student.

These two examples illustrate the negative consequences of feeling removed from peers after developing strong connections to them as part of an academic community. Diane and Cynthia felt completely removed from the peer community they had developed over time. In Cynthia’s case, she began to doubt herself each time another one of her peers dropped out of the
program. I interpreted this to indicate that she relied on her peer community even more than she realized; when she lost the connections to those peers, she doubted her own abilities to persist in the program. This suggests that losing members of one’s peer community can have a negative impact on a student’s rate of persistence in the program. Therefore, part of the answer to question two includes: losing a member of the peer community may have a negative consequence on a student’s rate of persistence because the student’s departmental connections are reduced.

While all of the participants indicated that they experienced a sense of community via their relationships with peers, this does not mean that developing and/or maintaining those relationships came naturally. In fact, most of the participants expressed that developing a sense of community with peers was very challenging.

**Difficult to Develop Peer Relationships**

Nine of the ten participants described the process of creating and/or maintaining peer relationships as very difficult. While there are a few reasons that were consistent across the participants, there were also significant differences between the two departments. I will first discuss the constructs that were presented from students in both departments; I will then cover the differences that emerged from the cross-case analysis.

**Differences in level of commitment/experience.** As mentioned previously in the section about concepts of community, some students found it difficult to engage in scholarly discussions with peers. Half of the participants (Jacob, Eric, Henry, Megan, Cynthia) attributed this difficulty to differences in the level of commitment between themselves and the peers with whom they were trying to connect. Students noted that they were drawn to certain peers in the program because they had similar purposes for pursuing the Ph.D. and they were committed to maintaining a similar high level of quality in discussions and assignments. These participants
associated a higher level of commitment to the program with being a part-time student, for a few different reasons. They explained that perhaps this is because the part-time students had to sacrifice another aspect of their lives (career, family, volunteering) in order to pursue the Ph.D.; therefore, they were extremely invested in the doctoral process. Eric recalled that the perceived lower level of commitment from his full-time peers was very surprising because he was often envious of those who attended full-time. He said,

And so even the students that were full-time, some of them seemed to not be as committed and when all I wanted, or I would have liked to have done, was be independently wealthy so I could go full-time, you know? And that was surprising, that even with this opportunity of being supported or going full-time which I would have preferred to have done, they just, not all of them seemed to be as committed as I was which was kind of a shock.

Four participants (Cynthia, Jacob, Megan, Henry) attributed a higher level of commitment for part-time students to differences in age and years of prior work experience, specifically having at least a few years of work experience between the masters and the doctorate. Cynthia stated,

Sometimes I think there is a little bit of a clash there because there are differing opinions about, you know, you should have some work experience in the real world before you go out and get your Ph.D. and teach other people how to do something you have never done, you know?

Megan attributed her success in the program to finding and socializing with peers who “have a similar approach to work” as she does because they are reliable and maintain a level of rigor in
their courses. She noted that the variance in commitment level due to age and/or professional experience often creates tension among the students:

I think that sometimes it creates tension between the students, right? Like there is no good enough in my world. And I feel sometimes, maybe it is about age too. That some of the younger students in the program that tend to be the full-time students are not perhaps as rigorous in their work.

While these participants described their full-time peers as “underprepared for class” and “not perhaps as rigorous in their work,” the participants did not necessarily describe this dichotomy as a negative part of their experience in the program. However, the differences did affect how they perceived their peers and who they considered part of their departmental community. I interpreted that they developed a stronger sense of community with their peers who were similar to them in age, professional experience, and approach to coursework. This provides an answer to the first research question: Participants developed a stronger sense of community with their peers who shared similar interests and backgrounds (i.e. other part-time students). For example, Jacob described that he was drawn to peers who had a strong work ethic and a professional background that was similar to his:

I almost always identified more closely with those who had taken time off between their masters and PhD or were working full-time. It wasn’t a personal like or dislike against those who were the full-time traditional students. It’s just that they were wanting a different type of experience.

In addition to the dichotomy between full-time and part-time students, Megan attributed some of the variance in commitment level to the students’ purpose of pursuing the doctoral degree. She
made a distinction between her peers who were “doers” and those who were “thinkers.” The “doers” tended to focus more on the applied portions of the program and were obtaining a credential, while the “thinkers” were those who were more theoretical or wanted to conduct research. She noted that the “research versus applied” dichotomy can create tensions when doing group work or having discussions in class because students tend to identify with either the “doers” or the “thinkers,” but typically not both. These distinctions have significant implications for the development of community with peers. This indicates that there are both “doers” and “thinkers” among part-time doctoral students and provides an answer to the first research question: If “doers” and “thinkers” identify and interact primarily with others who are like them, students are likely to experience community in pockets rather than widespread community with all of their peers. Based on the interview with Megan, I interpreted that she preferred to work with the “thinkers” and even avoided interacting with the “doers.” As a result, she had a much stronger connection and community with her peers who were more theoretical rather than applied. This finding also presents an interesting tension regarding the lack of consensus around the role of part-time doctoral students. Many see them as solely focused on practice, yet some of the participants in this study pursued the doctorate because they aspired to research or faculty careers. Another way to view this tension is through the lens of research (i.e. “thinker”) and applied practice (i.e. “doer”). These are examples of the ways that perceptions about this population can affect a sense of community within the academic department.

For one of the participants (Henry), the perceived differences in commitment level between the part-time and full-time Ph.D. students was particularly pronounced. I highlight this particular case because the descriptions of the differences were primarily negative and greatly affected his interactions and connections with full-time students. Moreover, he described very
limited levels of community with full-time students because of the feelings he expressed. Henry illustrated his perception that some of his full-time peers could not understand real world applications because they did not have professional experience:

… Young and idealistic in a different way. I was idealistic from the standpoint of becoming this, you know, this scholar I guess. But I wasn’t in terms of how I thought a lot of this stuff would translate to what I considered real world. And so, you know, I was listening to some of their backgrounds and oh, you know, I just graduated from undergrad or I did a year here and I am like, really? Really? You know, you got a lot to learn. You will be surprised at how some of this stuff shakes out.

Henry also noted that it was difficult for him to relate to his full-time peers because they could not identify with the nuances of the part-time student experience, particularly the issues of life/role balance that part-time students encountered:

You don’t freaking know what tired is, they don’t know what freaking multitasking is. Because we still, I think as part-timers we still have to perform in the classroom, perform on our papers, still do the same dissertation, do the same lit review stuff and work.

Throughout Henry’s interview, I perceived an absence of community with his full-time peers and limited community within his academic department in general. He discussed the ways that peer relationships were a source of support, but often described his disappointment in the overall quality and quantity of relationships. I perceived that Henry has a limited sense of community in his academic department; it is not as strong as the community that many of his peers in Education described.
Changing “cohorts.” Almost half of the participants (Henry, Diane, Cynthia, Rebecca) expressed that they found it difficult to connect and develop community with their peers because they lost track of their cohort during the program. Because of the pace in which they enrolled in courses as a part-time student, they began their Ph.D. with a cohort, but eventually ended their coursework with an entirely different group of students. Rebecca indicated that she really lost track of her peers after her second year of coursework. All of the students were taking courses at difference paces and she eventually only recognized one student from the cohort she began with her first semester. Diane noted that her original cohort included a combination of part-time and full-time students, and her full-time peers got “way ahead of us” so she lost touch with many people in her cohort. As mentioned previously, Diane also had to take an Incomplete in one of her courses, so she could not take a capstone course with her original cohort, and had to wait an additional year to take this class. Cynthia finished her coursework with a different group of students because many peers in her original cohort withdrew from the program.

Henry noted that since he completed his Ph.D. coursework as part of multiple cohorts, he did not feel a strong sense of connection to his peers because of the shifts back and forth with multiple groups of students. Additionally, he had to stop out from coursework for two semesters due to his wife’s medical emergencies. When he enrolled again the following year, he realized that he would be in classes with an entirely different group of students:

I started with a group and we were all pretty cool, we all knew each other. And there were a couple of semesters I couldn’t take classes…but they just kept going because they were full-time. I have had like 2 or 3 different cohorts since I have been here, the original and then maybe the folks that started a year, maybe a year after I did and then there was another one that started a little further beyond that. That first cohort, most of them have
actually finished. I mean we are still cool but I know I don’t have the same bond that I necessarily had when I first met them and talked to them.

From these stories, I perceived that the participants who shifted between cohort groups were attempting to develop several different peer communities rather than one large peer community. The challenge of assimilating into multiple peer groups increases the difficulty of developing a general sense of community within the academic department. It is also important to note that the conceptualization of a “cohort” varied among the participants. While Henry, Diane, Cynthia, and Rebecca described a “cohort” as a group of individuals admitted during a specific semester, some of the participants used “cohort” as a general term to describe all of the students in their program that they interacted with in coursework, despite when they were admitted to the program. It is possible that definitions of this term vary due to differences in the departmental cultures in each case. The Program Coordinator in Nursing used the term to describe incoming groups of students who were admitted in the same semester: “Each May is when we admit a new cohort of PhD students, and we like for them to move through the curriculum as a group, as a cohort, while they are doing coursework.” As I mentioned in the first section about departmental culture, the full-time and part-time Nursing Ph.D. students are admitted as one cohort, so it is possible for part-time students to get off track from their original cohorts and move to a different group. Based on the stories of Rebecca, Cynthia, and Diane, most part-timers lose track of their original cohorts, which hinders the development of community. The Program Coordinator noted,

Occasionally, we have students that kind of get off track a little bit depending on their schedules or maybe they can only take one class. And that is fine. They just sort of join in with the next cohort behind them, you know, as they are going through.
Similarly, the Doctoral Program Chair in Education used “cohort” to describe all doctoral students in the program who were admitted each fall, but did not specifically mention a desire for the students to take all of their courses together throughout their entire program. In the case of Education, the faculty attempt to keep the students in a cohort together for their first semester or year to build community, but as students begin taking courses for their minor or electives, they often lose track of their original cohort.

**Proximity (Time, Place, or Occurrence)**

Students in both academic departments (9 participants) described difficulties connecting with peers due to issues of limited proximity (time, place, or occurrence). However, some obvious differences emerged between the two cases. The Education participants noted that they interacted with peers regularly during class meetings, but it was very rare to interact with them outside of the traditional classroom environment. The Nursing students discussed limited proximity with their peers inside and outside the classroom, except during the summer intensive sessions. The case differences are described in separate sections below.

**Education students.** The Education students described regular interactions with their peers inside of the classroom, but found it very difficult to cultivate relationships and build on those interactions in other environments. The classroom environment was structured to include peer interaction through working in groups, giving and receiving feedback, and organized class discussions. Outside of those required interactions, it was rare for the students to interact with each other except for seeing each other occasionally in passing. Henry noted this when he stated,

> Inside the classroom it’s, I mean, I think we are a lot closer. I mean just because of the nature…We like to share our opinions and all that other stuff so that was never a problem. But unless it was someone in the class that I knew personally, once we left
that classroom that was pretty much it as far as correspondence and engagement.

Megan explained that limited proximity was a function of the part-time student experience. She referenced that full-time students typically have an assistantship and a shared physical space that encourages interaction:

The opportunities [for peer interaction] perhaps have not afforded themselves. And so I guess that that would in some ways be a function of going part-time, right? Like I think of the group of students, particularly students who have assistantships and do this work full-time. I think that they, that there are lots of reasons why their interactions include more opportunities for socializing than in my world.

One of the Education students had a particularly hard time developing a sense of community with his peers, even inside the classroom. Lawrence described feeling left out of most conversations and indicated that he often noticed that peers were not acknowledging his comments during class discussions. He attributed this to being “different” from his peers; Lawrence illustrated that he often felt his peers were uncomfortable around him because they would rather associate with people who are “more like themselves”:

There are times, for example if there are 10 people in the room, most of the people are not comfortable with approaching and sitting beside me and working with me. In general, people will typically work with the other people in the room. I am comfortable in saying because of my ethnicity, because of my age, because of my attitudes towards different things. I don’t know if there are very many students in the program that are in my cohort that are my age and that are African American and male, and I think that has something to do with it, the fact that people naturally are more comfortable with people like them.
Lawrence’s experiences with his peers in the classroom rolled over to his experiences outside of the classroom as well. He attributed some of these difficulties to limited proximity; he explained that his peers became more comfortable with him after he had several classes with them. He noted that he eventually felt closer to certain peers after multiple interactions, but he continued to feel disconnected from his peer community. While some of the other Education students experienced limited community during certain semesters, Lawrence’s absence of peer connections lasted throughout his entire program of study. Lawrence’s story suggests that students who feel that their peers cannot identify with them often feel ostracized. His story is an example of students who experience intense loneliness and isolation during doctoral study. Students in his situation do not feel a sense of belonging or connectedness with peers. As a result, their sense of community is often very weak or completely absent. Though Lawrence’s story presents a negative case, the findings from his situation contribute to the first research question. Part-time Ph.D. students who experience an absence of peer connections accompanied by feelings of loneliness may experience a very weak sense of community in the academic department.

**Nursing students.** The students from the School of Nursing described a sense of community during the summer intensive sessions, but noted a lack of connection with peers during the rest of their educational experience. Since many of the courses for this program are online, the students had a very difficult time maintaining the connections that they built during the summer intensives. The structure of the intensive sessions promoted many different types of interactions in person during the two week period, but students generally lost touch after that. Rebecca stated,

The first two summers we got really close over those two weeks just because we were,
you know, we were in classes together eight to ten hours a day for two weeks straight. You kind of lost it a little bit when everybody went home. And the online thing, what they would do is, you know, have their picture up there but yet they would freeze it, so it wasn’t like you were actually seeing them.

Cynthia described the same experience, feeling connected during the summer intensive and then losing that connection in the online classes. She said that she understood the difficulties of connecting online, but there were additional ways the program and her peers could have utilized technology to increase proximity and foster a sense of community:

In a more technological world, I think it would be great if we could have a common chat where at least, you know, once a month as we live through the program we could call each other and just chat. Like, where are you at in your program? What are you doing? What has been your experience? What would you suggest here? Even an email once in a while to let one or the other know hey we are still alive.

Similarly, Diane noted that she had tried to connect with her peers socially via email and Facebook, but the connections were spotty and faded quickly. She indicated that she and her peers would always promise they would stay in contact after the summer intensive, but they lost touch because of other priorities and “getting busy with everything else in their lives.”

**Unique Case: Elizabeth**

Since the overwhelming majority of participants (9/10) described developing peer relationships as difficult, it is prudent to review the case of one student who did not describe connecting with peers as challenging. While Elizabeth (an Education student) indicated that her full-time peers likely developed a sense of community more easily than she did as a part-time
student, connecting with her peers seemed to happen naturally. When reflecting on the support she received from her peers, she said, “God, I love my peers. I have had some really amazing friendships develop from this program.” Elizabeth noted that she did not have many interactions with her peers outside of the classroom, but she developed strong connections with them inside of the classroom via academic discussions about class topics as well as social discussions about their personal lives. Elizabeth said, “I have a lot of respect for my colleagues and the perspectives that they brought.”

Elizabeth had a long history at this institution and developed connections with faculty and peers in the department prior to choosing to pursue her Ph.D. in Education. She completed her master’s coursework there, and took a few elective courses in education during that program. She met faculty members and peers during that process; she had conversations with those people about the field and decided to pursue education for her doctorate. While some of her peers in Education had some ties to the academic department prior to beginning the Ph.D., Elizabeth is unique in that she described very strong connections and community within the department, even prior to beginning coursework. Elizabeth described her peers as a constant resource for support throughout her program, but also noted that she kept in touch with her peers even after finishing coursework because she cared about them and their progress:

When people are leaving, you keep friends with them on Facebook, you are e-mailing or, you know, you have an interest in them when they go up for quals, how they are doing. I would consider them to be friends.

Elizabeth explained that she felt strong connections with faculty in the program as well, so I interpreted her sense of community with both peers and faculty (and therefore, the overall academic department) as very strong. Her story suggests that students with strong pre-existing
relationships with faculty and peers can build upon those relationships in order to develop a stronger sense of community in the academic department.

In this section, I discussed the ways that relationships with peers impact a sense of community and persistence. I found that peer relationships served as a source of support and understanding, particularly during challenging courses or semesters. This answers the first research question because supportive peer relationships encouraged the development of community in the academic department. Further, this finding helps to answer question two because participants indicated that peer support served as a resource to help them persist through challenging coursework. Conversely, when peer relationships ended (as a result of shifting cohorts or students leaving the program), this support was removed and students’ sense of community and rate of persistence in the program were affected negatively. I interpreted that the students developed a stronger sense of community with peers who were like them (i.e. “doers” versus “thinkers” and part-time students rather than full-time students). In some cases, these part-time Ph.D. students did not establish a sense of community with their full-time peers at all. In fact, there were significant tensions (and possibly envy) between the part-time and full-time students, which created barriers to the development of community. This is important to consider in response to question one: part-time students develop a sense of community in the academic department primarily via relationships with others who are like them: other part-time students. However, full-time students were typically not part of their departmental community. This seems to run contrary to the departmental desire that students develop a sense of a cohort with all of their peers, both full-time and part-time. This departmental expectation did not become reality for the part-time Ph.D. students in this study. In the next section, I present a summary of the results pertaining to the students’ connections with faculty and how those relationships affected
the participants’ sense of community and persistence.

Relationships with Faculty

Each participant discussed the ways that relationships with faculty members affected their sense of community in the academic department. The participants made clear distinctions between faculty interactions inside versus outside of the classroom. In most cases, an interaction in one environment held a very different meaning from an interaction in another space. Further, out of classroom experiences (such as research opportunities or personal conversations) often had a greater impact on the participants’ overall doctoral experience and connection to the academic department. In this section, I will discuss the dimension of faculty relationships and the ways that these connections (or lack thereof) impacted participants’ sense of community and persistence.

Interactions with faculty were described as very different from peer relationships for many reasons, but primarily because peers were described as equals or “colleagues” while faculty were described as mentors to “look up to,” or senior scholars that students were “in awe of” due to their accomplishments. In all cases, faculty members were viewed as knowledgeable, experienced scholars who had the potential to serve as resources for the students. While the students recognized them as a potential source of support, some participants struggled to connect with faculty members due to various issues and barriers. The participants cited many reasons that faculty relationships affected their sense of community within the academic department, and many case differences emerged within this topic. The subthemes within this dimension are: a) faculty supported students through advising and mentoring; b) it was often very difficult to develop connections with faculty; c) proximity had a significant impact on interactions with faculty; and d) opportunities to conduct research with faculty were very limited.
Faculty Support via Advising/Mentoring

All of the participants described a supportive relationship with faculty throughout the program or during specific challenging circumstances. The level and consistency of support varied among the participants, but each student discussed the ways that at least one faculty member provided support and made him/her feel connected to the academic community. Faculty members were described as “encouraging,” “understanding,” and “very dedicated” to their work in the field and helping students succeed. Over half of the participants (6/10) noted intense respect or awe toward their program faculty. Elizabeth said that she constantly wondered how the faculty members managed to be so supportive of students while maintaining their research agendas, teaching, and balancing their personal lives:

I am in awe of our faculty. I am humbled, honored, and extremely impressed with the faculty in our school. Their dedication to our students, all of the students, it is just amazing to me. I don't know how they can manage as many graduate students as they have.

She also specifically mentioned the work of one faculty member who was known by the students as being very supportive and reliable. Elizabeth described her this way:

At one point [a faculty member] told me she was on 27 dissertation committees -- 27, that is insane. And she was chair for half of them I think. That to me just shows a willingness and driving passion for what they do and I appreciate that.

Several of the Nursing students explained that it was very uncomfortable to call the faculty members by their first names, due to intense respect for their work and their high status in the
field. These students stated that they felt connected to faculty who wanted to establish a “first name only” relationship, but it was a difficult transition. Rebecca said,

My faculty, mostly because I was generally in awe of them at the time, I tried to be extremely respectful towards. You know, and I have always, I am still not comfortable calling anybody by their first name. You know it is always Dr. this or Professor this or you know so and so. Finally my advisor was like, would you just call me [faculty first name]? Ok. I will try. I started looking some of them up you know the things that they have published and the research they have done. I just look at them and go, man that is just amazing, you know, the impact that they have made on research and on people’s lives.

Many of the participants specifically mentioned their primary advisor/program chair as a fairly consistent form of support and encouragement, but several students mentioned additional faculty members who were helpful as well. Often, the advisor/program chair was described as someone who knew the most about the students, particularly their personal and professional goals. For some participants, the advisor served as a visionary who could see the potential impact the student could have on the field, even if the student could not see it within his/herself. Henry described this type of situation with his advisor:

My advisor has been encouraging. I think she is, she has visions of what she sees me doing. I don’t know if ultimately I will do what she wants me to do but she definitely always tries to boost me up and is always complimentary and telling me that she truly believes in my skill sets and abilities and potential, which is helpful.
Participants also valued the expertise of their faculty advisors and often utilized them as a sounding board or someone who could ease their minds about a particular process or idea. Rebecca indicated that her advisor emails her periodically to check on her progress and “fielded thousands of emails and phone calls and panic attacks” throughout the program.

For some participants, a specific faculty member who was not the assigned advisor served as their greatest advocates. Almost all of the Education students (5/6) identified one or more faculty members, other than their advisor, who served as a mentor and/or advocate during their doctoral program. Notably, four of the participants mentioned the same faculty member as the person who was their biggest source of support. Megan described this faculty member as the main reason she was able to pursue her doctorate. Megan did not feel supported by her colleagues in her original professional position, so this faculty member helped her find a new position on campus that would encourage her efforts to further her education. Megan said that the support from this faculty member made her feel welcomed and appreciated as a part-time student:

I think that is a really good example of how faculty members are, in the program, very willing to meet you where you are regardless of your family situation or maybe just taking that into context: taking into context your family situation, taking into context your individual interests as a student. And I think it is one of the things that makes the program as successful as it is particularly for part-time students.

Jacob also indicated that the same faculty member specifically supported part-time students and served as a reliable advocate because she understood the unique needs and circumstances of part-time students. He described it this way:
One of the things that really helped my experience was having faculty who advocated for part-time students. I think there were a couple who understood what it meant to work full-time and be a part-time student and actively found ways to advocate for those students. That was huge and I think it allowed us, I think that’s why some of us are so connected to those faculty.

One participant (Cynthia) said that her assigned advisor was incredibly busy, so she contacted a different faculty member to request advising. After discussing her situation with this person, so began to view her as her main mentor and relied exclusively on her for advising support. Though she did not formally change her advisor (via required forms), she considers this faculty member to be her main point of contact. Cynthia illustrated that this new relationship has been extremely beneficial to her because the new advisor is very invested in her success:

After that first summer one of our assignments was to read two dissertations and so I read a dissertation of a faculty member. I didn’t know she was at [my institution] until after I read it. She had a similar interest area and so I connected with her. She is actually being my primary mentor and advisor. I feel very blessed and lucky because she is not as busy as my primary advisor and you know she wants me to succeed. Well they all want us to succeed, but she has something resting on it as well. It is kind of a win-win for both of us.

All of these examples indicate that participants needed a consistent faculty member that understood their personal and professional goals regarding the overall program, specific coursework, research ideas, or other personal endeavors. However, this faculty member was not necessarily the assigned faculty advisor. In fact, the sense of community with faculty was much stronger when the student chose his/her own mentor in addition to a faculty advisor. In these
cases, the participants had two key faculty members they could rely on for two different types of support. Further, I perceived a stronger connection with the faculty member that the students chose as a mentor; it was almost as if they took pride in their choice and made additional efforts to interact with that faculty member in order to develop community with him/her. These findings provide an answer to research questions one and two. In response to question one, the students developed a sense of community via supportive relationships with their faculty advisor and/or faculty mentor. Additionally, students developed a stronger sense of community with a faculty member when the student chose that person to serve as a mentor. In response to question two, choosing a faculty mentor positively influenced persistence due to a stronger relationship with a faculty member in the academic department. However, the students did not always feel that supportive faculty members were readily available or consistent in their support. In the next section, I will discuss the difficulties the participants experienced when they did not feel connected to the faculty in their academic department.

**Difficult to Develop Faculty Relationships**

Almost all of the participants (9/10) pointed to the difficulties of developing and maintaining relationships with faculty members. Students cited various reasons for this lack of connection with faculty, but two concepts that came up consistently were 1) a paucity of faculty availability and 2) anxiety about approaching faculty to ask to work with them on a project.

**Faculty unavailable.** Participants indicated that developing relationships and community with faculty was challenging because faculty were not available to provide support, have conversations, or even respond to email requests. The students noted that this was a considerable disappointment and quite different from their original expectations of their doctoral program. Henry illustrated that he was surprised by the lack of interactions between students and faculty.
because he expected a more collegial environment:

It doesn’t seem as collegial as I thought it would be. I always envisioned folks just kind of sitting around in the middle of the room or the middle of the floor discussing this or discussing that and collaborating in that way. It seems like a lot of people are in their offices doing their own thing. So I don’t necessarily feel as connected.

The participants acknowledged that faculty members were very busy and had “more important” things to do and projects to manage. However, it became evident that this was a point of frustration for the students. Interestingly, the participants often described immense respect and awe toward their faculty members in regards to their research and service, but I sensed that faculty commitment to their scholarly work also led to feelings of disconnection and frustration for the students. For example, Rebecca explained that she would have felt a stronger sense of community in her program “if professors weren’t so busy and weren’t out there saving the world” instead of being present and available to students.”

**Faculty cater to full-time students.** Three of the participants (Eric, Henry, Cynthia) indicated that, based on their experience, they felt that faculty members made themselves more available to full-time students, and therefore were not accessible to the part-time students. There was a sense that faculty preferred to work with full-time students because they assumed they were more committed, would finish the program faster, and needed/wanted more opportunities to interact with faculty. Further, the students perceived that faculty catered to full-time students because they had more free time on campus and could just “drop in” to faculty offices, attend presentations, or interact with faculty socially. The participants explained that this hindered their sense of community and negatively impacted their overall doctoral experience. Eric said,
Because I am part-time, I don’t expect to be catered to. You know, I am not the primary or the most preferred constituency in terms of doctoral students. So, you know, I know that. But, half time is not only half effort.

Eric said that this phenomenon significantly impacted his experience because his conversations and connections with faculty were limited. Eric indicated that he did not have opportunities to discuss his research with many faculty members, so he settled for someone who was available and willing to work with him as a part-time student:

The richness of the experience is much less because my options are so few. So you have to satisfy and say, ‘Okay, I will work with this guy even though he may not be the best guy for this particular topic because he is available and because I need someone that can work with me.’ But if I were able to be selective I would go and talk with all of the faculty and say this is what I want to do, you know? I have looked at your work, how is it that your work, you know, can help extend this work and make it better? That is the question I really don’t have the chance to ask.

Cynthia concluded that faculty members cater to full-time students because they are more likely to enter academia after they complete the program. Cynthia explained that academic faculty members wanted to work with students who had similar goals and ambitions to their own:

I think there is an assumption that, as a part-time student, you are not going to be in academia and you are so busy with your career that, I don’t think they intentionally do it, but they focus on the people that are going to replace them someday in the future. So the students with academic potential, I think, get more attention if you will and get a different program than what I have. As far as actual coursework we are getting the same things,
but it is the extra learning experiences and opportunities that are not the same.

The perception that faculty were unavailable or preferred to work with full-time students negatively impacted the sense of community with faculty because the students did not feel that they mattered as much as the full-time students. This phenomenon also affected the participants’ sense of belonging and mattering within the academic department; they did not feel that faculty acknowledged them in the same way as their full-time peers. This contributes to the answer to the first research question: In order to develop a sense of community with faculty in the academic department, part-time Ph.D. students need to feel that they are equal to their full-time peers. They need to feel a sense of belonging and appreciation from faculty.

**Anxiety about approaching faculty.** Many of the participants described feelings of anxiety regarding approaching faculty academically and socially. While some of this apprehension was related to limited community with faculty, many of the participants described feeling completely overwhelmed and intimidated by the idea of asking a faculty member to be on a research or dissertation committee. As a result, some of the students delayed these processes and even began developing their dissertation research without having a chair or committee in place. For example, Diane waited several months after her qualifying examination to begin to form a dissertation committee because she was very uncomfortable with the process. She stated,

> For some reason the picking of my academic committee has just been like one of those steps that has been foreboding and I am just now getting to the point where I am feeling more comfortable with who I am going to ask.

Similarly, Henry noted that he defended his qualifying examination and was preparing to write the first two chapters of his dissertation with his Chair, but he did not have commitments from
other faculty members to serve on his committee. He explained, “I am getting closer and closer to getting done, so I am hoping that I can identify faculty who would have an interest in what I am doing to help me finish.”

Participants also described general anxiety about interacting with faculty socially or asking them to work on a project or article. Elizabeth noted that she interacted with faculty so rarely that she had never visited a faculty member’s office until she began working on her dissertation. Several other participants said they preferred to send emails to faculty members because they were anxious about approaching them in their offices. Jacob attributed his apprehension to limited knowledge of area of faculty expertise and a lack of understanding regarding who may be willing to work on a project or article with him. He said, “I think it’s hard for anybody, regardless of status, to have that conversation with a faculty member to tell them, ‘I want to work with you on this.’” Since the participants mentioned that they were not very comfortable going to faculty offices or broaching the request to serve on committees, I interpreted the participants’ statements on this topic to indicate that, in general, students had difficulties approaching faculty outside of the classroom. Since students did not feel comfortable approaching faculty, their sense of community with faculty was impeded. Further, this anxiety led to delays in formal processes or completing the proper steps to prepare for qualifying examinations or dissertations because the students worried about approaching faculty to ask them to be on these committees. Therefore, for some participants, it affected the rate of persistence as well. This provides an answer to the second research question: A weaker sense of community with faculty members (as a result of anxiety about asking them to serve on committees) can negatively affect a student’s rate of persistence due to taking semesters off between coursework.
and the qualifying examination, as well as between the qualifying examination and the dissertation.

Unique Case: Lawrence

Lawrence is the only participant in this study who considered dropping out of the program; he contemplated leaving the program because of his negative interactions with faculty and a resulting absence of community. While the other participants also discussed difficulties connecting with faculty or lack of consistency in faculty availability, they overcame those challenges fairly well each semester and continued in the program. For Lawrence, several semesters of “abrasive” interactions with faculty made him consider dropping out of the program altogether. Lawrence summarized his experience this way:

There are times, for example, that I worked really hard and did perform better than the grade that I received and may have had a not so good experience with a faculty member and for a moment began to think, you know, I am not sure that it is worth those experiences because I am a very busy person and I have a life.

This is just one example of Lawrence’s experience with a faculty member in a specific semester; he described several instances of similar situations each term that eventually led him to question his experience and evaluate if the investment of his time and money was actually worth it anymore. As previously mentioned in the section covering peer interactions, Lawrence often experienced a lack of connection and community with peers and faculty in the classroom. He attributed the peer disconnection to people wanting to associate with others who were like them (and he did not consider himself to be similar to his peers). Ultimately, these feelings likely played a role in his negative experiences with faculty as well.
Lawrence eventually identified one faculty member in the program that provided consistent moral and academic support. Lawrence described this faculty member as someone who would “go out of [her] way to do things to make you feel comfortable.” While Lawrence continued to have some negative interactions with certain faculty members, the positive encouragement from the supportive faculty member helped him overcome challenges, persist in the program, and eventually finish his coursework and successfully defend his qualifying examination. Lawrence’s story suggests that connecting with even one faculty member can make an immense difference in a student’s decision to persist in the program. I perceived that the positive support from one faculty member mattered much more than all of the negative interactions Lawrence had previously experienced. While those negative experiences were not forgotten, the encouragement from just one person helped him consider his potential and persist through his program. Lawrence’s situation contributes to the answer for research question two: A sense of community with just one faculty member who provides consistent encouragement can support student persistence.

**Proximity (Time, Place, or Occurrence)**

Participants in both academic departments (9/10) noted that a lack of proximity made it challenging to develop relationships and community with faculty. The students noted that they interacted with faculty regularly during classes, but it was very rare to interact with them outside of the traditional classroom environment. Further, the participants explained that they rarely spoke with faculty before or after class regarding topics unrelated to the course curriculum (e.g., research opportunities, social conversations, etc.). Similar to the data that emerged regarding proximity in the peer relationships category, differences between the cases were evident. While students in both academic departments described a clear lack of proximity, the Education
participants placed much more emphasis on proximity creating a deficit in their opportunities, experiences, and sense of community with faculty. The differences from the cross-case analysis are described below.

**Education students.** All of the Education participants indicated that limited proximity to faculty affected their overall experience negatively. While the negative impact was more prominent for some students than others, all of them mentioned that the challenges related to proximity were likely connected to their part-time student status. The primary reason participants cited is that full-time students were probably “in front of” faculty more often due to the nature of their assistantships, higher number of credit hours, flexibility in schedules, etc. Part-time students do not spend as much time in the academic department as full-time students, simply due to the nature of the experience and limited time due to balancing other priorities in their lives.

Many of the Education students expected the limited proximity to faculty when they entered the program and knew they would need to be very intentional about trying to establish connections with faculty since they did not see them as often as their full-time peers. Eric explained that his interactions were formalized and planned in advance because he did not have the luxury of the “stronger and closer access to faculty” that full-time students had:

My interactions with faculty have to be much more formalized, so I have to give some sort of formal email request and then wait for a period of time and then have to probably ping them back and say ‘you know it has been a week is there any suggestion you have here?’ But if you are in the office with them, you can say ‘I sent that you mail, what do you think?’ and that is much different. It takes more intentional effort on the part of part time students.
Eric also indicated that faculty may not consider the needs of part-time students as much due to the “out of sight, out of mind” phenomenon that he described as “human nature” since part-time students are not interacting with faculty as much as the full-time students. Interestingly, three additional education students described similar concerns of feeling removed and even overlooked by the faculty due to their part-time status and limited proximity. Jacob said that he often desired more opportunities to interact with faculty outside of the classroom, but he often learned about presentations or events after they had already happened:

I also think when you’re removed from the program sometimes as a part-time student, you don’t hear about the opportunity until after it’s over. You realize how important the listserv is to part-time students. For many of us, it might be our only way of communicating and interacting.

Jacob added that he may have heard about those opportunities directly from the faculty if he had been able to interact with them more often. However, most of the time, email was the only notification he received.

I asked the Education Program Chair about part-time students’ interactions with faculty and how proximity affects access to faculty. The Chair said,

At the doctoral level, this is about making your own experience, making your own way. There are students here…who take the initiative to get to know and get some experiences with the faculty members that are around. Faculty members aren’t doing things too actively to, kind of, make sure everybody is getting equal time. We’re waiting for others to take the initiative; we’re not doing a lot of the initiative on our own due to schedules and busyness.
This statement indicates that the Education Chair and program faculty expect doctoral students to seek out opportunities to connect with faculty. Further, it suggests that faculty are available to students, as long as the students reach out to the faculty to initiate the connection. However, the students in this study indicated that they had been intentional about trying to connect with faculty, but still felt removed from them. This dichotomy has implications for the development of community in the academic department and contributes to the answer to question one: Differences in expectations between the students and program faculty can hinder the development of community in the academic department. In this case, the faculty expected students to reach out to them and the students expected faculty to respond and connect with them when they tried to initiate a relationship. However, the students were disappointed when they realized that they did not feel connected to faculty, even after they met the expectation of reaching out to faculty first. The Program Chair indicated that the students should be able to develop relationships with faculty by reaching out to them, but most of the students who actively tried to establish these connections were unsuccessful in doing so. This difference between expectations and the reality presented in the study indicates that some of the barriers to community with faculty may be structural within the case of Education. While the process used by Nursing placed the burden to create faculty connections on the student at the onset of admission, the attitude articulated by the Education Chair indicates that the burden is still on the student, but usually at a later point in the educational process.

**Issues with a dual campus program.** As I previously mentioned in chapter 3, the Education participants are in a program that is split between two campuses. Every participant in this department noted the difficulties that existed with this type of program structure, and most of the challenges were related to proximity. The Education Program Chair also acknowledged that
the two campus structure creates challenges for students and faculty. The majority of the program faculty reside on one campus, which created difficulties for the students on the other campus. For Henry, this dual structure led to frustration and feelings that the faculty “forget about” the students on the “other” campus. Henry illustrated that he began to seek expertise and support from faculty in other disciplines simply because they were more available to him than the faculty in his own department:

I think there is only one, maybe two, faculty members in my program that are based here and one of them is my advisor, so the critical mass of other faculty are an hour away. And so it is just hard to do that. They don’t see you every day. They only know you just based on a little bit of time in the class, so that is a big challenge. We just don’t, we don’t have enough engagement or opportunities to work and learn what it takes to be a scholar because, particularly for those of us who are up here, because we are distal to them. We are not in proximity and so we just, it is just almost impossible to engage them regularly. So you look for different opportunities here on campus in areas that may be totally outside of your field just to get the experience.

All of the Education participants described a lack of community with program faculty on the other campus because they had fewer opportunities for interactions due to issues of proximity. In fact, they often chose specific research topics not necessarily because they were interested in the topic, but because they knew the topic would appeal to a faculty member on their home campus. In essence, the participants shaped their program of study, research projects, and in some cases, even the dissertation topic, based on who would be proximal to them to provide faculty support. As a result, this meant that some students developed a stronger sense of community with faculty in other disciplines rather than their own (e.g., Henry’s case, described
above). For other students, this meant that they cultivated their own scholarly interests based solely on the area(s) of expertise of the proximal faculty on their home campus. For all of the students, this resulted in a sense of community with one or two key faculty members on the home campus, but an absence of community with the rest of the faculty who were not proximal to them. This finding also has significant implications related to the ways that community affects student persistence. In this program, Ph.D. dissertation committees must contain four faculty members (verified on program website). Due to faculty workload, most committees consist of faculty from both campuses. However, some of the Education participants articulated that they did not know the faculty on the other campus personally or academically; they knew very little about them, especially if they did not have class with them. Therefore, the students did not know the faculty members on the other campus well enough to ask them to serve on a dissertation committee. The present study did not follow students through the dissertation; however, based on the results of the study, if the students experience limited (or absent) community with faculty on the other campus, this could negatively affect their dissertation progress and degree completion.

Nursing students. Three of the participants in Nursing discussed a lack of proximity to faculty, but they explained it as fluctuating, depending on the semester. In contrast to the Education students, many of their challenges related to faculty proximity focused on issues regarding mentoring and/or advising. The Chair of the Nursing doctoral program said that “mentor/mentee relationships are very important for students and faculty in keeping engaged.” Students are assigned to a faculty advisor at the beginning of the program, but the structure of advising differs for each student. The Chair described mentoring and advising as “highly individualized, you know, according to personalities and how well people work and that kind of thing.” However, the participants perceived that there were discrepancies between how full-time
and part-time students were mentored. The participants noted that full-time students received in-depth, frequent mentoring from multiple faculty members throughout their program, whereas the part-time students received sporadic mentoring, typically from only one faculty member. Cynthia explained,

I think the full-time students, they get, you know, it always looks greener on the other side, but they get a lot of intensive mentoring. They have educational sessions every week. They have a lot of interaction with different faculty. Many of the others who are out of state, you know, they are having to find their own opportunities or just trying to get through the program.

Diane worked part-time in the Nursing department during several semesters, but recalled one semester when she was not employed there. She explained that she experienced deeper connections to the faculty in her department when she was working there because she could stop by faculty offices to talk briefly with them about whatever she needed. Those opportunities to drop in to chat were not as easy to find when she did not spend the extra time working in the department. Therefore, in response to research question one: Part-time Ph.D. students who spend more time in the academic department experience proximity with faculty and may find it easier to develop a sense of community with faculty. Conversely, part-time Ph.D. students who do not spend as much time in the academic department have limited proximity to faculty and may struggle to develop a sense of community with faculty in the academic department.

Similar to the Education students, the participants from the School of Nursing noted that research opportunities are linked with proximity because students conducting disciplinary research spend more time in the academic department, interacting with faculty. Most of the Nursing students had access to research experiences, while the Education students did not. In the
next section, I will discuss how access to research opportunities affected both groups of students and impacted their persistence and sense of community with faculty.

**Access to Research Opportunities**

Formal and informal research opportunities are very important to the doctoral process, particularly as students are transitioning from the role of student to scholar. For the participants in this study, access to research opportunities was very limited. All of the participants attributed these limitations to their status as part-time students. While there are a few themes in this category that were consistent across the participants, there were also significant differences between the two departments. I will present the findings separately because the research opportunities are different in each case due to program structure and the nature of the discipline.

**Nursing students.** In the Nursing department, students are permitted to serve as teaching assistants or accept temporary research assistantships, even if they are part-time students. Three of the four Nursing participants held adjunct faculty positions in the department and/or served as teaching assistants for one or more classes. This is significant because a number of studies (Austin, et. al, 2009; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006) indicate that doctoral students with these types of opportunities are often very connected to the academic community and have access to research opportunities with faculty. However, two of the four (one with a teaching assistantship and one without) participants described a marked dearth of research opportunities with faculty.

Cynthia did not hold any assistantships during her doctoral program. She was offered a research assistantship one semester, but after processing all of the required documents and gaining approval from the board, she was told it was too late in the semester to begin. Cynthia explained that her part-time status created significant limitations in research opportunities:
I think as a part-time student, personally I struggle. I have had to be really aggressive in seeking out some of the same opportunities. The full-time students have opportunities to write grants, to write publications, and to, you know, do oral presentations, and to get grants and lots of money for research, and to be really immersed in their research or their advisor’s research.

Cynthia noted that she was envious of the full-time students and the opportunities they had to conduct research with faculty. She said, “I wish I could be full-time because I could have taken advantage of so much more if I had been full-time.” However, she tried to make the best of it and sought creative options that would allow her to complete some of the same activities as the full-time students. For example, she registered for an independent study one semester in order to receive intensive faculty mentoring to help her complete a grant application and an article for publication. I interpreted Cynthia’s comments to indicate that full-time students were given opportunities to conduct research with faculty, but part-time students had to create the opportunities on their own. Her comments also suggest that community with faculty tends to happen more naturally for full-time students since they are provided consistent opportunities to conduct research. Conversely, part-time students have to be more intentional about seeking these opportunities and connecting with faculty.

Diane recounted specific discussions with faculty early in her program (shortly after she was admitted) when she was trying to secure a research assistantship. Her story is particularly poignant because she decided to pursue her doctoral program as a part-time student because of this specific experience. When she entered the program, she was working as part of a research team on a federally funded grant. The Principal Investigator was very pleased with her work and recommended her for an interview for a university fellowship that was covered by a T32 grant, a
national research award program through the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This grant is described by Nursing Program Coordinator as a “highly regimented way of getting through coursework” and it is very competitive (www.ninr.nih.gov). After interviewing Diane, a faculty member told her that students who receive the T32 grant are researchers “with a Big R,” but she described Diane as a researcher “with a little r.” Because Diane could not be funded under this program, she knew it would not be possible to afford to attend full-time. Therefore, she decided to maintain her full-time professional nursing position and attend classes on a part-time basis (T32 grants are awarded to full-time students only).

Diane knew when she entered the program that the school placed a lot of emphasis on research, but she explained that the “Big R, little r” distinction created obvious divisions among the students. Diane said, “…there is a difference within our cohort as far as the type of relationships that have been established. The School of Nursing is very research oriented, and the softer side of things is not as highly recognized.” Diane referred to students who wanted to focus on nursing education (to enter academia) rather than nursing research as the “softer side,” whereas the T32 students were those who would make research their primary career goal:

Research is going to be the main thing in their career and teaching might be secondary. It might be a part of it depending on where they are, but they are not focusing on their teaching skills; they are focusing on their research.

Diane said that she was disappointed that she did not receive the fellowship, but she understood that, based on the faculty member’s description, she was probably more of a “little r” researcher: “I get big research with a big R, it is just given my age and what my aspirations are I was okay with being described as research with a little r.” She noted that she did not receive intensive faculty mentoring like the T32 students did, but she eventually secured opportunities to work on
two research studies with faculty members and obtained some funding as a research assistant for those projects.

Diane’s story is an example of the far reaching effects that result from a negative interaction with a faculty member in the academic department. Diane’s experience significantly impacted her sense of community and the way that she defined her academic and research abilities throughout her program. She took an incomplete in a research course; she waited several months after passing her qualifying examination to form her research committee because the process was “foreboding” to her. While Diane did not clearly relate these two experiences to her negative discussion with a faculty member at the beginning of her program, I perceived that she defined herself as a “little r,” and this could have negatively impacted her self-confidence as a researcher. Further, her story indicates that every single interaction with faculty throughout her program was seen through the lens of the “Big R, little r” discussion she had at the commencement of her program. Diane’s experience provides a response to question one: negative interactions with faculty can have a significant negative consequence on one’s sense of community within the academic department. Additionally, in response to research question two, her incomplete and her long waiting period before forming a research committee suggest that these negative interactions can also impact student persistence.

**Education students.** The structure of the doctoral program in Education does not lend itself to as many opportunities for students to work under large national grants. While Education faculty conduct research projects and students have access to grant funding, they are typically not as large in scope (or dollars) as the NIH grant described above. However, the School of Education houses two large research centers that conduct national research related to education, and many full-time students obtain assistantships in those offices. Interestingly, all of the
Education participants mentioned these centers specifically, and noted that they did not have access to the research opportunities with faculty there because of their part-time status and their inability to secure an assistantship (due to full-time professional positions). The participants described an assistantship as a special opportunity to conduct research and regularly interact with faculty, due to close contact with faculty and the nature of spending more time “in front” of them. The students in this study described this level of faculty interaction as “impossible” due to their part-time status. Further, all of the Education participants pointed out that, in addition to assistantships, their full-time peers had more opportunities for research with faculty through conference presentations, writing grant applications, and articles for publication.

Three (half) of the Education students participated in a research project with faculty that resulted in an article for publication. However, all of the Education students described their access to research opportunities as very limited or non-existent. For example, Henry indicated that he knew that working with faculty at the research centers was a “big deal from a scholarly standpoint,” but it was never an option due to his full-time professional position. He also explained that it was very difficult to secure writing opportunities because faculty often asked full-time students first:

We are just not on their radar. If, for example, and I don’t know if this is the case, my instincts tell me, that if you had a faculty member at the main campus who had a research project and they needed students to work on it, I doubt they would try to identify students from our part-time student pool first. Unless they have a particular relationship with a part-timer and they know a particular skill set this person has, I seriously doubt they would try to identify from that pool of students.
Henry recommended that the academic department create formalized research mechanisms for part-time students by intentionally including them in faculty projects on a regular basis.

Eric’s description of research opportunities for part-time students sounds very similar to the one above, but Eric attributed the scarcity to a faculty “preference” to work with full-time students. The concept of “preferred constituents” was covered in previous categories as well, and Eric uses it again to describe access to research opportunities:

Full-time doctoral students that are supported through assistantships in the school or in school related units like the [two research centers]. Those sort of students are certainly, you know, the preferred constituents, the preferred students, because they see them, and because they tend to go through in a timelier manner than part-time students.

Eric indicated that he thought faculty viewed him as “sort of a hanger on out there on the side” since he was a part-time student and did not have opportunities to interact with faculty as much.

When analyzing the Education participants’ comments regarding research with faculty, I interpreted that the Education students viewed full-time students with assistantships as researchers “with a Big R” while the part-time students who had one or two research opportunities with faculty were researchers “with a little r.” The “Big R, little r” concept in Nursing, described by Diane, was evident in the Education participants’ responses as well, though it was different in nature. It became clear that access to research opportunities supported the development of community, while a lack of access hindered community. All of the participants in this study (in both academic departments) perceived that faculty provided more research opportunities to full-time students than part-time students. Further, one third of the participants indicated that faculty actually preferred to work with full-time students rather than part-time students on research projects.
The findings in this section indicate that supportive and consistent relationships with faculty in the academic department are an integral component of community for part-time Ph.D. students. In some cases (e.g., Lawrence), a positive relationship with just one faculty member can make a significant difference in a student’s overall experience, connections with the academic department, and persistence in the program. For the part-time doctoral students in this study, it was often difficult to maintain relationships with faculty due to issues of proximity and limited access to research opportunities. These challenges had a negative impact on the development of community with faculty, particularly for the students who perceived that faculty members preferred to work with full-time students rather than part-time students. While all of the students in this study persisted through their coursework, some of the participants postponed the completion of required processes due to a lack of faculty support. This study did not follow students through the dissertation process, but I sensed that the students who experienced these delays during coursework and the qualifying exam may also experience difficulties with the dissertation. Therefore, this lack of support and absence of community with faculty may affect their rate of persistence in the program due to taking semesters off between coursework and the qualifying examination as well as between the qualifying examination and the dissertation.

**Life/Role Balance**

Up to this point, this chapter has covered concepts of community in the academic department, relationships with peers, and relationships with faculty. While not a main focus of this dissertation, the analysis of data indicated that all of the previous dimensions are affected by concepts of life/role balance for these part-time doctoral students. The participants in this study managed many different life roles simultaneously while pursuing the doctorate: professional obligations (often more than one position in a given semester); family roles; student roles; and
multiple financial obligations. Participants cited time management and a general lack of time while discussing almost every aspect of this study. In fact, the participants referenced the word “time” a total 752 times. Recall that participants used “students” 471 times and “faculty” 347 times. Therefore, the participants discussed aspects of time management more than twice as often as they discussed interactions with faculty. Life/role balance considerations and frequent role transitions permeated every aspect of the doctoral experience for the participants in this study. While some of these roles are related to relationships outside of the academic community, they had a significant impact on the student role, time spent in the academic department, and the ways the participants interacted with their peers and faculty. Therefore, one must explore this topic in order to understand the magnitude of life/role balance as it relates to the development of relationships, sense of community in the academic department, and persistence. Subthemes that emerged in this category are: general time balance/management, personal relationships and family balance, and professional and financial obligations.

**General Time Balance**

All of the participants discussed the difficulties of managing their time as part-time Ph.D. students; they noted that they were constantly making sacrifices, or “stealing time,” from one aspect of their lives in order to balance priorities and transition among life roles. All of the participants described sacrificing certain pieces of their lives in order to pursue the Ph.D.; the constant “juggling” of family responsibilities, professional obligations, personal interests, and course assignments was quite a challenge. For the majority of the participants, every single aspect of their lives had to fit around the doctoral program because they described it as their first priority. This often meant that social activities with family and friends were severely limited, or in some cases, completely non-existent. For example, Cynthia described herself as someone who
lost her social life because of her pursuit of the Ph.D.: “It has been all I can do just to maintain the home front, the family, and school.” She said that the role of doctoral student “never leaves you” and you have to plan everything else around it. She used the example of making dinner plans: “When invited out for dinner, I have to gauge where I am at in my assignment, when it is due, and ask myself ‘do I really have time to do this?’” In addition to forgoing social activities, the participants noted that they sacrificed housekeeping activities (e.g., “I can only clean my house at the end of each semester”), hobbies they previously enjoyed, and scholarly activities (conferences and meetings) that they just could not fit into their schedule.

Over half of the participants said that they did not “waste time” taking a traditional lunch break; they used that time for school related activities instead. Eric described staying up late almost every night (including the weekends) to write papers, but he realized that he still needed to reserve additional time for reading:

Then I got the idea that I shouldn’t waste my lunch hour eating lunch. So I spent a lot of my lunch hour or lunch time writing or reviewing or reading articles or looking up citations and things like that. I had lunch for 10 minutes, and for 50 minutes I would go and try to work on my dissertation in some way, and that was productive. So I had to steal this time.

Elizabeth indicated that she did not take a lunch so that she could “earn” four extra hours of work time to allow her to use one half day each week to write. She explained that she prefers to do research and write from the privacy of her office rather than at home, due to her family obligations. Four of the participants (Jacob, Elizabeth, Cynthia, and Caroline) noted that their overall health and wellness declined as a result of pursuing the Ph.D. The decision to forgo a traditional lunch break attributed to this, in addition to a general lack of sleep, exercise, and time
to prepare healthy meals. All of these factors led to higher levels of stress and resulted in a negative impact on their health.

“Weekend warriors.” As previously mentioned, the role of doctoral student was only one of many roles that the participants embodied. At times, the student role had to take a back seat in order to manage other priorities in their lives. Many of the participants described “squeezing out” time for reading and writing late at night or on the weekends. Diane said that she fell asleep reading articles or books for class almost every night. Similarly, Henry, Lawrence, and Eric indicated that they made time for class work late in the evenings after their children or spouses had gone to bed. Henry added that he often “passed out on the couch” because he was so tired from managing everything in his life.

In addition to these late nights, all of the participants dedicated all or part of their weekend to completing requirements for the Ph.D. Some of the participants used the phrase “weekend warrior” to describe their approaches to balancing Ph.D. requirements with other life priorities. Jacob noted that it was nearly impossible to accomplish school related tasks during the week, due to working late and attending classes in the evenings:

I almost always made one of the weekend days my day to read and get work done. I found it too challenging during the week, to also, you know, read journal articles. I could read a couple of pages, but to put my focus into something, it just wasn’t going to happen.

Dedicating time for school related activities in late evening and/or weekends inhibited a sense of community with certain peers and faculty because most peers and faculty were not readily available at those times. For example, writing groups and/or social activities did not convene during these times. Therefore, most of the students completed their course assignments and
activities on an individual basis. The participants also addressed the negative impact of giving up time on the weekends, as it related to their relationships with family and friends.

**Personal Relationships and Family Balance**

Every participant in this study discussed how his/her pursuit of the doctorate impacted relationships with spouses, children, grandchildren, and close family friends. All of the participants were married or in committed relationships, and seven of the ten participants had children. As mentioned in the previous section, the participants often sacrificed certain areas of their lives in order to pursue the Ph.D. All of the participants said that their personal relationships suffered as a result of committing so much time and effort to the requirements of the doctorate because they were “less fun to be around and live with.” Additionally, the students noted that they “had to be selfish” and say no to family activities or decline invitations in order to attend class or work on assignments.

Three of the participants (all mothers), described intense feelings of guilt because they could not devote enough time to their children and grandchildren. Though the other participants did not label their feelings as “guilt,” they all expressed regret and/or a serious “emotional and psychological toll” from realizing that they could not always be available to their family members. Diane noted that she was often torn between her role as a mother/grandmother and her role as a student:

Sometimes I feel sad when I am saying goodbye to them. I was just thinking what it would be like if I wasn’t in the PhD program and what I could be, you know, dealing with the different relationships in my life, instead of being a student.
Diane’s quotation implied that it is impossible for her to maintain her relationships while also being a student. Other participants described trying to make family members feel that they were dividing their time equally between the Ph.D. and family activities, but they were unsuccessful.

Cynthia indicated that she attempted this, but found that she was “always thinking about school” and though she tried to watch movies with her children or spend time with her husband, she was not present mentally until she completed her assignments. She attempted to limit her guilt by focusing on the positive impact that doctoral study would have on her family; specifically, she wanted to be a successful role model for her children:

I think it is important that my daughter see, you know, that you have to make sacrifices but you can have a career, you can strive to continue your education, and you can balance a family. I wanted both of my kids really to appreciate education and the opportunities, the doors that open as a result of expanding your education.

Cynthia’s husband travelled often for work, which added to the difficulty of navigating her family relationships in addition to doctoral study. During particularly crazy weeks, the only time that she spent with her husband consisted of a Friday night grocery trip in which they would talk while choosing meals for the week.

Many of the participants explained that they “made a deal” with their spouses or family members in order to garner support to attend graduate school. However, they realized that their spouses quickly grew tired of handling additional responsibilities in the household. In fact, half of the participants clearly stated that their spouses were very frustrated about their agreement, and wanted the students to finish the program as quickly as possible. The participants stated things like, “she is tired of handling the extra load,” “he’s over it,” and “she’s ready for me to finish this process and leave all of this behind us.” Elizabeth explained that her husband no
longer asks her about her doctoral program because it “will usually result in a fight and stress me out even more.” Eric described feeling pressured to finish his program quickly because he cannot spend as much time with his wife and daughters in the evenings and weekends, when he feels that they need him the most. He also described feeling badly about missing some of his daughters’ school activities:

There is pressure to finish and it is because we have invested a lot of time and energy and I’ve missed some of the things that I would not have missed had I just said a master’s degree is sufficient in terms of my two daughters. It is not like I missed their birthdays or anything but some of the events of their lives I haven’t been able to see.

Similarly, Lawrence noted that he tried his best to balance his doctoral requirements and his family, but there are times when it simply was not possible. He said, “Definitely my wife would tell you that I probably didn’t balance family very well. It was tough. The difficulty is you can never prioritize something above family. You shouldn’t.”

Based on these stories, it was evident that there was a difficult balance between family support and pressure from family members to complete the program. While all of the participants described support from family members early in the program, their support began to wane over time and eventually, in some cases, led to resentment and pressure to finish the program. In Elizabeth’s case, discussing the Ph.D. with her husband became so frustrating that they eventually agreed that they would not talk about it at all. All of the participants described brief moments of questioning their decisions to pursue the doctorate when they considered how much they had sacrificed and the ways that their relationships with family members were impacted.

Based on my interpretation, when the students felt intense guilt or pressure from family members, they experienced periods of doubt about persisting in the program. Conversely, when
they felt supported by family, they were encouraged to continue to enroll and progress through
the program. These feelings seemed to vary depending on the semester and the participants were
constantly negotiating the support of their families.

For example, Elizabeth described the personal difficulties she encountered while
pursuing the Ph.D. and attempting to be a supportive wife and mother to two small children. She
said,

I don’t know very many of my peers going through the program who also are married and
having children. As a matter of fact, very few. And especially females who are married
and having children. And there is probably a really good reason for that because it is
really hard.

She described a specific semester when she had two large papers due at the end of the term. She
had requested three days off from work to finish the assignments, but her son became very sick
and could not attend daycare. She noted that it was a very stressful time for her; her mother took
vacation days from work to help care for her son. Eric described a similar situation of managing
course requirements while taking care of a sick child: “When you have a screaming four year old
you can’t say, you know, ‘stop screaming I need to write this paper.’ That is not how it works.”

Henry’s description of his life/role balance is particularly touching. His wife has a
medical condition and requires special care, so it was often very difficult for him to manage his
roles as a caregiver, husband, and professional, while also dedicating effort to his student role.
He explained that his wife has recurring health issues that required his devoted attention, but he
also knew that he had to meet the requirements of his coursework. He described it as a constant
back and forth process of knowing that she needed him, but also thinking about the tasks he
needed to accomplish for his courses each evening:
Obviously, with the stresses of her illness and injury and the stresses of me being a caregiver and then, you know, that can take a toll when she is, you know, in pain or needs help, but I have to study or write a paper and I have to do it. But she needs attention or needs someone to talk to but I still have a paper that is due in the morning. When you have a chronically ill spouse or family member, that is an entirely different dynamic. That is a level of commitment that takes a physical, emotional, and psychological toll on you.

Henry explained that he and his wife eventually developed a routine and did “a better job of adapting our lives to her injury” so that he could “do what I needed to do without feelings of guilt or her feeling resentful, or me feeling resentful to her.” Henry’s story is an example of the ways that role transitions and balance can impact a sense of community and persistence during doctoral study. There were two semesters during Henry’s program when he decided not to enroll because “something big happened” and his wife needed more intensive care from him. After both occurrences, he effectively transitioned back into his schedule of managing work, classes, and his home life. However, he explained that being a caregiver for his wife prohibited him from enjoying all of the parts of the doctoral experience (e.g., staying after class, social activities, etc.), and very likely hindered his sense of community. Therefore, in response to question one, students who have significant family responsibilities may not be able to spend as much time in the academic department due to those obligations; due to the limited time spent in the department, these students may have a weaker sense of community.

Many of the participants pointed out that a lack of support from family members could be attributed to limited understanding of the doctoral process and the dedication it takes to finish. They noted that, even after having multiple conversations with parents or spouses, they would still hear things like, “why is this taking so long?” or “why are you leaving campus so late?”
Megan explained that there were times when she did not feel supported by her family members. She said that her mother often questioned her and that it was hard for her mother “to envision the amount of work that it takes and that it is the life that I chose.” Rebecca stated that her family members would question her decision to commit to the extensive process of pursuing a Ph.D. She said, “they would just shake their head and say, ‘I don’t know how you can possibly go any further. How could you do that? I don’t ever want to go back to school again, you must be crazy.’” Similarly, Elizabeth noted that her husband did not really understand her reasons for pursuing the doctorate, or the types of careers she could pursue after completing the program. She said, “First of all, it has taken me three years for him to understand that I am not going to make six figures when I get done with my Ph.D.”

The participants indicated that they knew it was difficult for their family members to understand the doctoral process since they had not pursued it themselves. They were frustrated by the conversations, but tried to understand the other person’s perspective and hoped that their family members were only trying to help and/or be supportive by asking questions. Similar to the previous category, when the students felt supported by their family members, they felt encouraged to persist in the program. However, when they had to constantly explain themselves and the specifics of the doctoral experience, this frustration led to questions about continuing in the program. This finding contributes to the answer to the second research question: When the students felt supported by their family members, they were encouraged to persist through the program. However, when students felt questioned or misunderstood by their family members, they considered leaving the program.

**Family members as motivators.** Though balancing family interests and responsibilities was difficult, seven of the ten participants pointed out that their family members were often their
most significant source of support. Family members often motivated and encouraged the participants during particularly challenging times during their doctoral program. Participants mentioned spouses, children, grandparents, and siblings who provided emotional and psychological support as well as practical assistance with editing, proofreading, and general organization (e.g., helping manage schedules). This presents an interesting tension between family members creating challenges (the previous section) and family members serving as a source of motivation. It seems as if family members often served both roles: at some points, they created a significant challenge for the participants, while at other times, they served as the biggest source of support, encouragement, and motivation.

Some of the participants indicated that they considered their family members as a source of motivation because they knew that those people had made sacrifices in order to allow them to pursue the Ph.D. Cynthia explained that she would think about her family when she experienced high levels of stress or difficulty in her classes:

When I start feeling like I don’t want to go on anymore I just remember that all these people have invested something in me too you know and I can’t let them down. Lots of people just besides me have invested in this.

Henry described his family as a constant source of encouragement and indicated that his family members “always pushed education,” even when he was a child. He also said that his wife had aspirations of continuing her education and pursuing her doctorate prior to her injury, so she encouraged him to achieve his goals and obtain a Ph.D. Eric considered his grandmother to be his greatest advocate because she always advised him to pursue higher education and told him that “education was the only thing that people couldn’t take away from you.” He wanted to finish the Ph.D. for his grandmother, but she passed away as he was preparing for his qualifying
examination. He described her passing as a very difficult time, but it also renewed his commitment to completing his Ph.D. for her.

**Professional and Financial Obligations**

All of the participants in this study were employed full-time while they completed their Ph.D. requirements on a part-time basis; all of the participants worked at least 40 hours per week, and half of them averaged 50 or more hours per week. All of the students said that they had to “maintain a life” they had established prior to pursuing the doctorate; many of them had to provide for children and spouses, cover a mortgage, continue to pay for bills and groceries, etc. None of the participants could attend graduate school full-time because that option was not feasible from a financial standpoint. Even a university stipend would not have allowed them to maintain the same level of living they had prior to beginning their Ph.D. program. Notably, over half of the participants explained that attending graduate school created a significant financial burden for their families. This was a point of frustration for the participants because they often noticed that fellowships and scholarships were offered to full-time students only. Some of the participants who worked at a university received a “tuition benefit” that covered part of their tuition, but it was not enough to allay the financial burden they experienced.

All of the students discussed the ways that professional obligations created challenges during their program, especially when attending classes during the day. Some of their classes met during evening hours, but during certain semesters, daytime courses were the only available option. Nearly half of the participants discovered that their supervisors were amenable to allowing them to attend daytime classes, as long as they made up their required hours during the course of the work week or on the weekend. However, half of the participants had to change professional positions because of this issue; they knew they would need to be in a more flexible
environment with a supervisor who would support their efforts to further their education. Two of
the participants (Megan and Henry) obtained new positions shortly after applying to the program
(but before they began coursework) and three participants (Diane, Jacob, Rebecca) changed
positions during their coursework. Megan indicated that she needed to find a “job that works”
before beginning coursework because her previous supervisor would not support a flexible
schedule. Rebecca’s previous position required her to work four 12 hour shifts, which she
described as “too demanding,” because she had very little time for coursework. As a result, she
accepted a new position working two 24 hour shifts instead. She noted that her work days were
very long in the new position, but she appreciated having more full days available to focus on her
Ph.D.

Many of the participants noted that their professional obligations included working some
evenings and weekends, which conflicted with their course requirements or family commitments.
For some students, this meant that they did not have as much time to devote to their assignments,
and their grades suffered. For example, Jacob said he was disappointed that his professional
work did not intersect with his academic work as much as he had originally expected. During
high volume periods in his workplace, he could not devote as much time to his program
requirements:

I will admit that sometimes the quality of my work wasn’t there. I knew some things got
sacrificed. I also knew that there are papers and projects I turned in that could have been
better as a result of giving them more time.

Similarly, Caroline discussed frequently feeling overwhelmed by all of her responsibilities in the
workplace while trying to balance deadlines for her courses. She said that she took an incomplete
in a research course one semester because she was in charge of several additional projects at
work and “something had to give.” All of the participants pointed out that they rarely had the opportunity to attend social events or meetings offered by their program due to their professional responsibilities. As a result, this impacted the sense of community they experienced with peers and faculty in the academic department.

**Support from colleagues.** Nine of the participants pointed out that one or more of their colleagues provided moral support during their doctoral program. Many of them interacted with some of their peers or graduates from the program in their professional environment as well, so these colleagues often asked about their progress, their research topic(s), or specific courses. The participants said that this made them feel excited about their progress and held them accountable to finish the program. Most of the students indicated that their supervisors held a Ph.D., so they appreciated and understood the difficulties of managing a professional career while meeting the requirements of the program. The Education students also noted that they often received support from faculty and colleagues in other academic departments who knew they were pursuing the Ph.D.

My analysis of the data in this category indicated that issues of life/role balance and role transitions had the potential to interfere with the development of a sense of community in the academic department. Tending to professional and family obligations resulted in the participants spending less time in the academic department, and therefore, affected their connections with faculty and peers in the community. While all of the participants discussed the challenges of life/role balance, some of them transitioned among roles more effectively than others. For the students who navigated these difficulties with a bit more ease than the others, managing multiple commitments did not have a significant detrimental effect on their sense of community. However, for the participants who described very significant familial responsibilities (and those
who noted a lack of support from family members), their connections with peers and faculty suffered, and their sense of community was reduced.

**Motivation to Pursue the Ph.D.**

An unexpected finding that emerged was related to a strong personal striving to complete the Ph.D. This concept provides context to the case study because each subcase was influenced by intrinsic factors that are not necessarily captured within the preceding themes. Since intrinsic factors can influence student persistence, it is important to discuss the findings related to this topic. Motivating factors varied across the participants, but common factors emerged as well. The common motivating factors included: (a) pursuing the doctorate for professional opportunities: preparation for higher level positions in the future, or interest in a specific academic position that required the Ph.D. credential; (b) choosing a specific program that allowed part-time enrollment because full-time enrollment was not possible; (c) refining research and academic skills in preparation for scholarly work; (d) furthering education to pursue a life purpose (e.g., “I always knew I wanted to obtain my doctorate” or “I want to pursue my doctorate in order to have the credential I need to give back to the community;” and (e) changes in life circumstances that made participants consider future goals: losing a job, death of a family member, or having children.

**Personal Investment in the Program**

All of the participants described themselves as strongly intrinsically motivated to complete the Ph.D. This internal drive and goal orientation helped the participants overcome many personal and academic obstacles during their educational journey in pursuit of the doctorate. Many participants described this quality as perseverance to remain on track to reach their ultimate life goal of completing the Ph.D. Megan indicated that she knew she would
complete the program, regardless of obstacles or discouraging messages from others: “Once I started, I knew I wasn’t going to stop. I just wasn’t...I think that is sort of a personality trait, that once I make a decision like this, no one is getting me off the course of that decision.” To Eric, completing the program was a personal goal that became more attainable with each semester he completed:

You know, it meant something to me to do the program. You started this thing with the idea that you are going to finish, and I felt every term I was getting closer to that goal. That made me committed to be done because I want to show that I can do it. You have to have a level of resilience and persistence to do this.

Participants also noted that some of the intrinsic motivation to persist in the program could be attributed to considering the negative consequences their peers have experienced after deciding not to complete the doctorate. Due to the significant personal investment of time and money, many participants shared that leaving their programs would be a huge loss in terms of both monetary value as well as a loss of future opportunities that would be afforded to them after finishing the program. Cynthia even considered it “foolish not to finish” her program and shared that while she had experienced setbacks and major challenges in the program, “I am not a quitter so I believe in finishing what you start. I am pretty determined and stubborn and it’s something that I have wanted to do for a long time.”

Other participants shared that they were motivated to overcome challenges and complete the doctorate because of the values that were instilled in them during their upbringing. For example, Rebecca described completing the program as an “obligation” because it just made sense that “you finish what you start.” She said that these feelings stemmed from her childhood: “I was raised with, you just deal with your own life and buck up and do your work, you know,
meet your responsibilities and your obligations and, you know, deal with it.” Participants also explained that their inner drive and determination motivated them to push through the challenges of the “senioritis” phenomenon and feelings of dwindling interest and burnout as they were nearing the completion of the program. According to Henry, envisioning himself with a doctorate helped him overcome this burnout in his last few semesters of coursework:

> You know, I am to the point in my program where it is like I am ready to be done anyway. So you’ve got some senioritis kicking in, but I have always envisioned myself with a doctorate. Education has always been important in my family and just always thought that is just the pinnacle. I have invested a lot of time…and my own money so I need to finish.

Participants shared that their motivation to pursue the Ph.D. and the intrinsic goal of completing the doctorate were integral to their success because they had to rely on these feelings throughout their entire doctoral journey, particularly during challenging times. While the participants’ motivating factors were similar in many ways, the life events and circumstances that shaped their motivations were unique to each individual subcase. It is important to consider the motivating factors because they influenced the students’ decisions to persist in the program.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I answered two questions about the ways that part-time doctoral students develop community and how a sense of community is related to student persistence. In response to the first research question, I found that part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community when they feel connected to the academic department, experience a sense of belonging and trust, and become members of a scholarly community of practice. All three of
these constructs involved developing relationships with peers and faculty. I found that supportive peer relationships led to the development of community, particularly during challenging courses or semesters. Participants developed a stronger sense of community with their peers who shared similar interests and/or backgrounds (e.g., other part-time students, and “doers” or “thinkers”). On the faculty side, participants developed a sense of community with supportive faculty advisors and faculty mentors. The students differentiated between faculty mentors and advisors, and often developed a stronger community with a faculty mentor they had chosen. In some cases, a strong connection with just one supportive and consistent faculty mentor made the students feel connected to the academic community. Students who spent more time in the academic department experienced closer proximity to faculty and developed a stronger sense of community with faculty than those who did not spend as much time in the academic department.

Conversely, changing cohorts and losing track of peer relationships hindered one’s sense of community. Further, when students experienced a lack of peer connections and/or loneliness, their sense of community was very weak or absent. Negative or “abrasive” interactions with faculty and differences in expectations between students and faculty hindered connections with faculty and negatively impacted one’s sense of community. Some participants also perceived that faculty preferred to work with full-time students rather than part-time students; this perception hindered the development of community. Lastly, students who had significant family obligations or responsibilities could not spend a lot of time in the academic department; therefore, their peer and faculty connections were limited, and this negatively impacted their sense of community.

In response to question two, I found that one’s sense of community (or lack of community) can affect persistence. A sense of community with peers encouraged persistence by supporting students during challenging courses or semesters. On the faculty side, supportive
relationships with faculty members who provide consistent assistance can encourage student persistence. Conversely, losing members of one’s peer community (through changing cohorts or peers who leave the program) can negatively impact a student’s rate of persistence. Students who experienced this type of loss questioned their own abilities and potential for success. As a result, some of them received incompletes in courses and/or delayed processes required for the degree.

On the faculty side, negative interactions with faculty and anxiety about approaching faculty members can lead to a weaker sense of community and negatively impact a student’s persistence rate. For example, some students were uncomfortable asking faculty to serve on committees and delayed required processes, such as qualifying examinations and dissertations. Lastly, support from family members was very important to persistence; when family members supported the students’ efforts, the participants were encouraged to persist through the program. However, when family members questioned the participants or misunderstood aspects of the doctoral process, some of the participants considered leaving the program.

The results presented in this chapter indicate that all of the participants experienced a sense of community at various points in their doctoral program, but it was not consistent throughout their experience. While many of the students felt a sense of community in certain semesters, courses, or with one or two key individuals, they did not feel as connected at other points during their program. Two participants (Lawrence and Henry) described a specific occurrence that made them feel that they were part of a community, but generally had a much weaker sense of community than the other participants in the study. Overall, the participants in this study experienced sporadic feelings of community within the academic department.

Understanding the ways that part-time doctoral students develop connections and a sense of community provides information about the unique needs and experiences of this population.
The results of this study provide insight regarding interactions with peers and faculty as well as the ways that program structures and policies affect the development of community and student persistence. In the next chapter, I discuss results in connection to the existing literature and explain the implications for doctoral programs that accept part-time students.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

This chapter provides a summary of key findings and a discussion of the results in light of the existing literature related to the doctoral student experience. I explain how the results of this study support or contradict the literature and how this study addresses the research gaps presented in chapter one. I will also discuss implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

Discussion of Results

This study focused on the ways that part-time Ph.D. students develop community within the academic department and how a sense of community is related to student persistence. This section summarizes the findings in this study and connects the results to existing literature or gaps in the research.

Definitions of Community for Part-Time Ph.D. Students

The participants in this study defined a sense of community as: feeling connected to the academic department, a sense of belonging and trust, being part of a scholarly community of practice, and relationships with peers and faculty. These ideas are fairly consistent with previous studies about community during doctoral study, with one exception. Existing research in this area indicates that departmental communities shape the doctoral student experience through academic and social interactions with faculty, peers, and professionals in the field (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). In this study, participants did not specifically mention professionals in the field as members of the community in their academic departments. While their peers were professionals and the students held professional positions themselves, the existing literature focuses on external professionals as part of the academic community. This difference is most likely due to the fact that the previous studies included full-
time students only; part-time Ph.D. students are professionals themselves, and therefore, are exposed to their profession simply by working within it rather than interacting with external professionals through their coursework. For the participants in this study, external professionals were not part of the community in the academic department.

**Feeling Connected to the Academic Department**

The foundational requirement for developing a sense of community was feeling connected to the academic department. Connections were formed primarily via relationships with peers and faculty (covered in an upcoming section), but some students also described connectedness based on the general culture of a supportive academic environment, or the way that simply being within the space made them feel. The descriptions involved people, but did not necessarily involve knowing those people on a personal level. This finding adds to the literature on doctoral student community because most of the studies focus specifically on relationships as a means to build connections in the academic department. According to Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001), students must develop relationships with other people in order to experience strong connections to the department. Interestingly, the participants in the current study described connections based on brief interactions that did not lead to relationships. Further, some of the participants experienced feelings of connectedness based on observations alone, without interacting with people at all.

**Sense of Belonging**

The second important feature of community that emerged is a sense of belonging. Descriptions of a sense of belonging included mutual trust, encouragement, appreciation, and feeling that you genuinely matter to someone else. This finding is consistent with foundational ideas of belonging and mattering, as they relate to building relationships with others and
becoming a valued member of a sustained, collective group (Kadushin, 2004; Tinto, 1993; Wenger, 1998; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). The participants also confirmed that their sense of belonging with faculty and peers cultivated a shared sense of purpose, which deepened their commitment to the departmental community (Wenger, 1998).

Tinto’s (1993) model of student persistence proposes that doctoral student persistence is dependent on how individuals function within social and academic systems. The extent and quality of the interactions in these systems determine the degree to which doctoral students become integrated and ultimately persist to complete the program. Golde (2000) previously criticized Tinto’s “one size fits all” approach to persistence and socialization because it assumes that all students fit this model in the same way. Tinto’s model does not include part-time students and fails to address the unique experiences of this population, particularly as the model relates to a sense of belonging and fit in academic and social systems. Because existing studies focus on the traditional, full-time student experience, researchers often assume that a doctoral student moves to a new location to begin the Ph.D. and therefore, needs to develop a new social life in addition to his/her academic life. The findings of the present study indicate that academic and social spheres overlap for part-time Ph.D. students. Because of their limited availability to participate in social activities outside of class, part-time doctoral students develop social connections and relationships primarily inside the classroom, while completing academic activities such as group work or projects. Based on the results of the current study, I agree that academic and social integration is directly correlated with persistence. However, for the part-time Ph.D. students in this study, there is only one integrated system: their academic and social spheres overlap.
Scholarly Community of Practice

Definitions of a departmental community were consistent with Wenger’s (1998) description of a scholarly community of practice. Wenger’s (1998) research on scholarly communities of practice is not specific to academic settings, but it focuses on learning together and making meaning of experiences as a community. While the participants identified this type of community as a way to define what a sense of community should include, many of the participants noted that this type of community was frequently absent in their own academic department. The participants attributed the absence to their status as a part-time doctoral student; they described this as a characteristic of doctoral study that typically only applies to the full-time student experience. It is possible that this is due to the nature of the disciplines considered in this study, but participants in both academic departments desired more opportunities to engage in scholarly discussions with faculty and peers. While some of the participants noted a scholarly community of practice in certain courses, it was not a consistent form of community throughout their doctoral experience.

Comparison to Researcher’s Original Conceptualization of Community

Prior to data collection, I created a definition of community based on the existing literature and my conceptual framework. As I indicated in chapter one, for the purposes of this study, community was defined as the development of social networks through relationships. This definition was developed for this study based on the foundational ideas of belonging and mattering, the importance of meaningful relationships, and the idea that relationships can serve as connections and resources during doctoral study (Kadushin, 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Wenger, 1998; White & Nonnamaker, 2009). Based on the themes above, the researcher’s original conceptualization of community was consistent with that of the participants in this study.
Relationships with Peers

Interactions with peers were an integral component of community within the academic department. Notably, the participants had a higher frequency of interactions with their peers than with faculty. The findings of the present study support previous studies that note the importance of peers in facilitating doctoral student success and the development of community through support, mentoring, and accountability (Gardner, 2007, 2008; Golde, 1998, 2000, 2005; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Weidman et al., 2001; White & Nonnamaker, 2008).

Peers as a Source of Support and Understanding

The participants described their peers as an invaluable resource and one of the main reasons for their persistence in their programs. This conclusion supports multiple studies that indicate that supportive peers positively influence student adaptability, motivation, and perseverance, ultimately affecting degree completion (Golde, 1998, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). This was particularly true when the students were experiencing challenges in their classes or in their personal lives; their peers helped them overcome multiple obstacles and encouraged them to continue in the program. This finding also supports existing research showing that relationships with peers help students work through social, emotional, and academic problems they encounter while pursuing the Ph.D. (Hawley, 2010; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001).

Difficult to Develop Peer Relationships

Many part-time students experience difficulty creating and maintaining peer relationships from one semester to the next due to academic demands and balancing other commitments in their lives (Austin et al., 2009; Smith, 2000). This was true for the participants in this study; the students cited their part-time status as the reason they experienced difficulties connecting with
their peers. However, the participants drew a clear distinction between their relationships with their part-time peers and their relationships with full-time peers. It was evident that most of the participants found it difficult to relate to and develop connections with their full-time peers, citing differences in level of commitment and professional experience. Previous research indicates that a lack of interaction with peers can lead to loneliness and isolation in the academic department (Gardner, 2008; Hadjioannou, et. al, 2007; Lovitts & Nelson, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001). While the students in this study could relate to their fellow part-time peers, many of them described isolation from their full-time peers. Further, the participants mentioned obvious divisions and/or tensions between the two groups of students. Because of this, they experienced a strong sense of community with their part-time peers, but very limited community with their full-time peers. This finding is a significant contribution to the literature. Since this is one of the first studies related to the experiences of part-time Ph.D. students, these findings shed some light on this population and their interactions with their full-time peers.

**Changing “cohorts.”** Another significant finding is that almost half of the participants lost track of their original cohort and began taking courses with different groups of students. The participants found it difficult to connect and develop community with their peers because they were constantly transitioning among different groups of students. Notably, definitions of the term “cohort” were inconsistent among the participants and the Program Chairs. This term is likely defined differently based on each department’s culture, but the term is often used to describe a cohesive student group in which students are familiar with each other and develop strong relationships. Half of the participants in this study could not identify with such a group, due to their part-time status and the sequence in which they completed their courses.
**Limited Proximity to Peers**

Research indicates that part-time Ph.D. students often spend limited time in the academic department, which can lead to difficulties accessing peers within the academic culture (Deem & Brehony, 2000). The Education students described regular interactions with their peers inside of the classroom, but found it very difficult to cultivate relationships and build on those interactions in other environments. For many of the participants, structured class time was the only time they spent in the academic department, so contact with peers was limited to the few hours they interacted while inside the classroom. Similarly, the Nursing participants described a sense of community with their peers during the summer intensive sessions, but did not feel connected to their peers during the rest of their doctoral experience, even during required class hours.

**Distance education.** Students in distance learning programs may be more likely to experience isolation and/or separation from the academic department because of their lack of proximity to the institution and their peers (Exter, et. al, 2009; Horn, 1994; Liu, et. al, 2007; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). This was true for the Nursing participants in the present study who described difficulties connecting with peers in their online classes. The face to face summer sessions were very structured and included required group work and partner activities, which supported a sense of community. However, participants struggled to maintain those connections with their peers outside of the required summer intensives.

**Relationships with Faculty**

All of the participants described a supportive relationship with at least one faculty member during their program of study. The participants generally had positive relationships with their faculty advisor and/or mentor, which led to a sense of community with that specific faculty member. However, the level and consistency of support varied widely, and most of the
participants described a general lack of support and/or limited availability of faculty contact due to various issues related to their part-time status.

**Advising Versus Mentoring**

Researchers consistently indicate that regular interaction with faculty advisors and mentors is a strong predictor of doctoral student satisfaction and persistence (Golde, 1998, 2005; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Further, a student’s relationship with an advisor is “probably the single most critical factor in determining who stays and who leaves” (Lovitts, 2010, p. 270). While the students in the present study described their primary advisor/program chair as a source of encouragement, almost all of the students (9/10) identified at least one faculty member, other than their advisor, who served as a mentor and/or advocate during their doctoral program. Based on this finding, I agree with Lovitts’ conclusion that a strong, supportive relationship with a faculty member is critical, but that person may be someone other than the assigned advisor. Therefore, the results of the current study support the recent literature that differentiates between faculty advisors and faculty mentors (Golde, 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). It is possible that an assigned advisor could serve both roles, but, in this study, the mentor that students identified was not the assigned advisor.

**Difficult to Develop Faculty Relationships**

Almost all of the participants pointed to the difficulties of developing and maintaining relationships with faculty members. Students attributed this to a lack of faculty availability and a general anxiety about approaching faculty. This is particularly significant to the development of community as it relates to belonging and mattering. As previously discussed, doctoral students need to feel valued and appreciated in order to feel that they “belong” within the academic community (Tinto, 1993; Kadushin, 2004; Wenger, 1998; White & Nonnamaker, 2008).
participants expressed that faculty were too busy conducting research and did not make themselves available to students. Because of this, some of the participants concluded that faculty may value their research and writing more than they valued time with students. This led to difficulties developing and sustaining a sense of community with faculty members.

**Faculty cater to full-time students.** Some of the participants perceived that faculty members made themselves more available to full-time students, and therefore were not accessible to part-time students. There was a sense that faculty preferred to work with full-time students because they assumed they were more committed to the program and needed/wanted more opportunities to interact with faculty. This finding regarding differential faculty support is a significant contribution to the literature. Since this is one of very few studies that focus on part-time doctoral students, this is an addition to the body of knowledge on doctoral students and their sense of community. The theme of full-time students being “preferred constituents” continues throughout this section on faculty relationships.

**Anxiety about approaching faculty.** The literature on doctoral student socialization indicates that Ph.D. students often find themselves at the bottom of the status hierarchy and feel uncomfortable approaching faculty who are on a different professional level (Lovitts, 2001). Consequently, students often fill information gaps by asking their peers for academic advice rather than asking faculty (Gardner, 2007; Weidman et al., 2001). This was certainly true for the participants in this study. Many of the participants were overwhelmed and intimidated by the idea of asking a faculty member for help, particularly when asking someone to be on a research or dissertation committee. As a result, some of the students delayed formal processes and began developing their dissertation research without the direction of a Chair or committee. In the long run, this delayed student progress and, in one case (Eric), resulted in several different dissertation
proposals before arriving at a final topic.

**Incongruence/Lack of Fit with Faculty Culture**

In chapter 4, I reviewed the unique case of Lawrence, who described several semesters of “abrasive” interactions with faculty. Consequently, he considered leaving the program altogether. Lawrence often experienced a lack of connection with faculty and peers in the classroom and described feeling marginalized from faculty and peers because they wanted to associate with others “who were like themselves.” Many studies indicate that the extent of a doctoral student’s integration, or fit, into the social and academic culture in a department is strongly connected to persistence, while a lack of fit leads to isolation, disconnection, and/or marginalization (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005; Goodman, et. al, 2006; Hall & Burns, 2009; Hawley, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Watts, 2008). This marginalization can be particularly pronounced for part-time students who spend limited time in the department and have the most difficulty assimilating into academic cultures (Deem & Brehony, 2000). While Lawrence’s story provides only one perspective, his pronounced lack of community aligns with the literature. Lawrence eventually identified one faculty mentor who bestowed moral and academic support. In his case, the efforts of one faculty member made a significant difference and he described feeling a strong sense of community with that faculty member. As a result, he persisted through his coursework and qualifying examination. He is currently working on his dissertation proposal.

**Limited Proximity to Faculty**

A lack of proximity with faculty made it challenging to develop relationships and community with faculty. Students interacted with faculty regularly during classes, but it was very rare to interact with them outside of the traditional classroom environment. Most of the literature on the doctoral student experience focuses on interactions with faculty outside of the classroom;
researchers have not explored connections with faculty inside of the classroom. This is a significant gap in the literature. The part-time Ph.D. students in this study spent limited time in the academic department due to professional and family commitments; these students often came for required class time and left immediately afterwards. Therefore, interactions with faculty took place primarily within the structured classroom environment (with the exception of the advising relationship discussed above). Further, classroom interactions with faculty played a significant role in the development (or lack) of community and student persistence.

**Case differences.** While students in both academic departments described a clear lack of proximity, the Education participants placed much more emphasis on proximity creating a deficit in their opportunities, experiences, and sense of community with faculty. All of the education students attributed the lack of proximity to their status as part-time students; their full-time peers were “in front of” faculty more frequently and were more aware of opportunities to interact with faculty through presentations and social gatherings. Once again, the concept of full-time students as “preferred constituents” arose; almost all of the Education participants described an “out of sight, out of mind” phenomenon and indicated that they felt removed and even overlooked by faculty due to their part-time status and limited proximity. Some of the proximity issues may be related to the program’s dual campus structure. There was a pronounced lack of community with program faculty on the other campus, due to limited interactions and difficulties connecting with those faculty via distance technology.

While the Nursing students also attributed proximity issues to their part-time status, their challenges were specifically related to advising and/or mentoring. The participants noted that their full-time peers received more extensive, frequent mentoring from multiple faculty members throughout their program, whereas the part-time students received sporadic mentoring, typically
from only one faculty member. Many of the full-time students were funded under grants or fellowships that required intensive mentoring and monitoring, but part-time students were not eligible for those programs.

Limited Access to Research Opportunities

The doctoral socialization model developed by Weidman, et al. (2001) specifically mentions research partnerships as an integral component of the developmental process for doctoral students. For the participants in this study, access to research opportunities was very limited, and all of the participants attributed these limitations to their status as part-time students.

Case differences. Many studies indicate that doctoral students with teaching assistantships are strongly connected to the academic community and have access to research opportunities with faculty (Austin, et. al, 2009; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006). However, half of the Nursing participants who taught courses in the academic department experienced difficulties securing research opportunities with faculty. Based on this finding, it is evident that even part-time students who spend more time in the academic department do not automatically feel connected to faculty or have immediate access to research opportunities.

It is also important to discuss Diane’s “little r, Big R” research discussion with a faculty member in Nursing. Diane was told that students who receive T32 grants were “researchers with a Big R” while students like Diane were researchers with a “little r.” This discussion and experience greatly affected Diane’s socialization and perception of who she would become as a researcher. Several Nursing participants also noted that the “softer side” of research (nursing education) was not valued as highly as clinical research. When these feelings of limited value were compounded with lower levels of access to research opportunities due to students’ part-time status, the “little r” concept became particularly pronounced.
Similarly, all of the Education participants described a marked dearth of research opportunities with faculty due to their part-time status and their inability to secure an assistantship (due to full-time professional positions). The students viewed research assistantships as the only mechanism to spend significant and consistent time conducting research or writing with faculty members. Again, full-time students with assistantships were described as the “preferred constituents” who were approached first when faculty members were working on a project. Almost all of the Education participants expressed regret about the lack of research opportunities during their doctoral experience.

**Limited research access for all part-time doctoral students.** While Diane was the only participant to specifically articulate the “Big R, little r” concept, this differential was evident in the interviews with all of the students. Each participant discussed how his/her part-time status negatively impacted access to research opportunities. The students viewed full-time peers with research assistantships or fellowships as researchers “with a Big R” and the part-time students (like themselves) as researchers “with a little r.” Notably, all of the participants in this study perceived that faculty provided more research opportunities to full-time students than part-time students. Further, one third of the participants indicated that faculty actually *preferred* to work with full-time students rather than part-time students on research projects. I am drawing a distinction between *providing* the research opportunities to full-time students and *preferring* to conduct research with full-time students because I cannot assume that they are mutually exclusive. However, for many participants in this study, they are explicitly related. Either way, the results of this study indicate that a lack of access to research opportunities hindered the development of community within the academic department.
Life/Role Balance

Issues related to balancing multiple life roles and frequent role transitions permeated every aspect of the doctoral experience for the participants in this study. Life/role balance influenced community because family and professional commitments often took priority over doctoral study and relationships with faculty and peers. Very few studies have addressed role balance and/or role conflict during doctoral study. Further, those studies focus primarily on academic role conflicts (researcher, student, peer, scholar) within the scholarly environment rather than external environments (Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Weidman, et. al, 2001). The participants in this study did not even mention role conflicts as they relate to transitioning between scholarly roles. Conversely, they focused on balancing their non-student roles (professional and family) with their student role. The concept of “stealing time” or sacrificing one area of their lives in order to focus on another was prevalent in this category. The constant “juggling” of multiple life roles led to increased stress, took a toll on their relationships, and impacted their sense of community within the academic department.

Doctoral Study Lower Priority?

The findings from this study support the conclusion that part-time doctoral students carry nonacademic roles that are just as important, and perhaps more important, than their roles within academia (Baird, 1990; Deem & Brehony, 2000). In fact, for many of these students, doctoral study was often the last priority due to family and/or professional obligations. While many of the participants described the Ph.D. as the first priority in their lives, their statements indicate that family and professional obligations often came first. Several students told stories of reading or writing papers after their children had gone to bed, falling asleep reading, or failing to complete assignments because they just did not have the time to dedicate to coursework. The participants
indicated that all aspects of their lives had to fit around the Ph.D., but these illustrations actually indicate that the Ph.D. had to fit around everything else.

**Family and Professional Obligations**

All of the participants were married or in committed relationships, and seven of the ten participants had children. Missing family events or limited time with family was the sacrifice that participants mentioned most often when they discussed what they had given up in order to pursue the Ph.D. This was particularly true for the parents in this study; they described intense feelings of guilt and/or a pronounced “emotional and psychological toll” from feeling that they were neglecting their children or family responsibilities. However, the participants presented an interesting dichotomy: though balancing family with the Ph.D. was often difficult, their family members were often their greatest sources of motivation and support.

All of the participants were employed full-time while they completed their Ph.D., and over half of them worked more than 50 hours per week. Participants cited their professional position as the main reason they chose to attend graduate school part-time. Professional obligations often created challenges during their program, especially when attending classes during the day. Notably, half of the participants decided to change professional positions while pursuing their doctorate because their original supervisors did not allow flexible work arrangements to attend daytime classes. Similar to the family balance dimension, while balancing their professional obligations created challenges, almost all of the participants noted that one or more of their colleagues provided support and/or advice during their program.

**Financial burden.** Over half of the participants explained that attending graduate school created a significant financial burden for their families. Some of the participants who worked at a university received a “tuition benefit,” but it was not enough, and university fellowships and
scholarships were available to full-time students only (verified on the program website). The results from the present study indicate that many part-time doctoral students struggle to pay for their academic expenses nearly as much as their full-time peers. The participants chose to attend part-time to keep their professional salaries in order to “maintain a life” they started prior to beginning the Ph.D. Their mortgages, childcare, car payments, food, and other expenses remained the same, and their tuition each semester was an added expense. Many of their full-time peers with assistantships received monthly stipends, full tuition reimbursement, and professional development funds to attend conferences. However, part-time students were not eligible for these types of opportunities.

**Comparisons to Socialization Model**

As mentioned previously, socialization is widely accepted as the framework to describe the experiences and development of doctoral students during graduate study (Antony, 2002; Austin, 2010; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 1998, 2000; Weidman et al., 2001). Part-time doctoral students are not included in existing socialization models; therefore, I would like to provide some comparisons from this study in order to address this gap in the research.

Since doctoral programs prepare students to be professionals in the field, most of the literature combines socialization into the roles of student and professional (Antony, 2002; Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2007; Golde, 1998, 2000; Weidman et al., 2001). The results of the current study refute this assumption. Every participant in this study was already employed full-time in the professional area in which he/she was pursuing the doctorate; the participants had already been socialized into their professional roles in the field prior to beginning the Ph.D. Therefore, the role of doctoral student was a specific role in itself for these part-time students. The results of this study indicate that part-time Ph.D. students experience two distinct
socialization processes – socialization into the professional role and socialization into the student role during graduate study. Their socialization processes cannot be lumped together into one general model of doctoral socialization. Thus, part-time Ph.D. students do not fit into the existing socialization frameworks. Researchers (Austin, 2010; Gardner, 2007, 2010) have called for a study that addresses socialization of the individual at the degree level and noted that this is a significant gap in the literature. This study addresses this gap by examining socialization exclusively at the student level rather than viewing student and professional socialization as one combined process.

Summary

This section summarized the key findings in this study and compared the results to existing literature and gaps in the research. Findings from the present study reaffirmed the literature on supportive relationships with peers and faculty during doctoral study and a sense of belonging/fitting within the academic department. Since this is one of very few studies focused on part-time Ph.D. students, the results contribute to the literature by filling gaps related to the unique experiences of this population. Specifically, this study makes contributions to the literature in four main areas: relationship development; limited access to research opportunities with faculty; unique socialization processes; and balancing multiple life roles. First, the part-time Ph.D. students in this study developed relationships with peers and faculty primarily inside of the classroom and their academic and social spheres overlapped. This contributes to the literature because most existing studies focus on interactions outside of the classroom and separate academic and social relationships into two distinct realms. Second, the students in this study had very limited access to research opportunities with faculty and perceived that faculty preferred to conduct research with full-time students rather than part-time students. This is one of very few
studies to address research opportunities specifically for part-time doctoral students; therefore, this is a significant addition to the literature. Third, very limited research exists regarding the ways that life role balance affects the doctoral student experience, and existing studies focus only on role transitions within the academic domain (student, scholar, researcher). The present study indicates that part-time Ph.D. students have significant external role conflicts (professional, family, financial) that impact their experiences as doctoral students. Further, the students in this study did not mention role conflicts within the academic realm at all. Lastly, the findings of this study contribute to the doctoral socialization literature by providing insight into the unique socialization process for part-time doctoral students. The existing literature combines socialization into the roles of student and professional. However, in this study, all of the students were professionals in the field already; therefore, they were already socialized into the profession. The role of doctoral student was a role in itself and students were socialized into that role separately from the professional role.

In the next section, I address the implications from the findings in this study.

**Implications**

Since this study is one of the first to address the unique experiences of part-time Ph.D. students, the results should encourage administrators and faculty to evaluate their academic programs and strengthen their efforts to support this population. Accordingly, this section explains how the findings may influence practice and future research related to the experiences of part-time Ph.D. students. Limitations are also addressed in this section.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings demonstrate that a variety of factors influence the development of community for part-time Ph.D. students. There are several ways that faculty and administrators
in academic departments can support the unique needs of this population and foster connections and cultivate a sense of community with peers and faculty.

**Include purposeful, supportive interactions with faculty.** Doctoral students are often perceived to be adept navigators of academic processes and systems, having completed their bachelor’s and master’s degrees successfully. Consequently, it is falsely assumed that doctoral students require limited support in making connections and cultivating community (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Most undergraduate programs provide highly structured environments, whereas graduate programs require students to quickly become independent and self-sufficient (Gardner, 2007). Without the proper support, students navigate these changes alone and fail to develop a strong, sustainable sense of community with faculty. The students in this study articulated difficulties accessing faculty and developing relationships with them. Due to the nature of the part-time student experience and balancing multiple life roles, doctoral programs need to include purposeful required events and meetings with faculty to foster community.

**Provide more equitable research opportunities for part-time students.** Research partnerships are vitally important to the socialization process for doctoral students (Weidman, et al., 2001). However, the participants had very limited opportunities to conduct research with faculty. This study brought forth evidence of a perception that faculty preferred to conduct research with full-time students rather than part-time students. This concept has major implications for academic programs that accept part-time Ph.D. students. Even if this is a perception rather than a proven fact, the perception alone led to discouragement and frustration, and hindered the development of community with faculty. Academic programs must provide more equitable access to research for part-time and full-time students. For example, adding
research projects to topical courses or seminars would provide an opportunity to conduct research with a faculty member.

**Plan/revise program structures to accommodate part-time students.** The participants consistently pointed to structural and procedural barriers that impeded their sense of community. First, it is important to consider the timing and rotation of course offerings. Every participant in this study held a full-time professional position; therefore, it was very difficult to attend classes during daytime hours. Because the students needed courses in the evenings, they often chose courses based on the time offered, rather than content. Second, it is important for academic programs to consider the implications of the “cohort” model for part-time Ph.D. students. Since part-time students are taking fewer courses than their full-time peers, they often get off track from their “cohort” and take courses with a different group of students each semester. These experiences led to feelings of “starting over” each semester rather than maintaining a sense of community via existing relationships with peers from prior semesters. I recommend that programs consider creating doctoral cohorts specifically for part-time students only; this structure would allow students to create and maintain connections and community with the same group of students throughout their program.

**Offer scholarships, grants, or fellowships for part-time students.** While all of the participants worked full-time, over half of them indicated that pursuit of the Ph.D. created a significant financial burden. Many academic programs restrict fellowships and awards to full-time students because of an assumption that part-time students are financially secure. The findings of this study refute this assumption and indicate that part-time Ph.D. students need financial support as well. Academic programs should consider creating specific financial awards
for part-time students to provide extra support, alleviate the financial burden created by doctoral study, and encourage persistence in the program.

**Emphasize the importance of peer connections.** All of the part-time Ph.D. students in this study articulated the importance of their peers, describing them as a resource and source of support. Positive peer relationships encouraged the development of community within the academic department and contributed to a sense of belonging. While some of the students struggled to connect with a tangible community (ongoing interactions and connections through relationships), the ability to be part of a perceived community (a feeling that a community exists based on observations and available resources) was very meaningful and created feelings of a supportive space. However, this also created a bit of tension for the participants in the study. While a perceived community was meaningful to their overall doctoral experience and made them feel supported, it also had the opposite effect – knowing a community existed that they were not actually part of made them excluded and/or isolated.

In order to alleviate some of this tension, it is important to emphasize the benefit of peer connections, particularly with other part-time students. Academic departments should consider developing peer mentoring programs or peer support groups to foster the development of community. It is also important to encourage students to participate in graduate student organizations or social groups within the academic department.

**Provide flexible accommodations for family and professional emergencies.** This study presented evidence of several challenges related to balancing the student role alongside professional and familial responsibilities. In order to support part-time Ph.D. students effectively, academic departments need to consider that other life priorities may take precedence at certain times. Many participants discussed medical emergencies, ill family members, and/or professional
emergencies that interfered with the requirements of the program. When emergencies arise, it is important for faculty to be flexible and understanding of these circumstances. Additionally, it is important to welcome partners, spouses, and children into the academic community. On the professional side, supervisors should consider allowing part-time Ph.D. students to take a temporary educational leave during particularly intense times, such as qualifying examinations and/or heavy semesters.

Limitations

Limitations associated with this study need to be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this was a case study of part-time Ph.D. students in two academic departments at a single institution. Part-time Ph.D. students at other types of institutions may have different experiences than the stories represented here. Also, due to a relatively small sample size, the results may not be true of all part-time Ph.D. students within this institution. However, the smaller sample size and in-depth interviews provided rich descriptive data that is transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and can be extrapolated (Merriam, 2009) in order to provide a greater understanding of the experiences of all part-time doctoral students. Second, the Nursing program included a combination of face-to-face and online courses. As noted in the results section, some of the issues related to proximity and limited community articulated by students in the Nursing sample were due to this unique program structure. Therefore, it is possible that part-time Ph.D. students in other programs with a different course structure may have different experiences than the students in this study. Next, while some racial/ethnic diversity existed in the sample, only two students from traditionally underrepresented populations participated in the study. Lastly, I was a Ph.D. student myself when I conducted this research, so I had my own assumptions and ideas about the experiences of doctoral students. In order to address this limitation and ensure
that my own experiences did not affect the study, I maintained a research journal of personal reflections and decisions about the research process. Respondent validation also addressed this possible limitation by ensuring I interpreted and represented the participants’ stories accurately and without bias.

Implications for Research

Ultimately, this research was conducted to provide a greater understanding of the unique experiences of part-time Ph.D. students. This population is notably absent in the small body of literature on the doctoral student experience. It is my hope that the results of this study will provide a foundational understanding of the ways that part-time Ph.D. students develop community and how a sense of community supports student persistence. In order to build upon the findings, more research is needed to cultivate additional understanding of this population.

Multiple institution study. A primary objective of future research should be to investigate the experiences of part-time Ph.D. students across multiple institutions. The present study provides rich, detailed accounts of ten part-time Ph.D. students at one institution. An exploration of a broader, more diverse group of students would provide additional data to determine if the themes presented in this study are supported in a larger sample of part-time Ph.D. students in different academic programs at other types of institutions.

Comparison study of persisters vs. non-persisters. Much of the doctoral literature focuses on student attrition that resulted from a lack of community within the academic department. The present study fills a gap in the research by focusing on the ways that students developed connections and how a sense of community supported their persistence through their coursework. However, to date, there have not been any large scale studies of part-time doctoral students that compare persisters and non-persisters in doctoral programs within the same
institution. This type of study would provide a wealth of information on success factors and challenges within the same institutional framework.

Comparison study of part-time vs. full-time Ph.D. students. The part-time Ph.D. students in the current study described perceived differences between their experiences and the experiences of their full-time peers. However, the present study is not a comparison study, so I cannot draw specific conclusions about the differences. This calls for a need to conduct a large scale study that compares the experiences of part-time and full-time doctoral students. Based on the results of the present study, I recommend a specific focus on access to research opportunities and the perception that faculty prefer to work with full-time students.

Study of doctoral programs delivered through distance education. This study brought forth evidence that part-time Ph.D. students struggle to develop connections and community with their peers in online courses. To date, the literature on community within online courses focuses primarily on bachelor’s and master’s students (Exter, et. al, 2009; Horn, 1994; Liu, et. al, 2007; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). As more doctoral programs offer online courses and/or distance accessible options, it is important to conduct research specifically focused on the doctoral student population. Further, it is necessary to investigate how part-time doctoral students might experience online environments differently from their full-time peers.

Study of dual campus structures and influences on community. The results of this study indicate that the dual campus structure impeded the development of community between doctoral students and faculty. The distance between the two campuses limited the proximity of faculty and decreased the level and consistency of interaction. As more institutions opt to create branch campuses that share doctoral programs with flagship campuses, it is important to investigate how student and faculty relationships are affected by this type of structure.
Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how part-time Ph.D. students developed community within the academic department and explore how a sense of community affected student persistence. This qualitative case study provided extensive insight into the unique experiences and challenges of part-time doctoral students. After conducting in-depth interviews with 10 students and two program chairs, I analyzed the results into four major themes and multiple sub-themes that answered the research questions. Several of the themes from this study reaffirmed conclusions from the literature. Many of the themes, however, are not found in the literature, and therefore, clearly add to the body of research. The new findings are related to the unique experiences of part-time Ph.D. students: differences in socialization; limited access to faculty (especially research opportunities); difficulties connecting with full-time peers; the financial burden of doctoral study; and challenges related to life/role balance. All of these findings affected community development and persistence for the part-time Ph.D. students in this study. The implications of these findings were discussed and recommendations for practice and research were explained.

As the numbers of part-time Ph.D. students continue to increase, institutions must acknowledge the unique needs of this population. More research and theories related to the part-time student experience will be necessary as academic programs shape and implement policies to support these students. My initial objective for this study was to provide a voice for part-time Ph.D. students who are often left out of the research and are invisible within institutions of higher education. By sharing their stories, I hope that I have achieved my objective and brought their unique needs and experiences into the light.
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Appendix A

E-mail Invitation to Department Chairs

Hello Dr. ________,

I am a Ph.D. Candidate in the Higher Education program at Indiana University. For my dissertation, I am investigating how part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community during graduate study and the ways community influences student persistence. I am defining community as the development of social relationships with faculty and peers within the academic program.

Based on a review of your website, I have identified the School of ________ as having a population of part-time Ph.D. students that I could use as part of my research sample.

As part this study I would conduct semi-structured interviews with 4-6 students from your academic department (a total of two departments will be included). I would also like to interview you, as the Program Coordinator/Director/Chair, to gather contextual data about the department prior to the student interviews. In order to protect the confidentiality of student data, I am requesting that the Program Coordinator serve as the gatekeeper by forwarding the participation request to students who meet the study criteria and then students can contact me directly about participation.

Since this study is related to the experiences of part-time doctoral students within the context of their academic departments, the interview with you as the Program Coordinator/Director/Chair is very important. If you are not available to participate in an interview, I will not be able to include part-time doctoral students from your department in this study.

This will be one of very few studies to address the experiences of part-time doctoral students. The results will contribute to academe’s understanding of the experiences of part-time Ph.D. students and how to structure courses, programs, and experiences for these students. Please let me know if you are interested in participating in my study.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sarah B. Zahl
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education
Indiana University
Appendix B

E-mail Invitation to Participants

Language that will be included at the top of the email when Department Chairs send the request:
Dear Student,
Please see the email below regarding a research study of part-time doctoral students. Based on your current enrollment, I believe you may be eligible to participate. If you are interested in participating, please contact Sarah Zahl directly. Please do not respond to me regarding your participation.

Greetings!

I am a Doctoral Candidate in the School of Education at Indiana University and I am conducting research on part-time doctoral students. I am writing to you in hopes that you will consider participating in the study. The study will highlight the ways that part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community in the academic department of study. Your experiences could shed insight on this important topic.

Participation will include one in-person interview (60-90 minutes in length) regarding your experiences as a part-time doctoral student.

The study focuses on students who meet the eligibility criteria listed below.
- Ph.D. student enrolled in fewer than 8 credit hours each semester (Registrar’s definition of a part-time graduate student) and
- Has successfully passed the academic department’s qualifying examination or intends to complete the qualifying exam within the next academic year and
- Has 0-2 courses remaining in program of study

If you are eligible and interested in participating, please contact me directly at sabrande@iupui.edu or 278-5739. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sarah B. Zahl
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education
Indiana University
Appendix C

Script for Telephone Screen

Hello, I am calling for [Student Name].

My name is Sarah Zahl and I am calling in response to your email indicating interest in my research study about the experiences of part-time doctoral students. If you are eligible for the study, your participation will involve one 60-90 minute interview that will be recorded using an audio recorder.

I would like to verify that you meet all of the eligibility requirements for this study. To be eligible to participate, you meet the following criteria:

- Ph.D. student enrolled in fewer than 8 credit hours each semester (Registrar’s definition of a part-time graduate student) and
- Has successfully passed the academic department’s qualifying examination or intends to complete the qualifying exam within the next academic year and
- Has 0-2 courses remaining in program of study

Do you meet all of these requirements?

[If the student meets these requirements] I will send the Study Information Sheet to you via email today. Please review the Study Information Sheet and contact me with any questions and your final decision regarding participation in this study. If you are still interested in participating after reading the Study Information Sheet, I will email you again to arrange a time and date for the interview.

[If the student does not meet requirements] Thank you for your interest in the study. Best wishes to you as you finish your program.

Thank you.
Appendix D

Study Information Sheet for Department Chairs

INDIANA UNIVERSITY STUDY INFORMATION SHEET FOR

Creating community: Investigating how part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community during graduate study

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the ways that part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community during graduate study. You were selected as a possible subject because you are currently the Ph.D. Program Chair/Coordinator/Director. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Sarah B. Zahl, School of Education at Indiana University.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine how part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community within the academic department and to investigate how a sense of community influences the persistence (continuation of enrollment) of part-time doctoral students. If you agree to be in this study, your participation will contribute to academe’s understanding of the experiences of part-time Ph.D. students and how to structure courses, programs, and experiences for these students.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

Participate in one semi-structured interview, lasting no longer than 90 minutes. The interview will be recorded using an audio recorder. The interviews will be conducted on campus in a private conference room or office.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored.

Only the researcher will have access to the collected data. Interview sessions will be audio recorded and transcribed. Audio files will be stored on a secure computer that is password protected in a locked office.
Audio recordings and transcriptions gathered as a result of this study will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study in May 2013.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP).

**PAYMENT**

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

**CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

For questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Sarah Zahl, via email at sabrande@iupui.edu or via telephone at 317-278-5739.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the IU Human Subjects Office at (317) 278-3458 or (800) 696-2949, or by email at irb@iu.edu.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Indiana University.
Appendix E

Study Information Sheet for Student Participants

INDIANA UNIVERSITY STUDY INFORMATION SHEET FOR

Creating community: Investigating how part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community during graduate study

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the ways that part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community during graduate study. You were selected as a possible subject because you are currently enrolled in fewer than 8 semester hours in your Ph.D. program, and therefore, are considered a part-time doctoral student (based on the institution’s definition of part-time enrollment). Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Sarah B. Zahl, School of Education at Indiana University.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine how part-time doctoral students develop a sense of community within the academic department and to investigate how a sense of community influences the persistence (continuation of enrollment) of part-time doctoral students. If you agree to be in this study, your participation will contribute to academe’s understanding of the experiences of part-time Ph.D. students and how to structure courses, programs, and experiences for these students.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

Participate in one semi-structured interview, lasting no longer than 90 minutes. The interview will be recorded using an audio recorder. You will also complete a brief participant profile form. The interviews will be conducted on campus in a private conference room or office. The location of the interview will be at a location on campus outside of your academic department to ensure privacy and protect the confidentiality of participants.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored.
Only the researcher will have access to the collected data. Interview sessions will be audio recorded and transcribed. Audio files will be stored on a secure computer that is password protected in a locked office. The participant profile sheets will be entered into a secure document and all identifiable information will be removed. The paper information sheets will be shredded after they have been moved to the secure file. All documents and audio files will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study in May 2013.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP).

**PAYMENT**

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

**CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

For questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Sarah Zahl, via email at sabrande@iupui.edu or via telephone at 317-278-5739.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the IU Human Subjects Office at (317) 278-3458 or (800) 696-2949, or by email at irb@iu.edu.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Indiana University.
Appendix F

Participant Profile Form

This information will be used for research purposes only. All responses will be kept confidential. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Name __________________________ E-mail Address __________________________
Student Classification: □ PhD Student     Enrollment Status: □ Full-time □ Part-time
Residency Status: □ In-state □ Out-of-state
Program Area: __________________________ Minor Area: __________________________
Date You Began Your Program: ___________ Anticipated Graduation Date: ___________
How many credit hours have you completed thus far? __________________________
Date of Qualifying Examination: __________________________
Have you been a part-time student your entire program? If not, when did you change your status?
__________________________________________________________________________

Relationship Status: □ Single □ Married □ Divorced □ Committed Relationship
Race and/or Ethnicity __________________________
Employment Status: □ Full-time □ Part-time
Do you have a graduate assistantship or fellowship? □ Yes □ No
If you have an assistantship or fellowship, in which department is it? __________________

Please estimate the number of hours you typically spend each week doing the following:
Attending class __________________
Outside Classwork – studying, preparing, group work, etc. __________________
Working __________________
Attending to family/household commitments __________________
Other __________________
Appendix G

Interview Protocol for Department Chairs

Introduce self and review the Study Information Sheet with the participant. Advise that the interview will take 60 to 90 minutes.

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about the Ph.D. program in (department/program name).
   Potential probes:
   a. Program/Chair/Coordinator’s role in the program
   b. Number of students, part-time vs. full-time numbers
   c. Number of faculty, faculty involvement in Ph.D. program
   d. Activities, resources, supports for Ph.D. students

2. Tell me about a typical day in your academic department. What types of things happen there?
   Potential probes:
   a. Student interactions with faculty inside the classroom? Outside the classroom?
   b. Student interactions with peers inside the classroom? Outside the classroom?
   c. Interactions with student services staff?
   d. Do you believe students feel a sense of connection to the faculty and peers in your academic department? Why/why not?

3. How do you define a sense of community within an academic department?
   Potential probes:
   a. What do you think students look for in the departmental environment?
   b. Do you feel that there is a sense of community here, the way you just described it?
   c. What role should the program department have to foster a sense of community?

4. What do you think motivates students to continue in the program each semester?
   Potential probe:
   a. What recommendations would you share with part-time doctoral students to help them be successful?

5. Do you think there are differences in the experiences of part-time students vs. full-time students?

6. Are there any other important things for me to know about this Ph.D. program?
Appendix H

Interview Protocol for Student Participants

Introduce self and review the Study Information Sheet with the participant. Advise that the interview will take 60 to 90 minutes.

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself before you entered your doctoral program.
2. What factors and/or experiences in your life brought you here?
   Potential probes:
   a. Family, relationships, previous experiences
   b. Motivation
3. What factors influenced your decision to pursue your Ph.D. program on a part-time basis?
4. What expectations did you have of your doctoral program?
   Potential probes:
   a. Who discouraged/encouraged you, if anyone?
   b. Have your experiences differed from your expectations? If so, in what ways?
   c. Have your relationships changed since being a doctoral student?
5. When you arrived on campus, what were your initial impressions about the academic department?
   Potential probes:
   a. Impressions about the faculty and staff?
   b. Impressions about the students?
6. Tell me about your personal support system.
   Potential probes:
   a. Family, friends, others…
   b. What role do they play in your life?
7. Tell me about a typical day in your academic department. What types of things do you do and see there?
   Potential probes:
   a. Interactions with faculty inside the classroom? Outside the classroom?
   b. Interactions with students inside the classroom? Outside the classroom?
   c. Interactions with university administrative staff and student services staff?
   d. Do you feel a sense of connection to the faculty and peers in your academic department? Why/why not?
8. How do you define a sense of community within your world as a doctoral student?
   Potential probes:
   a. What would you look for in the departmental environment?
   b. Do you feel that you are part of a community, the way you just described it?
   c. Do you feel that you have to go out of your way to develop relationships with peers and faculty?
   d. What role should the program department have to foster a sense of community?
9. Talk about how you balance coursework, work, personal commitments, etc.?
Potential probes:
   a. How did your other roles impact your role as a student?
10. What motivated you to continue in your program each semester?
   Potential probes:
   a. Was there a time when you considered leaving your doctoral program?
   b. What strategies did you use to continue through your program?
11. Do you think there are differences in the experiences of part-time students vs. full-time students?
12. What recommendations would you share with other part-time doctoral students to help them be successful?
13. Are there any other important things for me to know about your experiences as a part-time doctoral student?
### Appendix I: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Program Area</th>
<th>Exam Date</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Assistantship/Fellowship</th>
<th>Hours spent:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attending Class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>White non-Hispanic</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>Committed Relationship</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>February 2010</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Afro-American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SARAH (BRANDENBURG) ZAHL

Curriculum Vita

EDUCATION

Ph.D., Higher Education - Indiana University  
Bloomington, Indiana  
June 2013

Dissertation: The Role of Community for Part-Time Doctoral Students: Exploring How Relationships Support Student Persistence  
Dissertation Defense Date: May 28, 2013

Committee: Drs. Vasti Torres, Trudy Banta, Sherry Queener, and Margaret Adamek

M.S., Student Affairs Administration - Indiana University  
Bloomington, Indiana  
2007

B.A., Journalism/Public Relations, summa cum laude - Butler University  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
2003

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Adjunct Faculty, School of Education  
Indiana University - Indianapolis, Indiana  
2008-present

Teach graduate and undergraduate courses in Education, including College Teaching and Learning, Strategies of Educational Inquiry, Windows on Education, and the Summer Bridge Program. Redesigned Strategies of Educational Inquiry as an online research methods course. Developed curriculum map and assessment plan for three graduate research courses in Master of Education program.

Academic Advisor - Graduate Programs, School of Education  
Indiana University - Indianapolis, Indiana  
2007-present

Advise and mentor graduate students regarding program requirements, admission standards, and career development. Conduct a formal evaluation of student learning outcomes and competencies in master’s programs. Collaborate with faculty to plan graduate curriculum and develop and implement policies. Conduct evaluation of graduate course offerings and assess graduate student needs based on enrollment and admissions data. Conduct one on one and group training sessions with faculty regarding best practices in graduate student advising, teaching and learning strategies, and use of technology resources to track student progress, admissions data, and enrollment figures.
Research Assistant, Center for Teaching and Learning 2006-2007
Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis - Indianapolis, Indiana

Provided faculty support for campus wide instructional design and development efforts. Served on research team, organized data, and developed coding scheme for large qualitative study of student retention. Researched and reported on national trends in faculty development and student retention programs. Developed surveys and collected data to measure program effectiveness. Planned events and orientations for new faculty.

Manager of Campus and Community Initiatives 2005-2007
Office of Development and Operations, University College
Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis - Indianapolis, Indiana

Trained staff members to conduct, analyze, and produce research. Facilitated focus groups with program directors and community members. Developed and administered bi-annual surveys for readers of Metropolitan Universities Journal. Analyzed results and reported data to Board of Directors. Directed United Way Campaign, Annual Fund, and Campus Campaign. Planned and executed special events. Produced monthly news releases and wrote grant proposals.

Career Center Graduate Peer Advisor, University College 2006-2007
Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis - Indianapolis, Indiana

Counseled undergraduate students about career options and academic majors. Assisted students with resumes and setting professional goals. Planned Career Center activities.

Orientation and Welcome Week Coordinator (Practicum) 2006
Butler University - Indianapolis, Indiana

Advised, selected, and trained student orientation coordinators and guides. Planned and organized orientation activities. Developed program evaluation strategies and administered surveys.

PUBLICATIONS

Refereed Journal Articles


Huisman, R., & Zahl, S. B. (in review). Faculty and Librarians in Collaboration: Coordinating Instruction for First-Year Students in Summer Bridge Programs and Beyond. Reference Services Review, Special Issue on Retention, Progression, and Graduation.
Book Reviews


Invited Publications


PEER REVIEWED PRESENTATIONS

Zahl, S. B. (2013, April). Why Is Attrition So High and What Can We Do About It? Fostering Community During Graduate Study. Presentation at the Annual Conference of the National Association of Graduate Admissions Professionals, Orlando, Florida.


Invited Presentations

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

EDUCATION W505: College Teaching and Learning, Instructor of Record
Indiana University (Indianapolis)
Summer 2013
Graduate level interdisciplinary course focused on effective teaching and learning methods in higher education settings.

EDUCATION Y520 (online): Strategies in Educational Inquiry, Instructor of Record
Indiana University (Indianapolis)
Summer 2011, Fall 2011, Spring 2012
Graduate level research course that acquaints students with key terms and accepted procedures in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research.

EDUCATION C750: Teaching and Learning on the College Campus, Co-Instructor
Indiana University (Bloomington)
Spring 2013
Doctoral level interdisciplinary course focused on effective teaching and learning methods in higher education settings.

EDUCATION F110: Windows on Education, Instructor of Record
Indiana University (Indianapolis)
Fall 2008-present
First year seminar for students who wish to pursue education as a profession. Focuses on current issues, trends, and expectations for educators.

Summer Bridge Program, Instructor of Record
Indiana University (Indianapolis)
Summer 2008-present
Two week intensive program for college freshmen, focusing on the transition to college and locating resources to promote student success.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

Assessment of Student Learning in Masters Programs in the School of Education
Indiana University (Indianapolis)

Student Retention Issues at an Urban University
Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

Study of Student Use of Outdoor Space
Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

Docent Preferences at Central Library
Central Library – Indianapolis, Indiana

Validation Study of National Survey of Fraternity and Sorority Life
GRANTS & AWARDS

Program Review and Assessment Grant (funded)  
Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)  
Fall 2012 - $2500

Project Director. Supports program review and assessment of student learning outcomes in the masters programs in the School of Education at Indiana University (Indianapolis).

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Conference Travel Award (funded)  
Indiana University  
Fall 2012 - $200

Virginia Piper Fellowship (funded)  
Indiana University  
Fall 2011 Award - $2000

Fellowship award to support a graduate student who models principles of effective teaching, scholarship, and practice in higher education.

Faculty Civic Learning Outcomes Assessment Project Award (funded)  
Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)  
Fall 2011 Award - $500

Supported the development of civic learning outcomes in first year seminars at IUPUI and an evaluation of the electronic portfolio.

Favorite Professor Award from IUPUI Student Athlete  
2011 Award

Faculty Interdisciplinary Pilot Program, Gateway to Graduation Award (funded)  
Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)  
Spring 2010 Award - $500

Supported a formal evaluation of IUPUI’s competencies for First Year Seminars (Principles of Undergraduate Learning) by linking competencies with specific course assignments in education courses.

Quill Society Distinction Award for Journalism (funded)  
Fall 2000 Award - $250

Lilly Scholar  
1999-2003
INSTITUTIONAL SERVICE

Co-Chair of Research and Assessment, Academic Advising Association 2012-present
Administrative Review Committee, Dean of School of Education 2012-present
Facilitator, Research and Assessment Series for Academic Advisors 2012
Civic Learning Outcomes Assessment Project 2011-present
Service Learning Faculty Mentor 2011-present
Advising Council for Graduate and Professional Schools 2011-present
Higher Education Study Abroad Travel Award Selection Committee 2011
School of Education Web Development Search Committee 2011
Graduate Recruitment Council 2010-present
Principles of Undergraduate Learning Assessment Project 2010
Vice President, Higher Education/Student Affairs Executive Board 2005-2007

PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), Member and Volunteer
National Learning Communities Conference, 2012 Annual Conference Moderator (Invited)
IUPUI Academic Advising Association (JACADA)
Lilly Scholars Network
Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center

EDITORIAL POSITIONS

Editor, Metropolitan Universities News, 2005-2007