

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ADVANCED AGE INDIVIDUALS
PURSUING A DOCTORAL DEGREE

by

Elaine G. Phillips

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of advanced age individuals 62 years and older who chose to return to academia and pursue doctoral studies in accredited doctoral programs in the United States. The theories that guided this study are the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan and Erikson's psychosocial development theory, specifically stage eight, Integrity versus Despair. These two theories framed this study investigating the central research question: What are the experiences of advanced age individuals pursuing a doctoral degree? These advanced age individuals pursued, experienced, and completed doctoral degrees or are in the final dissertation phase at colleges and universities in the eastern region of the U.S. Their lived experiences were collected through interviews, open-ended questions, journals, focus groups, and a letter of advice to advanced age peers who are starting the degree journey. The data analysis began with phenomenological reduction, which included bracketing, horizontalization, organizing invariant qualities and themes, and then constructing into the textural and structural descriptions. Their experiences were integrated into a universal description of group experience, which became the essence. The essence of this phenomenon was the persistence and motivation to finish the degree in spite of fatigue, burnout, and other obstacles in their path.

Keywords: doctoral, persistence, motivation, advanced age, self-determination, phenomenon, phenomenology

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, my children, my grandchildren, and my great-grandchildren. I pray that I am setting a good example for them to follow and hope they will continue their education as I have. God gave us our minds and a life to use for the betterment of humanity. No matter the obstacles we may find along life's way, persistence and motivation will help us achieve the plans that God has for us.

I want to thank my supportive husband who encouraged me to go back to school to obtain the advanced degree that I have always desired. His loving support is the backbone of my persistence and motivation to obtain the cherished dream of a doctoral degree.

To my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, I hope you see the value of continuing your education. Education is precious and something that nobody can take away from you. I hope my example of returning to academia will spur you to pursue your dreams and continue educating yourself to reach those dreams.

This dissertation was not possible without the love and support of my wonderful husband. Thank you for believing in me.

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I pray every night to God to thank him for all the opportunities in life that he has given me. Despite obstacles, God was always there to support me and pick me up when I stumbled. God gave me the faith, grace, and will to persevere to achieve my life's goals. With God, anything is possible.

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List of Abbreviations

All But Dissertation (ABD)

Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT)

Causality Orientations Theory (COT)

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

Education Specialist (Ed.S.)

Goal Contents Theory (GCT)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Intelligent Quotient (IQ)

Learning Disability (LD)

National Science Foundation (NSF)

Organismic Integration Theory (OIT)

Positive Sentiment Override (PSO)

Self-determination (SD)

Self-determination Theory (SDT)

Social Security Administration (SSA)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Transcendental Phenomenology (TPh)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of Chapter One is to provide a framework for this phenomenological study describing the lived experiences of advanced age individuals who chose to return to academia and pursue doctoral studies in accredited doctoral programs. This chapter provides a foundation for this study examining why individuals who in the advanced years of life decided doctoral studies would complete their years of lifelong learning. Erikson (1959) suggested that advanced age individuals realize that the end of life is near and there are pursuits yet to accomplish. This study sought to understand what motivated these individuals to take on and persist through such an arduous task. Self-motivation as described by Deci and Ryan (1994) holds the explanation. Review of the literature on doctoral persistence revealed many articles and research on younger generations. However, a thorough search of relevant literature revealed there are no studies giving a voice to advanced age learners who pursued a doctoral degree. This chapter discusses the problem that was researched, the purpose and significance of the study, and the questions that needed answering to describe the lived experiences of advanced age individuals who elected to undertake doctoral studies. The lived experiences of these individuals serve as role models for others who want to experience the same journey and provide valuable information for faculty and administrators who seek to support them.

Background

Research and statistics were lacking on doctoral attrition and persistence for advanced age individuals. The research statistics on doctoral attrition and persistence were not positive. Many consider starting a doctoral degree a risky enterprise given the high attrition rates (Barnett, 2008; Devos et al., 2017; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Collins (2015) reported that only

56% of those who started a postgraduate or doctoral degree made it to completion. Research by Fain (2015) echoed the same results; up to 35 million enrolled but never finished a degree. Life expectancy is increasing in the U.S., people are working longer, and quality of life in advanced age has improved across the 20th century. Because of longer life expectancy, many see retirement as a chance to pursue career dreams that were not feasible before retirement (Hannon, 2015). Most literature related to advanced age students focuses on their return to school for a bachelor's degree or sometimes a master's.

Historical Context

Life expectancy in the U.S. has increased; people are working longer, living longer, and the quality of life in advanced age individuals has improved across the 20th century. The research on doctoral persistence did specifically address advanced age individuals but focused more on individuals who returned to academia after working a few years (Peters & Daly, 2013; Ross-Gordon, 2011). There was information on doctoral student attrition and hierarchical regression analysis for younger students (Barnett, 2008; Devos et al., 2017; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; Mason, 2012). But there was little research on doctoral candidates who finished their degree while in the advanced years of their life (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). The lack of research on advanced age individuals pursuing doctoral degrees leads one to reflect on Erikson's (1959) stage eight, Integrity versus Despair, and high attrition in doctoral degree programs. Erikson described ego integrity as "the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be" (Erikson, 1950, p. 268) and later as "a sense of coherence and wholeness" (Erikson, 1982, p. 65). The reason advanced age individuals go back to college to obtain a doctoral degree is because during this stage adults contemplate their accomplishments and develop integrity when their life is viewed as successful (McLeod, 2018). During this

period, advanced age individuals experience a sense of integrity when accomplishments and lives are successful (McLeod, 2018).

While life expectancy is increasing, the relevant literature and research for the advanced age learners completing a doctoral degree is lacking. Barnett (2008) found that many doctoral students made it to the dissertation phase and then resulted in All But Dissertation (ABD) in the program. Many considered starting a doctoral degree a risky enterprise given the high attrition rates (Barnett, 2008). Most of the historical literature revolved around graduate school success for younger students (Peters & Daly, 2013; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The research that is available centers on the elderly whose education was interrupted in their youth, and now, in their retirement years, they returned to education to finish a high school or bachelor's degree (Antczak, 2014). However, no research focused specifically on advanced age individuals pursuing a doctoral degree. Research suggested expectations for success in returning to graduate school were for people who have worked five years or less and then returned to academia (Peters & Daly, 2013). Griess's (2014) research listed the reasons and advantages of returning to academia when young. There were numerous blogs, *Ask the Professor* forums, and editorials where aspiring learners at age 27, 30, and even 40 asked what age is too old to go to school for a master's degree (Boone, 2013; The Grad Café, 2016; Turtle, 2016). Even *Forbes* published studies on the reasons younger students should return to academia (Antczak, 2014). The problem was all the research, blogs, editorials, and information forums were for the younger learner, explaining why going back to college was advantageous for improving their career and salary. The predicted success was not researched for advanced age individuals in their retirement years. It may be that the perception was that advanced age individuals are too old to learn (Jindal, 2014; Juznic, Blazic, Mercun, Plestenjak, & Majcenovic, 2006). The voice for the

advanced age learner was missing. A search was needed to understand their motivation for earning their doctoral degree and the strategies and support necessary for their persistence to completion.

Societal Attitude

Advanced age individuals have time on their hands and the logical question is what to do to relieve the boredom of retirement. Many look for activities to be pursued in their spare time. These activities are used not only to relieve the boredom of retirement but also to provide new social interactions for fulfilling the lonely empty hours. Some even consider going back to the work environment, often at lower paying jobs that require less education and experience. Many discover that they now have the time and energy to go back to school and acquire the education that they could not obtain when they had to provide for and raise a family. They now have the time, persistence, and motivation to pursue the education that they could not afford to pursue when younger. According to Warhurst and Black (2014), it is never too late to learn. The pursuit of educational degrees, particularly a doctoral degree, gives advanced age individuals the social interactions and the incidental learning missing from their younger years (Warhurst & Black, 2014).

The logical time to pursue a doctoral degree is during the early career days, which would lead to advancement in career and better opportunities and pay (Mason, 2012). However, research suggests that many individuals in the early years of their career were not anxious to return to academia as the lure of money and career was stronger (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018) or child rearing competed with the time and energy to return to academia (Carter, Blumenstein, & Cook, 2013). Another research study revealed that students entering practical fields did not see the value of a Ph.D. or postgraduate degree as it would not be of financial

benefit for them (Woulfe, 2016). Collins (2015) reported that only 56% of those who started a postgraduate or doctoral degree made it to completion. Research by Fain (2015) echoed the same results. Up to 35 million enrolled but never finished a degree. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) listed demographics, responsibilities, personal attributes, coping skills, and motivation as factors contributing to the attrition of doctoral students.

Recent research on advanced age individuals' learning ability was lacking. The few research studies that counter this societal attitude were by authors from Slovenia. Juznic et al. (2006) published research to counter society's attitude toward elderly learning in which it was stated even old dogs can learn new tricks. Sommervold and Goodwin (2012) countered with research based upon the theme that it is never too late to learn and created a professional development program with real-world practice for older adults. Jindal (2014) also researched the question of whether older adults were too old to learn. Overcoming barriers to learning was not just about making the effort to know about cultural and societal attitudes. This effort was about understanding what is learning and using motivation and persistence to overcome the attitude that many members of society have toward advanced age learners. This phenomenological study provided an opportunity for advanced age learners to share their experiences and shed light on their motivation to persist to obtain doctoral degrees.

Theoretical Concepts

This study describes the motivation of advanced age learners to return to academia and to discover what advanced age learners attribute to their persistence, despite obstacles and setbacks, to continue the pursuit of their educational dream. This investigation was guided by two theories, the theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and Erikson's (1959, 1968) theory of psychosocial development.

Self-determination theory (SDT). Deci and Ryan's (2001) theory of self-determination explains persistence and motivation. SDT is a motivational theory of personality, development, and social processes that examines how social contexts and individual differences facilitate different types of motivation, especially autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. This theory predicts learning, performance, experience, and psychological health. SDT proposes that all human beings have three basic psychological needs – the need for (a) competence, (b) autonomy, and (c) relatedness – the satisfaction of which is essential for effective functioning and wellness. Satisfaction of these basic needs promotes the optimal motivational traits and states of autonomous motivation and intrinsic aspirations, which facilitate psychological health and effective engagement with the world of academia. With persistence and motivation, advanced age learners were able to overcome social-contextual factors that were obstacles to their educational pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is also the basis of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which explains an individual's goal-directed behavior. Therefore, peoples' motivation comes from satisfaction of their psychological needs, which allows them to form and enjoy good relationships. Returning to academia at an advanced age allowed learners to form and enjoy new relationships with fellow classmates and professors. Deci and Ryan's (1985, 1991) theory applies to the realm of education and is concerned with promoting in students an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in abilities and attributes. For advanced age learners, the outcome was intrinsic motivation and internalized values, which resulted in high-quality learning and personal growth.

SDT addresses intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For teachers, the lesson from these studies was to support autonomy in the students to

increase their intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and desire for learning. Students taught with a controlling approach lost initiative, learned less, and had decreased intrinsic motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Five mini-theories made up the framework of SDT. These mini-theories were:

- Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) — internalization of extrinsic motives;
- Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) — how social contexts facilitated or undermined intrinsic motivation;
- Causality Orientations Theory (COT) — adapting to different aspects of the environment to regulate behavior;
- Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) — basic needs directly correlated with wellness; and
- Goal Contents Theory (GCT) — materialism and extrinsic goals do not enhance satisfaction and do not foster well-being (Ryan, 2009).

Ryan (2009) concluded that self-determination and well-being suggest people function best when behavior is autonomous rather than controlled. In this study, his theory served as a lens for investigating and describing the motivation and persistence experiences of advanced age individuals pursuing a doctoral degree.

Ryan, Williams, Patrick, and Deci (2009) used the SDT to highlight its importance in physical activities, social development, and wellness. They introduced the value of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to enhance physical activities, using the mini-theories of CET, OIT, and BPNT mentioned in the above article by Ryan et al. (2009). They found that physical activity can be intrinsically motivated and positive support increased intrinsic motivation and well-being (Ryan et al., 2009).

While physical activity was not a component of the methodology for describing the lived experiences of advanced age individuals, the SDT played a strategic part in describing the persistence and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation displayed by individuals who persisted to completion of doctoral programs.

Erikson's stages of development. Another theory which serves as a lens to examine the experiences of advanced age individuals is Erikson's (1959, 1968) theory of psychosocial development. Erikson's (1959, 1968) theory includes eight stages of identity development, from adolescence through adulthood. Stage eight: Integrity versus Despair is the late adulthood stage and explains the identity development of advanced age individuals. Erikson (1959, 1968) explained that the final stage of his theory is where individuals must live with what they have built over their lifetime. Ideally, they have achieved integrity, which involves the acceptance of the limitations of life, a sense of being part of a history that includes previous generations, a sense of having the wisdom of the ages, and a final integration of all the previous stages. However, the opposite of integrity is despair—the regret for what one has done or not done with one's life, fear of approaching death, and disgust with oneself for not achieving one's dreams. Erikson's (1959, 1968) stage eight may explain what motivates advanced age learners to achieve now what they had not accomplished earlier in their life. They are aware of the approaching time of death and the end of their life. Therefore, they are chasing their dream with all the persistence and motivation they can muster.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to use SDT (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999) and Erikson's (1959, 1968) theoretical concepts of integrity versus despair to examine the persistence and motivation behind the lived experiences of advanced age learners pursuing doctoral studies. The persistence to pursue and complete a doctoral degree

required high levels of grit, motivation, and identity development (Cross, 2013). Describing these experiences will prove valuable to anyone who is considering the same doctoral journey and to the faculty and program administrators who strive to foster their persistence.

Situation to Self

Relating to the above theories, I can articulate my motivation and persistence in researching the voices of advanced age learners because I am one of the voices. As a retired educator who enjoys the atmosphere, structure, and axiological values of academia, I felt the time was right to reach the final goal of my educational journey: the doctoral degree. I have three personal motivations for the doctoral journey: (a) personal satisfaction in obtaining my educational goal, (b) a desire to serve as a role model for my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and (c) an aspiration to return to teaching as an adjunct professor at a local college.

The philosophical assumptions for this study were multifaceted. These assumptions included, but were not limited to, the assumption that learning should never end: people should learn something new every day; that if one stops learning, his or her brain withers away; that individuals are still capable of learning; that they are not too old to learn; that advanced age individuals share common experiences and problems when going back to academia.

My ontological assumption is that reality varies according to the individual, and based on this assumption, I conducted a qualitative study to explore the personal lived experiences of advanced age learners in a doctoral program. The assumption is that everyone's reality of the college experience was different. The commonalities of participant realities were then integrated into themes and the essence of their lived experiences was described.

Epistemologically, I became as close as possible to the participants in the study, lessening the distance between myself and their experiences. I assembled the evidence advanced age learners provided from their perspective, realizing the subjective nature of the phenomenological approach which accounted for individual views. All researchers bring values to a study, and my axiological assumptions also influenced this qualitative research (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I value education, lifelong learning, and educational knowledge. These axiological assumptions influenced my interpretation of the participants' persistence and motivation experiences in the doctoral degree attainment.

The paradigm guiding the study was constructivism. Denzin and Lincoln (1998, 2000, 2011) described social constructivism as individuals seeking an understanding of the world in which they live and work. Using constructivism, this study was designed to discover and describe the subjective lived experiences of advanced age individuals obtaining doctoral degrees. A description of their experiences described the obstacles these participants hurdled, and the persistence and motivation needed to reach this goal in their advanced stage in their life. Lee (2012) reinforced the paradigm of constructivism as an epistemology doctrine that asserts reality is socially constructed and transmitted to members of society by social agencies and processes (p. 22). Thus, my role as a researcher was to identify the underlying social constructs of the participants' narratives to develop themes of their lived experiences and reveal the essence of the doctoral attainment experience for advanced age learners who pursued a doctoral degree.

Problem Statement

The problem was centered on perennially low persistence rates of doctoral students across disciplines and across the decades (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016) and the need to examine subpopulations to understand their motivation and persistence experiences. While

researchers have examined the experiences of minority students (Gopaul, 2015; Webber & Canche, 2015), women (Buglione, 2012; Carter et al., 2013; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Lunde, 2017; Veal, Bull, & Miller, 2012), and nontraditional students (Collins, 2015), there is currently no research describing the experience of advanced age individuals who returned to college to pursue a doctoral degree. With loneliness and isolation being a problem for many advanced age individuals (Buglione, 2012), research is needed to investigate the role doctoral study and completion has on the well-being of advanced age individuals. The literature did not address the doctoral persistence experiences of this unique population. There was a gap in the research on advanced age individuals returning to academia for a doctoral degree and very little research on what an individual does education-wise in his or her retirement years. While doctoral student persistence has been studied extensively (Hannon, 2015), research was lacking on why advanced age individuals pursued a doctoral degree and how they persisted to completion. Further research is needed to give a voice to these advanced age learners.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of advanced age individuals in doctoral studies. The central phenomenon or category of study was the persistence and motivation of older adults who are in doctoral studies or have completed a doctoral degree in the eastern region of the U.S. For this study, persistence was defined as continuance toward or attainment of the goal of doctoral completion. The motivation to begin and persist in a doctoral degree program was explored using Deci and Ryan's (1985, 1991, 1994) SDT. SDT is a motivational theory of personality development and social processes that facilitate different types of motivation, personality development, and well-being. It postulates basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness,

which, when fulfilled, is necessary for healthy human functioning. SDT also explained the persistence achieved from intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Deci & Ryan, 2001).

For this study, older adults in retirement age years are referred to as advanced age learners. Advanced age learners are defined as individuals 62 years of age or older based upon the accepted Social Security Administration (SSA) retirement age (U.S. Government, 2017).

Another theory important to this study is Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development. Stage eight of Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development explains how adults in this life stage, Integrity versus Despair, may realize with regret what one has not done with his or her life. Therefore, Erikson's stage eight framed this study investigating the motivation and persistence experiences of advanced age individuals obtaining a doctoral degree.

Significance of the Study

This study investigating the lived experiences of individuals in their advanced years who pursued doctoral degrees has empirical, theoretical, and practical significance. The importance of these concepts is described here.

Empirical Significance

People are living longer due to advances in medicine and nutrition. Therefore, individuals who are happy in their careers and are still contributing to society may not want to retire at age 62 or 65. These individuals may want to continue their education and improve their skills for the workplace. It was often assumed that at a certain age, advanced age individuals wanted to retire, had no need for further education, and were not interested in returning to academia. Research on why students returned to academia for further studies is not new (Canon & Gascon, 2013). However, the research to date was largely limited to the younger age group of 25 to 50 (Hannon, 2015; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The significance of this study was to give

these advanced age individuals the opportunity to describe their stake or value received from the education that allowed them to prolong their careers or find personal fulfillment in their advanced age. This investigation was achieved through a qualitative phenomenological inquiry of the lived experiences of advanced age individuals, using deep and rich information derived from their own words. The participants described their lived experiences as advanced age learners enrolled in a doctoral degree program. This study contributes new empirical research on advanced age individuals in academia and contributes understanding of doctoral motivation and persistence for advanced age learners. This study fills the gap in the literature and contributes new knowledge on this topic. This study presents an opportunity for further potential study and research into why and how advanced age learners persisted to doctoral completion. This study contributes to the literature an understanding of the self-determination and motivation for advanced age individuals who returned to academia and embarked on the journey for a doctoral degree.

Theoretical Significance

While Deci and Ryan's (1991, 1994) SDT is a motivational theory of personality, development, and social processes, it does not specifically address the individual differences and experiences of advanced age adults to explain learning and performance in their academic pursuits. Therefore, the lived experiences of these advanced age learners who described their persistence and motivation to acquire doctoral degrees enhances Deci and Ryan's (1991, 1994) SDT theory and adds credence to Erikson's (1959) stage eight theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, describing the motivation and self-determination of advanced age learners.

Practical Significance

In this research study, the lived experiences of the advanced age learners are a picture worth a thousand words and serve as sage advice for others who want to embark on the doctoral journey. Findings serve to motivate other advanced age and retired individuals as well as learners at any age. Findings also inform colleges and universities with advanced graduate and doctoral programs as they further develop their graduate programs and support services to better meet the needs of learners of all ages. Understanding why advanced age individuals enrolled and how they persisted to attain a doctoral degree is bound to influence other advanced age individuals to try the school's doctoral programs. Persistence and motivation traits are valuable traits to learn and experience at any age.

Research Questions

This study was designed to discover the lived experiences of advanced age individuals who were motivated to return to university and persist to completion of a doctoral degree. The research questions now ascertain the experiences of advanced age individuals as they worked hard on this quest.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of advanced age individuals pursuing a doctoral degree?

The central question restates the purpose of the study, which describes the lived experiences of the advanced age individuals who pursued a doctoral degree. According to Moustakas (1994), it is important to learn what contexts or situations influenced or affected an individual's experiences. The purpose of this central research question was to gather data that lead to a textual and structural description of the advanced age learners' experiences, the contexts that influenced their experiences, and ultimately provided an understanding of the

essence of the experience of all the participants in the study. The sub questions further refined the central question and gathered further information on their lived experiences.

Sub Questions

Sub question 1: What motivates advanced age learners to earn their doctoral degree?

Open-ended questions provided data for understanding the motives of advanced age learners in pursuing doctoral degrees (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Unfortunately, there is was very little literature on advanced age learners returning to academia to pursue doctoral degrees. This information had to come from the participants of this study. To date, there is no literature on the motivation of advanced age learners pursuing doctoral degrees.

Sub question 2: How does program choice influence the persistence of advanced age learners pursuing a doctoral degree?

The data gleaned from the participants on this question may be valuable to colleges and universities for planning and providing programs that appeal to the older generations of our society. This information may be valuable to colleges and universities who want to plan residential, distance, and blended learning programs to attract retired students into returning to academia.

Sub question 3: To what do advance age learners attribute their doctoral persistence?

The data collected from this question added credence to Deci and Ryan's (1985, 1991, 2001) SDT theory. The motivation and role model efficacy from this question may provide impetus to other individuals considering a doctoral degree as well as motivation, grit, and determination for the younger generation to follow in their footsteps (Cross, 2013).

Definitions

1. *Advanced age* – Advanced age refers to individuals 62 years of age or older based upon the accepted Social Security Administration (SSA) retirement age (U.S. Government, 2017).
2. *Axiology* – A philosophical assumption relating to the values that a researcher brings to a qualitative study; the researcher will include his or her own interpretation in conjunction with the interpretations of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).
3. *Bracketing or epoche* – Investigators/researchers set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination (Moustakas, 1994).
4. *Epistemology* – A philosophical assumption where knowledge is assembled from the subjective experiences of people (Moustakas, 1994).
5. *Extrinsic motivation* – Motivation that is accomplished for the sake of some external outcome. The extrinsic motivator is outside of, and acts on, the individual (Deci & Ryan, 2001).
6. *Horizontalization* – Method where data analysts go through the data and highlight significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).
7. *Institutional Review Board (IRB)* -- Institutional Review Board (IRB) is an administrative body established to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to participate in research activities conducted under the auspices of the institution with which it is affiliated (Liberty University School of Education, 2017b).

8. *Intrinsic motivation* – Performing an action or behavior for the pure enjoyment of the activity itself. The inspiration for acting on intrinsic motivation is found in the action itself (Deci & Ryan, 2001).
9. *Member check* – Also known as informant feedback or respondent validation, it is a technique used by researchers to help improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability (also known as applicability, internal validity, or fittingness) of a study (Moustakas, 1994).
10. *Methodology* – The procedures in qualitative research that are characterized as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher's experience in collecting and analyzing the data (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).
11. *Ontology* – A philosophical assumption based upon the nature of reality and its characteristics and has multiple realities as seen through many views (Moustakas, 1994).
12. *Phenomenology* – A study that describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. The description of these experiences consists of what they experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).
13. *Qualitative research* – Research that uses interpretive/theoretical frameworks to inform the study of research problems. The research problems address the meaning individuals or groups give to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).
14. *Self-determination theory (SDT)* – A motivational theory of personality, development, and social processes that examines how social contexts and individual differences facilitate different types of motivation, especially autonomous motivation and controlled

motivation, and in turn predict learning, performance, experience, and psychological health (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991, 1994, 2001).

15. *Self-efficacy* – The belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task (Bandura, 1997).
16. *Social constructivism* – Social constructivism is described as individuals seeking an understanding of the world in which they live and work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).
17. *Social Security Administration (SSA)* – The governmental agency that determines the retirement age of U.S. society (U.S. Government, 2017).
18. *Stage eight* – The final stage of Erikson's (1959, 1968) eight stages of development. It is the final stage of late adulthood and explains the identity development of advanced age adults. The name of stage eight is Integrity versus Despair.
19. *Transcendental phenomenology* – A philosophical approach to qualitative research developed by Husserl (1931) that seeks to understand human experience that emerges from the lived experiences of the individuals (Moustakas, 1994).

Summary

Chapter One presented the background and purpose of this study investigating the motivational and persistence experiences of advanced age individuals who decided to pursue doctoral studies (Cross, 2013; Hannon, 2015). Most of the research on doctoral persistence spans all ages, but no research specifically investigates the unique experiences of advanced age individuals who pursued a doctoral degree. This research study was designed to discover their motivation and the reasons for their persistence and motivation to return to college at an advanced age. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of advanced age individuals who were or are now pursuing a doctoral degree. Deci

and Ryan's (2001) self-determination theory was the central framework for this study investigating the persistence and motivation of advanced age individuals persisting in a doctoral program. Stage eight, Integrity versus Despair, of Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development added substance to the framework of this study by investigating the experiences of these advanced age learners who chose not to despair. The descriptions provided by the advanced age adults of their lived experiences provided an excellent resource of motivation and persistence for others who may wish to pursue a doctoral degree. This study gave a voice to the advanced age learners. Colleges and universities may use this research to promote advanced age learners, to promote their graduate programs, and to better support this subgroup of their student population.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Research revealed that 56% of individuals in the 25 to 50 age range started but did not finish bachelor's or master's degree studies (Collins, 2015). Research by Fain (2015) echoed the same results. Fain reported figures of 35 million enrolled in college programs who never finished a degree. While doctoral student persistence has been studied in the 25 to 50 age range (Hannon, 2015), research was lacking on why advanced age individuals, 62 years and older, see the relevance of a doctoral degree.

This chapter explains the theoretical framework and related literature that informed this study. Deci and Ryan's (1985, 1991, 1994) SDT and Erikson's (1959, 1968) theory of psychosocial development (stage eight) served as the theoretical framework to investigate and describe the persistence and motivation of individuals who returned to academia to pursue further education. The literature addressed many of the questions an advanced age individual may have before enrolling in a graduate program. This chapter sheds light on the influences that affect the decision to pursue doctoral studies, the obstacles and handicaps individuals face including societal attitudes and lack of support from family and friends, and information on choosing a college or university and program of study. On the positive side, studies were conducted to find what motivated students to persist and successfully obtain the degree. Handling role conflict, acceptance by classmates, developing an identity when pursuing an online doctoral degree, working with younger classmates, and achieving doctoral success were questions to which advanced age learners wanted answers.

Foremost in the research was the motivation for returning to academia and to what advanced age individuals attributed their persistence and motivation to continue the doctoral journey to completion. This chapter sheds light on these subjects.

Theoretical Framework

To study the motivation and persistence of advanced age individuals who returned to academia to pursue their dream, despite obstacles and setbacks, two theories guided this study and its findings and provided the theoretical framework. The intent was not to summarize what is already in the field, but to give all readers a clear theoretical approach to the phenomenon this study was researching (Maxwell, 2005). The two theories forming the theoretical framework of this study are Deci and Ryan's (1985, 1994, 2001) theory of self-determination (SDT) and stage eight, Integrity versus Despair, of Erikson's (1959, 1968) theory of psychosocial development.

Self-Determination Theory

The main theory in the theoretical framework of this study is the SDT by Deci and Ryan (1985, 1994, 2001). Self-determination played a major role in the persistence and motivation of individuals who returned to academia. Deci and Ryan's (1985, 1994, 2001) SDT is a motivational theory of personality, development, and social processes that examined how social contexts and individual differences facilitated different types of motivation, especially autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. The types of motivation then predicted learning, performance, experience, and psychological health. Thus, the purpose of this study is to describe the motivations of advanced age individuals in doctoral studies.

SDT proposes that all human beings have three basic psychological needs – the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness – the satisfaction of which is essential for effective functioning and wellness (Ryan et al., 2009). Satisfaction of these basic needs promoted the

optimal motivational traits and states of autonomous motivation and intrinsic aspirations, which facilitated psychological health and effective engagement with the world of academia. Therefore, this study investigated the persistence and motivation of advanced age individuals who had the persistence and motivation to undergo a doctoral study.

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1994, 2001) is based also upon intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which aimed to explain an individual's goal-directed behavior. Therefore, activities motivate people, allowing them to form and enjoy good relationships with their fellow classmates and professors. Deci and Ryan's (1985, 1994, 2001) SDT theory applies to the realm of education and its value, an interest in learning, and confidence in one's own capacities and attributes. When this theory is applied to advanced age learners, it examines the intrinsic motivation and internalized values that drive persistence in their educational pursuit despite obstacles. Lending support to the SDT was another theory, which added another lens to examine the experiences of advanced age individuals. This theory was Erikson's (1959, 1968) stage eight, Integrity versus Despair, in his psychosocial development theory.

Erikson's Eight Stages of Development

Lending support to Deci and Ryan's (1985, 1994, 2001) theory was Erikson's (1959, 1968) psychosocial development theory with eight stages of development. Stage eight, Integrity versus Despair, is the late adulthood stage that explains the identity development of individuals from the mid-60s to end of life. Miller (2011) explained that in the final stage of Erikson's theory, the advanced age individual must live with what he or she has built over a lifetime. Ideally, they achieved integrity, which involved the acceptance of the limitations of life, a sense of being part of a history that included previous generations, a sense of having the wisdom of the ages, and a final integration of all the previous stages (Miller, 2011). However, the opposite of

integrity is despair — the regret for what one has done or not done with one's life, fear of approaching death, and disgust with oneself for not achieving one's dreams (Miller, 2011, p. 156). This study investigated the motivational and persistence experiences of doctoral students and those who completed their doctoral degree in Erikson's (1959, 1968) stage eight, Integrity versus Despair. When this theory is applied to advanced age learners, it explains the persistence and motivation driving their desire to achieve something they had failed to accomplish earlier in life, especially with their heightened awareness of the approach of life's end. Erikson's (1959, 1968) theory served as a helpful framework to explore and describe the experiences of advanced age learners obtaining a doctoral degree in a unique stage of life not specifically examined in studies on doctoral persistence.

These two theories provided the theoretical framework for this study investigating the lived experiences of advanced age adults who pursued a doctoral degree. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe, via Deci and Ryan (1985, 1994, 2001) and Erikson (1959, 1968), the persistence and motivation behind the lived experiences of advanced age learners pursuing a doctorate. The motivation to pursue and complete a doctoral degree required grit, motivation, persistence, and identity development (Cross, 2013). This qualitative transcendental research study may prove valuable to anyone who is considering the same doctoral journey and to those who seek to foster their persistence. The literature related to this study highlighted some of the obstacles, problems, and successes that any individual pursuing a doctoral degree might encounter.

Related Literature

There is increasing attention on doctoral persistence, but the research does not specifically focus on advanced age individuals who had undertaken a doctoral program. Many

of those barriers or obstacles were related to poor identity and lack of self-efficacy, resulting in a self-perception that they were unable to attend college and complete a degree. The voice of these advanced age individuals, their lived experiences, their obstacles, and their persistence, motivation, and self-determination to succeed needed describing and addressing in the literature. This review of the literature addresses the institutional and personal challenges advanced age individuals face and the challenges the typical doctoral student experiences in his or her journey.

Institutional Factors

A synopsis of some of the research articles on student persistence centered on the college environment. Veal et al. (2012) credited their previous educational experiences and degrees, their life experiences, and a welcoming university environment as factors leading to success and well-being. Feinstein and Peck (2008) were concerned as to why some students succeeded in school while others did not. Feinstein and Peck concluded that educational systems should be more flexible and change to avoid rigid tracking or unnecessary stigmatization of students. If policy and practice were supportive of the students, then, the students would succeed and experience well-being.

Cross (2013) researched the amount of grit required for online or nontraditional students to reach the completion stage and academic success. Cross found that grit and success were directly related to student GPA, the number of hours spent weekly on studying, and the student's age. Mature adults were more likely to persist to completion and enjoy success and well-being (Cross, 2013).

School and degree program. School and program selection played a role in persistence. Branch-Mueller and Schultz-Jones (2017) recommended that anyone considering going back to academia for a doctoral degree should start the process by deciding what he or she would

ultimately do with the degree. Once that was decided, then, it was time to find a program that offered the degree and expertise desired. Mason-Williams and Washburn-Moses (2016) created a mnemonic to aid in choosing the degree and program. It is DOCTORAL — Decide, Outcome, Consider, Time, Opportunities, Research, Ask, and Look (pp. 75–81). Their mnemonic offers advice to consider before undertaking the cost of a doctoral program. The advice is:

D — Decide what are your specific interests.

O — Reflect on the desired outcome of the degree.

C — Consider what is involved and what you must give up working on the degree.

T — Consider the time involved in obtaining the degree.

O — What opportunities will be available when you finish the degree?

R — What are the research funding opportunities and college costs?

A — Ask lots of questions so you know what is involved in the process.

L — Look at the requirements for the degree and what universities offer what you desire.

On the other hand, Pivik (2018) offered financial, mental, and emotional advice for anyone considering going to graduate school. Pivik gave reasons why not to go to graduate school such as (a) competition, (b) stress, (c) cost, and (d) no guarantee of higher salaries. However, Pivik countered with the pros of a doctoral degree such as (a) greater earning power, (b) advancing a career, (c) upgrading education, and (d) wanting an academic challenge (Pivik, 2018). His last advice was to determine the cost and graduate debt before embarking upon a doctoral journey (Pivik, 2018).

Choosing a college is not as easy as it used to be according to Education Dynamics (2017). According to Education Dynamics, the main reasons students chose a college were as follows: the college had a very good academic reputation, their college graduates received good

jobs, the college offered financial assistance, the cost of the college was attainable, the atmosphere of the campus was visited and liked, the size of the college was appropriate for their needs, a high percentage of students finished their degrees and graduated from this college, and the college was close to home base.

Other factors to consider should be the types of degrees being offered by the college. The college should offer Education Specialist (Ed.S.), Doctor of Education (Ed.D.), or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees. The following types of study should also be available: full time, part time, online, in-class, or blended learning (Griffith College, 2017; Kanar, 2014; Pivik, 2018).

Patel (2017) found research stating that only 50% of graduates were obtaining positions for which they were trained. Patel recommended choosing a university and degree program that in the end would be worth the time, energy, and money one invested into the program and would make the college experience worthwhile (Education Dynamics, 2017; Kanar, 2014; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Pivik, 2018).

Antczak (2014) suggested that choosing the right university and degree program resulted in (a) a sense of accomplishment, (b) better job prospects, (c) personal growth, (d) a way to keep busy, and (e) a way to contribute to society. This is important for advanced age learners as their time to invest in years of study is shorter than a younger adult, and they want to be able to reach completion and not be one of the dropout statistics.

Choosing the right degree program and the university that best suits one's goals required considerable research and thought. Learning all one can about various colleges and what each had to offer is important in making the right choice for a doctoral degree (Kanar, 2014). Choosing the college that fits the advanced age individual's needs is important in ensuring that

discouragement does not take place and the individual will have the persistence and motivation to finish the degree. All the literature researched will be useful in understanding the experiences of the advanced age individuals in this study. The persistence and motivation by advanced age individuals to persist to obtain a doctoral degree should be the impetus for other individuals who desire to embarking on the doctoral journey and to succeed to completion.

Too old to learn. Advanced age individuals who return to academia to pursue doctoral degrees may face the societal attitude of being too old to learn (Jindal, 2014; Marcus, 2013). It can be very discouraging when on the first day in a classroom the professor walks in, surveys the class, takes one look at someone and says, “What are you doing here? Why are you pursuing a Ph. D. or Ed.D. at your age?” (*Guardian*, 2014, p. 363). Many consider higher education in later life as pointless (*Guardian*, 2014; Jamieson, 2007; Robinson & Lakin, 2007). Jamieson (2007) studied middle-age adults considered too old to undertake higher education and found that the reason for higher education study in middle-life was to transition from work to retirement by having something meaningful to do. Jamieson’s conclusion was that there was no point in these middle-age individuals studying higher education unless they were making up for opportunities lost earlier in life. Robinson and Lakin (2007) discovered three barriers, which kept older adults out of education: structural barriers; attitudinal barriers; and demographic barriers of age, gender, race/ethnicity, income, or geography.

To counter this societal attitude of being too old to learn, some research studies were conducted to demonstrate that it is never too late to learn (Jindal, 2014; Juznic et al., 2006; Marcus, 2013; Warhurst & Black, 2015; Wilson, 2006). Researchers found that older individuals were capable of learning, but they needed to learn in a different way: incrementally (Jindal, 2014; Marcus, 2013). Thus, by building up in a step-by-step fashion, older adults can

achieve the same results as younger individuals. Juznic et al. (2006) wanted to dispel the prevailing belief that computers and the Internet were used mainly by the younger generations because they were more technology literate. Their research found only one third of the active lifestyle seniors were active Internet users. However, they did find that the more highly educated seniors were more likely to use the Internet and that age was not a factor in determining Internet usage. Therefore, they concluded that “age has nothing to do with teaching old dogs new tricks” (Juznic et al., 2006, p. 4). Wilson’s (2006) research resulted in a book proving that no one is too old to learn. His study researched the brain waves in relation to IQ and found that IQ remains the same as the adult ages; therefore, the older adult was still capable of learning.

Because literature reported that later-career workers received very little formal occupational training, Warhurst and Black (2015) conducted a qualitative investigation of later-career managerial workers who received occupational training and additional on-the-job training. The results of the study revealed that these workers learned extensively, were more productive in their jobs, and were willing to work beyond retirement age. Their study revealed the value of continued learning and development even for an aging work force; thus, proving it is never too late to learn. This may be one of the reasons advanced age learners returned to academia.

While research was lacking on advanced age individuals pursuing doctoral degrees, the literature did address older individuals going back to school to earn a bachelor’s or master’s degree. The Super Scholar (2017) contacted colleges and universities in search of advanced age scholars. The results of their search yielded 10 advanced age adults who were featured in the article on the oldest people to earn a degree. These super scholars were:

- Leo Plass, 99 — in 2011, earned an associate degree from Eastern Oregon University.

- Nola Ochs, 98 — in 2007, earned a degree in general studies from Fort Hays State University.
- Twila Boston, 98 — graduated from Utah State University with a bachelor's in American Studies.
- Allan Stewart, 97 — in 2012, earned a master's degree in clinical science from Southern Cross University in New South Wales.
- Cliff Dadson, 93 — earned a Bachelor of Art Open Degree in Arts from Open University in Britain.
- Wally Taibleson, 90 — in 2016, earned a master's degree in education from California State University.
- Bertie Gladwin, 90 — earned a master's degree in intelligence history from Buckingham University in Britain.
- Mary Fasano, 89 — in 1997, earned an associate degree from the Extension School at Harvard.
- Charlie Ball, 89 — earned a bachelor's degree from Arkansas Tech.
- Anne Martindell, 87 — in 2002, earned an undergraduate and honorary degree from Smith College.
- Willadene Zedan, 85 — in 2013, earned a bachelor's degree from Marian University in Wisconsin.

All the top 10 advanced age individuals in the Super Scholar (2017) article had their high school or college education interrupted due to unusual circumstances such as World War II, marriage, or family problems. Another exceptional adult who should have been in the Super Scholar (2017) list was the great-grandmother studied by Berenson (2015). This great-

grandmother went back to college to heal her broken heart. The advanced age individual Berenson studied was Jean Kops, 87, who returned to college after her husband of 50 years died. The reason for returning to college was to take her mind off her husband's death. In 2015, Kops graduated from the University of Nebraska with a bachelor's degree.

Antczak (2014) researched individuals over 50 who went back to college to earn a degree. One participant was laid off from his English teaching job, so he went back to college at age 59 to get a master's degree and, subsequently, landed a job at a college in Washington State. Another participant dropped out of college twice before finally obtaining her bachelor's degree in English at the age of 67. Another received an associate degree in nursing at age 54.

It is encouraging and admirable to read the research and studies on both middle age individuals and advanced age individuals who returned to academia to finish an education started many years earlier. However, there was no research on advanced age individuals who had the persistence and motivation to return to academia to pursue a doctoral degree. This study was designed to determine why advanced age individuals were pursuing doctoral degrees and to what they attributed their persistence.

Educational system. Many researchers highlighted obstacles relating to the educational system. Hannon (2015) found that the educational system was preventing older adults from returning to college for more education because the system catered only to the adults in their 20s (Hannon, 2015). These results were also found by Buglione (2012), Collins (2015), Devos et al. (2017), and Feinstein and Peck (2008). Hannon's (2015) study suggested that colleges needed to rethink their educational system because more people were working well into their 80s. Buglione (2012) also recommended colleges revamp their programs and services to support the online or nontraditional students and make them feel more included in the educational process.

Feinstein and Peck found that the structural rigidity of the educational system led to more failures, and the results of their study called for revamping the educational programs in the colleges and universities to encourage older adults to return to academia.

In addition to rigidity of the system and the need for revamping college programs, researchers found that advanced age individuals lacked support from their universities, the professors, and their classmates (Buglione, 2012; Collins, 2015; Dortch, 2016; Phipps, Prieto, & Ndinguri, 2013). Buglione (2012), Collins (2015), and Devos et al. (2017) recommended that doctoral students have a peer support group to assist with the logistics of the program. Phipps et al. (2013) discovered that college professors played a relevant role in the success of a college doctoral program. Dortch (2016) found that uninvolved faculty, difficult dissertation committees, and inability to choose a topic that they were passionate about were failures of the educational system. Universities also failed to provide online and nontraditional students with support services that the traditional student had access to such as counseling services, health services, and the extracurricular activities they enjoyed as part of their college education (Buglione, 2012; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016).

The United States Census Bureau (2015) predicted that by 2030 the population of Americans 65 and older will grow to 72 million, compared to the 40.2 million in the 2010 census. Colleges and universities will not be prepared to educate these advanced age individuals (Hannon, 2015). Feinstein and Peck (2008) believed that the educational system can develop programs in which diverse students have better relationships with the professors, doctoral committees, and classmates. With redeveloped programs, better professors-to-student relationships, and support groups with their peers, Buglione (2012) and Feinstein and Peck (2008) suggested that not only the 25 to 50-age group would benefit but advanced age

individuals would also be more inclined to return to academia. This should include providing incentives for advanced age individuals to return to higher education and experience integrity, rather than despair, stage eight of Erikson's Integrity versus Despair (Erikson, 1959, 1968).

With an improved educational system, not only would older adults return to academia, but they would also increase the percentage of students who persist to completion.

Individual Factors

Besides institutional challenges and negative societal attitudes, there were other obstacles preventing older adults from obtaining these advanced degrees. Empirical research on advanced age individuals and the problems they encountered in their pursuit of improving their educational skills was nonexistent. The related literature presented here focuses on younger individuals, but the problems they encountered can also apply to advanced age individuals. Advanced age individuals should consider the importance of self-efficacy, identity development, family dynamics, persistence and motivation needed to obtain a degree, and the attitude of well-being needed to be successful in the completion of a doctorate. The following discussion highlights some of the personal obstacles encountered by adults returning to academia.

Self-efficacy. Bandura (1989, 1997) found in his research that individuals with high self-efficacy were healthier, more effective, and more successful than individuals with low self-efficacy. Buglione's (2012) research found that a lack of identity development was one of the major reasons that online students had poor academic outcomes and poor degree attainment. Improved identity development led to higher graduation rates. Collins (2015) found that students were unprepared for the time sacrifice with family, work, and sleep. To complete a doctoral program involved a lot of motivation, self-efficacy, and mental toughness to achieve the degree.

However, Collins (2015) found that research and writing courses in the doctoral program would prepare students for the self-efficacy and challenges of the dissertation process.

Dortch's (2016) research found that challenges to identity development, self-efficacy, and self-perception included a lack of involved faculty, poor dissertation committees, and the students' inability to ask for help. To overcome these and to increase self-efficacy, one must seek faculty and peer support, ask for help when instructions are not clear, and master all tasks. Poor identity development was discovered by Erikson's (1959, 1968) research of the early years of childhood. He found that poor identity development occurred from the sum of all the earlier years when the child was forced to become like the people he depended on (Erikson, 1959, 1968).

Waterman (1982) found the most extensive advances in identity development took place during the time an individual spends in college. Therefore, professors needed to encourage positive identity development by providing equality in the classroom, self-efficacy, and self-perception of the ability to succeed.

Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2017) researched doctoral persistence in women with multiple roles and identities (e.g., wife, mother, caregiver, professional educator). Women needed to realize that when the college journey begins, they do not have to choose between the family/mother identity and an academic identity. There were resources available to help women intertwine multiple identities into one identity that was compatible with the role of scholar and mother. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) also noted the importance of a strong marital relationship to doctoral persistence.

The literature also suggested that individuals who lack self-efficacy struggled to be self-directed and self-disciplined and were unable to complete the dissertation process (Kelley &

Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Pivik (2018) found that to maintain self-efficacy and self-confidence, individuals needed to find the right program and attend classes for all the right reasons. Then graduate work would be rewarding and improve self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Varney (2010) found that a positive self-efficacy led to the most progress in dissertation completion. Students who highly valued their doctoral program had the highest self-efficacy. Mason (2012) found that lack of self-determination and motivation affected identity, self-efficacy, and self-perception. Without these, students failed in the doctoral program.

Phipps et al. (2013) and Ross-Gordon (2011) found that older, reentry adults lacked self-confidence in their ability compared to the younger students. Ross-Gordon (2011) also discovered that age and position in life in addition to juggling life's roles led to older adults needing different learning styles, structure, and more flexibility.

Educational attainment. Universities that improved their educational system to attract adults of all ages should see an increase in the number of students who begin and persist to completion. Studies were undertaken to see if there was an improvement in educational attainment statistics (Beder, 1990; Messersmith & Schulenburg, 2008; Turtle, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Messersmith and Schulenburg (2008) and Turtle (2016) studied student expectations with the idea that high student expectations would result in satisfactory college completion. However, they found that in many cases, educational expectations were not met. Data from a longitudinal study by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2002) examined the relationship between inability to meet educational expectations and demographic characteristics, average grades in high school, and the parents' educational level. These factors were strong indicators affecting the ability of a student to graduate from college by age 25 or 26. If these

factors influenced the younger age group, it is possible these same factors would affect middle age and advanced age individuals who returned to college in pursuit of a degree (Turtle, 2016).

Age. Older adults who returned to academia may deal with situations that the younger students may not be experiencing (Beder, 1990; Turtle, 2016). Older students often felt that they were the bottom of the academic ladder because the younger students seemed to be smarter. Further, older students often had to deal with being older than the professor and felt out of place (Turtle, 2016). Beder (1990) found that older students perceived that academia was too complicated for them to handle and there were no other adults their age in the class. These obstacles were more overwhelming than many older students could handle. These findings may explain why research on advanced age individuals pursuing doctoral degrees was lacking. Older individuals may feel that they could not keep up with the younger students and that attainment of a doctoral education was beyond them (Turtle, 2016). The older adults felt that age, family, and position in life were a hindrance to their ability to attain an advanced degree.

Family and position in life. Characteristics exhibited by reentry adults, which distinguished them from the younger college students, were circumstances due to their age and position in life. Age was a major factor in research studies by Beder (1990), Phipps et al. (2013), Ross-Gordon (2011), and Ryan and Bauman (2016). Age influenced intentions to go back to school and learning. Older adults perceived that college was too complicated and they would not be able to keep up with the younger students (Beder, 1990; Phipps et al., 2013; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Ross-Gordon (2011) also found that reentry adults had a lack of self-confidence, structure, flexibility, and preferences due to their social and cultural backgrounds. These factors influenced their ability to learn and their self-confidence (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Family problems were often listed as an obstacle for returning to college; family problems counted as one of the causes of attrition with college students (Angielski, 2017; Boone, 2013; Collins, 2015; Pivik, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Knight, 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Students who returned to college had to juggle responsibilities of work, a family, and classwork. For many, especially women, it becomes overwhelming. The responsibilities for caring for the children, taking them to school, attending their school events, cooking the meals, cleaning the house, doing the laundry, maintaining a relationship with their husband, and doing classwork becomes more than one person can handle and do it well. Something must give, and usually it was the homework and attending classes (Angielski, 2017; Collins, 2015). Many researchers recommended that students, especially doctoral students where the classwork was more rigorous, build a support system with spouse and family members (Angielski, 2017; Boone, 2013; Collins, 2015; Pivik, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).

Pregnancy and childbirth were also obstacles that made it difficult for female students to continue in college (Angielski, 2017; Collins, 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2015). When female students discovered they were pregnant, that was the time to build a support system with family members and friends to help care for the new baby (Angielski, 2017; Collins, 2015). After childbirth, women are not in the best condition and they have diapers to change, feeding the baby, and sleepless nights with an unhappy baby (Angielski, 2017; Boone, 2013; Collins, 2015; Pivik, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). While advanced age individuals are not having babies, they may be raising their grandchildren or providing childcare for their children. It takes a strong marriage relationship to overcome the challenges of caring for children and grandchildren while pursuing a doctoral degree (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2015).

In addition to family problems, other circumstances involve juggling multiple life roles (Ross-Gordon, 2011). These other life roles could be, but are not limited to, a job, a spouse or partner, children, caregiver for aging parents, political leader, and member of community organizations. If age, family problems, and position in life were major obstacles for returning to college for younger students, an advanced age individual would experience the same obstacles when trying to decide if further education was obtainable.

Ethnicity and gender. Ethnicity and gender are obstacles prevalent in all sectors of society including academia (Carter et al., 2013; Gopaul 2015; Mansfield, Welton, Lee, & Young, 2010; Rodgers, 2013; Ryan & Bauman, 2016; Zalberg, 2015). According to Rodgers (2013), ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom and the United States were studied and compared. Rodgers (2013) concluded that the ethnic disadvantage was a result of chronic stress associated with living in minority neighborhoods. In a gender research study by Zalberg (2015), he discovered male participants were not speaking to a female researcher because she was a woman doing the research study.

In their research study of educational attainment by age, race, gender, and ethnicity, Ryan and Bauman (2016) discovered that women 25 years of age and older had a higher rate of college completion than men. Their statistics revealed Asians outpaced all others in obtaining degrees beyond a bachelor's (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Next came Caucasians, then African Americans, and last was the Hispanic race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). A qualitative study by Mansfield et al. (2010) on female doctoral students resulted in the female students stating that their gender, race, age, and sexuality were a deficit rather than an asset in the strong male-centered doctoral culture. Brown and Watson (2010) researched eight female doctoral students and found that they received less encouragement than their male counterparts while completing the dissertation.

Despite advances by the women's movement for equality, inequality was still prevalent for women in doctoral studies (Carter et al., 2013). In the academic world, men's clothing choices were not subject to value judgments while women's clothing, makeup, and jewelry were indicators of the wearer's morality (Carter et al., 2013, p. 340). According to Gopaul (2015), Jain (2015), Mansfield et al. (2010), and Webber and Canche (2015), studies on race and gender inequality resulted in the same findings: lower salaries, poorer job market, difficulty in publishing, and inaccessible to research funding for women. Mansfield et al. (2010) found that while women may secure a job in the male-dominated market, the pay was considerably less. Webber and Canche (2015) recommended that individuals should take into consideration the inequalities of gender, race, and discipline of study when deciding whether to pursue graduate studies and if they will be able to overcome these costs.

Mansfield et al. (2010) researched female students in doctoral programs and found that they faced more challenges than their male peers. Female students reported their race, class, gender, age, national origin, and language were considered deficits to their success. While they were concerned about future academic employment, the female students reported success in their studies and a feeling of well-being (Mansfield et al., 2010). Schmidt and Umans (2014) researched experiences of well-being among female doctoral students and how they perceived their level of well-being. Some of their findings include the following: (a) well-being occurred from self-perception; (b) well-being was a high priority for older females; (c) structure added to stability and well-being; (d) supportive colleagues aided well-being; and (e) clear instruction and good working conditions contributed to well-being. However, the most important factor for well-being was the availability and mentoring style of their supervisor (Schmidt & Umans, 2014). Haynes et al. (2012) also observed female doctoral students struggling with their well-

being due to the conflict of multiple roles, trying to develop coping skills, and at the same time, maintaining social support. Haynes et al. (2012) found that female students had difficulties in trying to balance multiple roles. This led to stress, which was noted as being at the core of the graduate student experience. Some of their findings were as follows: (a) well-being occurred from a sense of self-worth due to successes or failures, (b) younger graduate students achieved well-being through friends while older students used exercise, (c) a positive advisor relationship created well-being, and (d) well-being occurred from a sense of accomplishment (Haynes et al., 2012).

The article written by Ryan and Siebens (2009) for the U.S. Census Bureau reported that fewer women completed doctoral degrees than do men, and women took longer to earn their doctorates (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Ryan & Siebens, 2009). The delay in time for earning a doctorate resulted in making the pursuit of a doctoral degree less attractive and giving women less time to contribute in a professional role (Maher et al., 2004; Ryan & Siebens, 2009). In response to these statistics, two phenomenological studies explored the lived experiences of female doctoral students (Mansfield et al., 2010; Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram, & Frels, 2014). Findings were as follows: (a) constraints within the organizational culture; (b) personal and familial sacrifice; (c) struggles with identity; (d) a questioning of self; and (e) poor experiences with mentoring (Mansfield et al., 2010).

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2014) also conducted a similar study examining the lived experiences of eight female doctoral students (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Their lived experiences varied due to age, culture, and socioeconomic differences plus balancing their lives as wives, mothers, and/or professionals (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Their findings included the following: (a) difficult to manage time and lack of time management skills; (b) adjustment in

lifestyle and interaction with family and friends; (c) needed intrinsic motivation to pursue a doctoral degree for its own sake; (d) needed extrinsic motivation from family and friends to continue the pursuit; (e) discouragement due to self-distraction and loneliness; (f) lack of a support system; (g) needed family members to motivate them; and (h) intrinsic motivation of faith in God was more important than external motivation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). These studies demonstrate that not all lived experiences have the same results.

Finances. Finances played a significant role in one's ability to attend college and persist to completion (Angielski, 2017; Canon & Gascon, 2013; Economist, 2016; Jain, 2015; Pivik, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, Swezey, & Wicks, 2014). Some individuals started college but the company they worked for downsized and they were left without a job, forcing them to choose between paying the rent and putting food on the table or continuing their education (Angielski, 2017). Pivik (2018) stated that financial aid might be available through scholarships, grants, graduate assistant positions, family loans, insurance scholarships, and credit cards. Pivik also recommended students should explore all avenues before discontinuing the college studies. Despite poverty, an individual with persistence, motivation, and some creative funding, often found a way to continue the educational journey (Pivik, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014).

Health. Serious health problems and declining mental ability were other obstacles affecting an advanced age student's ability to remain in the classroom and continue undergraduate and graduate studies (Phipps et al., 2013). Phipps et al. (2013) discovered that many adults were reluctant to go back to college during their middle age years. Attitudes and self-perceptions of health and mental stability affecting one's ability to learn and succeed

alongside the younger students were reasons for this reluctance (Beder, 1990; Phipps et al., 2013).

Value of a doctoral degree. In addition to worrying about one's health and mental ability, the value of a doctoral degree has been the subject of much debate and whether the salaries and benefits of the Ph.D. or Ed.D. offset the costs to obtain it. Adding to the obstacles facing advanced age individuals, as well as adults of all ages, was the concern of whether to pursue a doctoral degree. Boulos (2016), Donner (2015), Economist (2016), Fahlman (2015), Findlen (2014), Jain (2015), Mansfield et al. (2010), Smallwood (2001), and Woulfe (2016) examined the pros and cons of obtaining a doctoral degree. Some of the research studies were positive about the value of the Ph.D. or Ed.D. while others found the opposite.

Examining the labor market, Boulos (2016) found that individuals with a Ph.D. and an Ed.D. were overqualified and had difficulty finding jobs. Donner (2015) found that these degrees had no more earning power than someone with a master's degree and that an individual would be earning as much or more if he or she had simply stayed in the workforce during the time it took to earn the advanced degree. Fahlman (2015) found that a doctoral degree had lost its value as many companies were happier hiring mostly people with master's degrees and did not care if the individual had a doctoral degree.

Woulfe (2016) found that a master's degree was a prerequisite if an individual wanted to advance in a profession such as nursing. However, Woulfe found that obtainment of a doctoral degree was not more advantageous for advancing in the profession and not more financially beneficial. Smallwood's (2001) research revealed the same results, with most jobs not needing researching scholars. Jain (2015), a Ph.D. professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said that the overall value of a Ph.D. or Ed.D. was diminishing due to oversupply of doctoral

degree graduates compared to the number of positions available. Jain (2015) further stated that there was a marginal salary differential between bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

Therefore, the cost of obtaining a Ph.D. or Ed.D. was not recouped in the job market. Mansfield et al. (2010) also discovered that female doctoral graduates were concerned about future academic employment after completion of their doctoral program. Even though they may secure a job in the male-dominated market, the pay could be considerably less despite equal workloads (Mansfield et al., 2010). Economist (2016) echoed the same findings as the above researchers:

- a doctoral degree may offer no greater financial benefit than a master's degree and may even reduce earnings;
- the job market was not strong enough to support the number of doctoral degrees being earned;
- transferring doctoral skills to the job market was difficult;
- hard work and brilliance were not enough to succeed; and
- the individual would be better off doing something else.

Findlen (2014) found that there is a poor job market for doctoral students, especially in the humanities and other antiquated and obsolete subjects. Because of the bleak job market for Ph.D. and Ed.D. graduates, Findlen's (2014) advice to someone contemplating graduate school is as follows:

- Do not go unless you have good financial resources or attend a well-funded program;
- You should only go because you want to have a unique educational experience;
- If you decide to go to graduate school, determine how much time you want to invest in this intellectual advancement project;
- Prepare yourself for jobs that may not use your expertise;

- Having a Ph.D. or Ed.D. means two things: you know a lot about a little; and you know better than most people how to look things up (Findlen, 2014, p. 3).

All the above obstacles were key factors in why someone of advanced age would choose not to undertake the pursuit of a doctoral degree. Because there was little or no empirical research on the reasons advanced age individuals pursued a doctoral degree, this study is pertinent to describing the factors that motivated individuals to pursue and persist in obtaining a doctoral a degree.

Identity, self-efficacy, and self-perception. The importance of identity development, self-efficacy, and self-perception has been well researched (Bandura, 1997; Buglione, 2012; Collins, 2015; Dortch, 2016; Erikson, 1959, 1968; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; Mason, 2012; Phipps et al., 2013; Pivik, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Varney, 2010; Waterman, 1982). The lack of identity, self-efficacy, and self-perception affects one's ability to deal with and succeed in academic programs.

The above researchers concluded that to succeed in doctoral studies, adults had to be motivated to learn and maintain self-efficacy. The problems that advanced age learners face may not be the same as the problems identified with the young to middle age adults. Advanced age individuals do not have the problems of pregnancy, caring for a newborn, rearing young children, or losing a job due to downsizing. However, advanced age learners do need marital support and the support of friends and family, a positive identity, and self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to pursue and complete doctoral studies. Professors and universities need to be aware of this and provide incentives to advanced age individuals, so they remain confident in their identity, self-efficacy, and self-perception of their ability to learn (Varney,

2010). Because the literature and research did not focus on the advanced age learners, the purpose of this study was to hear advanced age individuals describe their persistence, motivation, and the problems encountered to pursue doctoral studies to completion. Their persistence and motivation in completion of a degree may be an encouragement to others and pertinent to reducing the dropout rate in colleges.

Dropouts

Every year, hundreds of thousands of young adults who enrolled in colleges and universities dropped out before receiving a degree (Angielski, 2017; Boone, 2013; Budden, Hsing, Budden, & Hall, 2010; Buglione, 2012; Canon & Gascon, 2013; Collins, 2015; Devos et al., 2017; Economist, 2016; Fain, 2015; Feinstein & Peck, 2008; Golde, 2000; Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; King & Williams, 2014; Lindner, Dooley, & Murphy, 2001; Mason, 2012; Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Nettles & Millet, 2006; Phipps et al., 2013; Rodgers, 2013; Smallwood, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Varney, 2010). Researchers reported multiple reasons individuals do not persist to completion.

Some of the reasons people quit college and never received a certificate or degree were (a) inability to balance work and study, (b) unprepared for classes or missed classes, (c) unexpected personal problems such as pregnancy, sickness, or health problems, (d) lack of motivation, (e) lack of family, faculty, and peer support, and (f) financial problems (Angielski, 2017; Buglione, 2012; Canon & Gascon, 2013; Economist, 2016; Fain, 2015; Mason, 2012).

Phipps et al. (2013) discovered the following reasons for the high dropout rate: (a) adults considered college too complicated for them to handle; (b) no one their age was attending classes; (c) adults had health problems; (d) adults considered they had declining mental ability;

(e) adults feared risk of failure; and (f) adults had poor attitudes and self-perceptions about themselves as an achiever in college. The researchers discovered the adults' intentions were good and they had the desire to return to college, but they were unable to overcome their inhibitions, personal attributes, responsibilities, and personal obstacles such as poverty, race, and ethnicity (Feinstein & Peck, 2008; Phipps et al., 2013; Rodgers, 2013; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Attrition rates in college vary depending upon the course of study and the degree program. Researchers found the attrition rate ranged from a low of 40% to a high of 70% (Budden et al., 2010; Boone, 2013; Collins, 2015; Fain, 2015; Golde, 2000; Hagelskamp et al., 2013; King & Williams, 2014; Lindner et al., 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006; Varney, 2010). Fain (2015) discovered that more than 35 million Americans enrolled in a college or university at some point but never earned a degree or certificate. Boone (2013) found that at least 20% of the dropouts were 35 years old or older while first year university students had a departure rate of 25% (Budden et al., 2010; Hagelskamp et al., 2013). That means only 70% to 75% of enrollees finished their degrees.

Students in doctoral or higher education programs were the least likely to complete the program and receive a degree. As high as 70% of doctoral candidates completed all the studies except the dissertation (ABD), while only 30% finished the degree (Devos et al., 2017; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; Varney, 2010). Devos et al. (2017) and Kelley and Salisbury-Glennon (2016) studied the ABD phenomenon from multiple perspectives and concluded the following factors affected the ABD failure to complete the degree: (a) poor supervision, (b) lack of financial support, (c) lack of social and mentor support, (d) low self-efficacy, (e) inability to find

a field of study, and (f) inability to research a subject for their dissertation about which he or she was passionate.

Boone (2013), Buglione (2012), Fain (2015), and Smallwood (2001) offered advice for the mature student and universities to follow to prevent the high attrition rate: (a) redesign the Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs to be less scholarly and more marketable (Smallwood, 2001); (b) start with only one class to gain confidence; (c) build a support system with spouse and family members; (d) get tips on time management; (e) realize your weaknesses and work to overcome them; (f) seek tutoring and help with difficult assignments; (g) reset your priorities and computing habits; and (h) colleges provide advisors to help students with their complex needs.

The dropout rate of the 18 to 55 age individuals in American colleges and universities is disturbing (Hagelskamp et al., 2013). Researchers have unearthed many factors affecting the high attrition rate among students. Among these factors were lack of finances, demographics, poor academic achievement, lack of time, health problems, poor coping skills, poor self-perception, complicated courses, and lack of motivation, persistence, and self-determination. While research has concentrated on younger to middle age individuals, it has overlooked advanced age learners who value education. Research examining the lived experiences of advanced age individuals will be interesting to see if this group encountered the same obstacles as the younger demographics in pursuing a doctoral degree. The journey of the advanced age individuals and their will to overcome obstacles and persist to completion will serve as a model of motivation and persistence for individuals of all ages to emulate.

Persistence, Motivation, Self-determination

The key to success in academia or in any field of work is the individual's persistence, motivation, and self-determination to succeed, to perform to the best of his or her abilities, and to

complete the desired goal of a degree. Many research studies have been undertaken to ascertain the factors which affect persistence, motivation, and self-determination (Barnett, 2008; Cameron, Banko, & Pierce, 2001; Cross, 2013; Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Eisenberger, Pierce, & Cameron, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 1994, 2001; Devos et al., 2017; Golde, 2000; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; Lepper, Henderlong, & Gingras, 1999; Mason, 2012; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Veal et al., 2012).

The high attrition rate of doctoral students has been described as a “hidden crisis” (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000, p. 44). Mason (2012) found the following percentages of dropout rates for the disciplines varied: 27% of biological and physical science majors, 34% of engineering students, 47% of social science students, 52% of professional program students, 56% of humanities students, and 70% of online students did not finish their doctoral degrees (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; National Science Foundation [NSF], 2009). Veal et al. (2012) found statistics on ethnically diverse nursing students: only 24% of nurses in master’s programs were racially and ethnically diverse (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2009, p. 24) and 27% of students enrolled in baccalaureate programs were racially and ethnically diverse (National League for Nursing, 2012, p. 1).

Several research studies were conducted to determine if persistence affected the attrition and completion rates of graduate students (Golde, 2000; Mason, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Several researchers found that without motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) and self-determination, students would not persist to completion (Mason, 2012). Golde (2000) found that poor relationships with faculty and peers

were the main reasons for students losing their motivation and persistence to complete a doctoral program. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014) found that poverty and childhood losses were turned into positive attributes to motivate persistence in a doctoral program, highlighting the adage that individuals can overcome and rise above their background and challenges if they have the motivation and persistence to do so.

Also famous for his research on persistence is Tinto. In 1993, Tinto published his integration model of graduate persistence. Many follow his model today. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2017) researched women in online doctoral programs and found that success begins with conducting research with a positive attitude, followed with a good advisor or mentor, a supportive spouse, and interactions with faculty and classmates to support persistence.

Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) researched persistence in education and found (a) demographic variables of age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status, (b) personal attributes of learning style, intelligence, GPA, personality, and intrinsic motivation, (c) good motivation, (d) ability to cope with stress, (e) curriculum and program structure, (f) good relationship with faculty, advisors, and peers, and (g) finances to persist in pursuing the doctorate. All these contributed to conducting research with a positive attitude.

Additionally, the highest attrition occurred when a student entered the dissertation stage (NSF, 2009; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). The reasons for this could be the student now must conduct independent research and analysis, is poorly motivated to do the research, is dissatisfied with the way things are progressing, and is having problems with dissertation advisors (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Several researchers wanted to discover the reasons doctoral students reached the dissertation stage and then become ABD. Barnett (2008), Kelley and Salisbury-Glennon (2016), and Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding (2014) found that

approximately half of doctoral students persisted to this stage and then quit. The ones who completed had a positive academic attitude and were motivated to persist due to a supportive committee, mentor, and peers. These supports fostered the self-efficacy and motivation to continue. Research studies that focused on doctoral students who persisted to completion were conducted by Cross (2013) and Veal et al. (2012). Both studies found that grit, persistence, and a welcoming environment in the educational program were critical for success (Cross, 2013; Veal et al., 2012).

Persistence and motivation go hand in hand. Motivation fuels persistence and persistence can be the result of motivation. Various studies were undertaken to explain the necessity of motivation with the aid of persistence to succeed in undergraduate and graduate studies, in addition to all other tasks in life (Cameron et al., 2001; Deci, Nezick, & Sheinman, 1981; Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1994, 2001; Deci et al., 1999; Devos et al., 2017; Eisenberger et al., 1999; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Lepper et al., 1999; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2009).

Devos et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study to investigate why doctoral students do not complete the doctoral program. They found that dropout was linked to (a) lack of student integration and socialization in the academic environment, (b) lack of support from doctoral peers, (c) lack of motivation to complete, (d) poor supervisor support, and (e) not being able to work on a topic that made sense to them (Devos et al., 2017).

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2014) conducted phenomenological research on the accommodations women doctoral students had to make to pursue a doctoral degree. They found that women had difficulty handling all their roles as wives, mothers, and students. This led to a decrease in

motivation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Those who completed found their motivation and strength from their fellow classmates (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014).

The theorists who developed SDT conducted several research studies on the dynamics of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and self-determination in social development, education, physical activity, personality development, and wellness (Deci et al., 1981, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1994, 2001; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2009). Deci et al. (1991) found that without intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and self-determination students would not persist to completion. They also found that self-determination promotes motivation development and wellness (Deci et al., 1991). In an earlier study, they found that students/children achieved greater intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and desire for challenge when teachers and parents used autonomous support rather than controlling support (Deci et al., 1981). Deci and Ryan in 1994 found that intrinsic motivation and self-determined extrinsic motivation are positively associated with high quality learning and personal adjustment. In a 2001 study, Deci and Ryan found that when students are motivated, they endorsed their courses, research work, and dissertation work with a sense of willingness, self-discipline, and self-determination. They also found that when instruction in a college course was more supportive, the students were more intrinsically and autonomously motivated for the course, understood the material better, and received higher grades.

Several researchers have examined persistence in graduate students (Golde, 2000; Mason, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Ryan and Deci (2000) found that self-determination facilitates intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being through competence, autonomy, and relatedness. A further study by Ryan et al.

(2009) found that physical activity can be intrinsically motivated and focused on greater well-being. Earlier research by Erikson (1959) resulted in the psychosocial development theory. This theory has eight stages with stage eight being Integrity versus Despair. At debate by several researchers was whether extrinsic rewards to people for completing an activity really enhanced intrinsic motivation (Cameron et al., 2001; Eisenberger et al., 1999; Lepper et al., 1999).

Cameron et al. (2001), Eisenberger et al. (1999), and Lepper et al. (1999) claimed that (a) parents and educators were giving rewards to get students/children to do activities and tasks and these rewards decreased intrinsic motivation giving it negative effects, and (b) if the rewards did not keep coming, intrinsic motivation was undermined and motivation to do the activity diminished. Deci et al. (1999) countered that rewards may forestall self-regulation, but one should not be misled by one study. Cameron et al. (2001), Eisenberger et al. (1999), and Lepper et al. (1999) finally capitulated, conceding that rewards can be used effectively to enhance interest without disrupting performance of an activity and rewards did not have negative effects on intrinsic motivation.

The implications and recommendations from the research studies on persistence, motivation, and self-determination are many. Kelley and Salisbury-Glennon (2016) had three recommendations because of their study: (a) incorporate self-regulating learning strategies in the doctoral curricula to improve doctoral rates of dissertation completion; (b) improve the dissertation committee's direct involvement in the self-regulating process; and (c) encourage doctoral students to choose dissertation topics that hold intrinsic task value to the student, increasing intrinsic motivation and persistence to complete the dissertation and degree.

Golde (2000) and Deci and Ryan's (1994) research revealed further implications and recommendations for persistence, motivation, and self-determination. They found that

professors needed to use autonomy procedures with the students to promote intrinsic motivation and self-determination to excel in doctoral courses (Deci & Ryan, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Golde (2000) found that universities and professors needed to revamp the programs and provide students with experiences to motivate and encourage persistence to completion.

Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016) found further implications and recommendations from their research studies. Support services, strategic curriculum and instruction, academic integration, program structures that foster social integration with faculty and peers, and familial integration can promote online doctoral persistence. A university that provides these services will be attractive to advanced age individuals as well as individuals of all ages as the institution of choice for pursuing a doctoral degree. Because of these studies, future doctoral students will be better prepared for the challenges and setbacks of a strenuous doctoral program and will be prepared with tenacity, motivation, and persistence to complete their doctoral program (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

The empirical research studies on persistence, motivation, and self-determination are applicable to all ages, genders, ethnicities, and in all stages of life. These studies highlighted the importance of the effort an individual made to achieve an ambition or goal, and this effort to achieve was dependent upon the individual's persistence, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-determination, and self-discipline. That was the crux of this phenomenological study: to describe the persistence and motivation of advanced age individuals who pursued the coveted doctoral degree. When advanced age individuals finally reached the pinnacle of their ambition, they enjoyed success and psychological well-being.

Success and Well-Being

Navigating the doctoral journey may have pitfalls and setbacks and can be a life-

changing process for individuals of all ages; but when reaching the ultimate highlights of the journey, the completion of the dissertation and the awarding of the doctoral degree, individuals experienced the euphoria of success and psychological well-being (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Many articles have been written on students' success and well-being. Cross (2013), Feinstein and Peck (2008), Griess (2014), Haynes et al. (2012), Joyner, Rouse, and Glatthorn, (2013), Mansfield et al. (2010), Peters and Daly (2013), Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding (2014), Ryan (2009), Ryan and Deci (2000), Ryan et al. (2009), Schmidt and Umans (2014), Showers and Kinsman (2017), and Veal et al. (2012) have all researched and written articles on students' success and well-being.

To enable students to navigate the doctoral journey, Joyner et al. (2013) and Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding (2014), wrote or co-edited books on strategies for success and writing a dissertation. These books take the reader through the entire doctoral journey from choosing the right type of program, managing stress, learning to do research, completing a literature review, choosing the right research method, writing the dissertation, and presenting the dissertation (Joyner et al., 2013; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). These books are "go to" handbooks of information and strategies to help the student succeed and complete the doctoral degree.

Peters and Daly (2013) researched students who returned to college after working for five years or more to determine their expectations of success, the value to be received from the degree, and the management of costs. While these students were less skilled with computers and out of practice with some math skills, they were confident in their ability to successfully finish the degree due to their motivation for returning (Peters & Daly, 2013). Griess (2014) researched

educators who returned to academia to improve the educational experiences in their classrooms. Griess was not surprised to find that “when teachers had higher levels of education, they had higher quality classrooms” (p. 56).

Empirical research on advanced age individuals and the problems they encountered in their pursuit of a degree was nonexistent. The related literature presented here focused on younger individuals, but the problems they encountered can also apply to advanced age individuals. Advanced age individuals should consider all the obstacles, family dynamics, identity development, importance of self-efficacy, persistence and motivation needed to obtain a degree, and the attitude of well-being needed to be successful in the completion of a doctorate. After taking all these factors into consideration, the next step in the doctoral journey is to research colleges and universities and select the doctoral program that is the best fit for the goals of advanced age individuals.

All the literature researched will be useful for the advanced age individuals in this study. The persistence and motivation by advanced age individuals to persist to obtain a doctoral degree will be the impetus for other individuals who are desirous of embarking on the doctoral journey and succeed to completion.

Summary

Review of the literature revealed a lack of notable research on the experiences of advanced age individuals who returned to academia and pursued doctoral studies. The themes that emerged from the literature review concentrated on articles proclaiming that advanced age individuals were too old to learn or on the obstacles encountered by women, especially marital problems, role conflict, and self-efficacy. Even 40- to 50-year-olds were considered too old for academia (Guardian, 2014; Jindal, 2014). In view of the obstacles, the attrition rate for those

who started and those who completed was high. Exploring the lived experiences of those who attempted and those who completed the journey was insightful (Mansfield et al., 2010; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Students who were able to complete a degree attributed their success to the ability to persist and keep motivated. Their self-determination was a major factor in their success. Choosing the right degree program and college or university was also critical for success and well-being. While the literature and research generally involved younger adults between ages 18–55 (Hannon, 2015; Hagelskamp et al., 2013), their experiences and information can be applicable to all ages, even advanced age individuals. This study hopes to give a voice to and hear the lived experiences of those few advanced age individuals who had the ability and fortitude to begin and persist in obtaining a doctoral degree. It is time to give them a voice and describe their lived experiences to aid others who want to travel the same doctoral path while also informing the support institutions that offer these students the needed support along the way.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of advanced age individuals who earned or are pursuing a doctoral degree. These advanced age adults were defined as individuals who were 62 years of age or older based upon the accepted Social Security retirement age (U.S. Government, 2017), and were graduates from or students enrolled in accredited doctoral programs in the eastern part of the U.S. This study gave these individuals the opportunity to voice their struggles, obstacles, motivation, persistence, and desires to undertake the doctoral journey. This chapter describes the research design, researcher's role, the data collection, and the data analysis methods. Ethical considerations and a discussion of trustworthiness concludes the chapter. Following Moustakas' (1994) methodology ensured systematic data collection and careful analysis of the advanced age learners' lived experiences.

Design

Qualitative inquiry was the appropriate method for this research as my intent was to capture the lived experiences of advanced age individuals describing their motivation to begin and persist in pursuing a doctoral degree (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research was the appropriate design for ascertaining the following: (a) There is an issue that needs explanation or exploring; (b) There is a group whose voices have not been heard; (c) There is a need to empower learners to share their stories and hear their voices describing their struggles and persistence; (d) Quantitative statistical analysis does not describe or explore the problem (Creswell, 2013).

A good qualitative study has rigorous data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013, 2015;

Creswell & Poth, 2018). The results of the study allow the reader to have the feeling of being there during the lived experience (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative study allows the reader not only to hear the stories but also to experience the feelings, the beliefs, and the lived experiences of these advanced age learners (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Understanding the life stories of advanced age learners provided greater insight into their motivation to begin and the supports and strategies that allowed them to persist rather than simply examining completion statistics (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2000, 2011).

Creswell (2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018) listed five qualitative designs of inquiry for a study including narrative, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and phenomenology. Narrative designs are chronological occurrences in specific places and have a turning point (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Grounded theory discovers a theory grounded in the data from many participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Ethnography involves individuals in an entire culture-sharing group and examines how the culture works (Harris, 1968). A case study examines a specific case bounded by time and place and ends with conclusions (Yin, 2009). Last, the phenomenological approach describes the common meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences regarding a concept or phenomenon. The description of the lived experiences consists of “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). From an examination of the five approaches I quickly identified phenomenology as the appropriate research design for this study. The shared phenomenon of the study was the motivation and persistence exhibited by advanced age adults who returned to academia to pursue their educational goal of a doctoral degree.

A good phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals who shared similar lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, a phenomenological inquiry was the appropriate design to describe the experiences of advanced age individuals who returned to academia to pursue and persist to completion a doctoral degree.

There are two approaches to phenomenology: the hermeneutic approach (van Manen, 1990, 1997) and empirical transcendental or psychological approach (Moustakas, 1994). The hermeneutic approach interprets lived experiences and the researcher mediates between different meanings of the lived experiences (van Manen, 1990, p. 26). The transcendental approach is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). Creswell (2015) defined a transcendental phenomenological design as an inquiry where researchers set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination. The procedures, illustrated by Moustakas (1994), consist of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one's experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon. The researcher then analyzes the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the statements into themes (p. 78).

This study used the transcendental approach to describe the lived experiences of the participants. The transcendental approach allowed me, an advanced age individual who is living the phenomenon and therefore came to the study with many preconceived assumptions, to take a fresh perspective toward the examined phenomenon. As the researcher, I was anxious to learn why others wanted to take on the lived experiences of obtaining a doctoral degree, but I set aside my own story to ensure that the stories of the participants were told. According to Moustakas

(1994), “Transcendental means everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (p. 34). Using this approach and design allows the world to hear for the first time the struggles, the joys, the successes, the anguish, the setbacks, the motivation, and the persistence stories of advanced age individuals who decided life was not over yet and they still had educational dreams to achieve.

Research Questions

Central Question

What are the experiences of advanced age individuals pursuing their doctoral degree?

Sub Question 1

What motivates advanced age learners to earn their doctoral degree?

Sub Question 2

How does program choice influence the persistence of advanced age learners pursuing a doctoral degree?

Sub Question 3

To what do advanced age learners attribute their doctoral persistence?

Setting

The setting for this study was the eastern U.S. Participants were recruited from two institutions offering doctoral degrees: Site A and Site B. Site A is a public university in a southern state. Site B is a large, private, faith-based university. Both sites offered accredited doctoral programs. Both sites required the completion of a traditional dissertation. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, the sites as well as each participant were given pseudonyms (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

For a qualitative study, Creswell (2013) recommended a purposeful sampling approach. Purposeful sampling allowed me to select the participants in the study, the site or sites for the study, the specific type of sampling strategies, and the sample size to study (Creswell, 2013). For the number of research participants to recruit for the study, Dukes (1984) recommended three to 10 subjects. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended interviewing multiple participants from five to 25 individuals who had all experienced the phenomenon. Dissertation handbooks often recommended the number range from 12 – 15 or higher, with no fewer than 10 participants being accepted (Site B School of Education, 2017, p. 24). According to Creswell (2013), “The point is to gather enough information to fully develop or saturate the model” (p. 89). The final sample for this study was 10 participants. I ceased sampling when I reached thematic saturation, meaning no new themes were discovered as more participants were added.

The participants were chosen by purposeful convenience and snowball sampling. To qualify as an advanced age learner, the adults needed to be 62 years of age or older based on retirement age set by the Social Security Administration (U.S. Government, 2017). The participants must also have earned or were in the final stages of a doctoral degree from an accredited institution offering doctoral programs. I chose participants who earned their degree within the last five to 10 years.

The sample is a convenience sample because I began with participants who met the study’s criteria and provided their informed consent to participate. According to Huberman and Miles (1994), the convenience sampling strategy saved time, money, and effort in doing the study. Convenience sampling was important because it represented sites and individuals, which the researcher could access and easily collect data (Creswell, 2013).

As I began to collect data from these initial participants, I began to snowball sample, asking participants to forward my recruitment email to friends and acquaintances who met the study criteria. Snowball sampling using Facebook, LinkedIn, and Skype was also useful for inviting advanced age individuals who obtained a doctorate to participate in the study. I also contacted local universities to share my recruitment email with individuals connected to their programs (current students or alumni) who met the study criteria. I did not request any email addresses but simply asked individuals to share the recruitment email, providing potential participants the choice to respond. Only those candidates who signed and returned informed consent forms (see Appendix F) became the participants in this study. All advanced age participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The advanced age individuals who participated in this study are listed in the following table which gives their pseudonym, current age, gender, ethnicity, and degree earned. See Table 1 for this information.

Table 1

Degrees of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Degree	Site
Alexander	75	M	Caucasian	Ph.D., French Contemporary History	A
Duke	84	M	Caucasian	Ed.D., pending, Curriculum and Instruction	B
Edward	74	M	Caucasian	Ph.D., Interdisciplinary Humanities	A
Jake	70	M	Caucasian	Ph.D., Marriage and Family Therapy	A
Linda	76	F	Caucasian	Ph.D., Instructional Services	A
Mary Grey	69	F	Caucasian	Ph.D., Sociocultural & International Development	A
Minnie Fearon	67	F	Caucasian	Ed.D., Curriculum and Instruction	B
Noci	77	F	Caucasian	Ph.D., Adult Education	A
Spirit-led	62	F	African American	Ed.D., Educational Leadership	B
Shannon Quinn	64	F	Caucasian	Ed.D., Curriculum and Instruction	B

Their information for the table was gleaned from the demographic information that the 10 advanced age participants filled out after they read the welcome letter. They returned the demographic information along with their consent form. The demographic information in Chapter Four provides further description of these advanced age individuals who participated in this study.

Procedures

After a successful proposal defense, the first step in the procedural process began with Site B's approval to conduct the study. The research proposal was submitted to the IRB of the

university I am attending for approval to begin the study (see Appendix A). After receiving IRB approval, I provided gatekeepers from each site with my recruitment email requesting that they forward it on to individuals who met my student criteria (see Appendix E). The candidates who returned the consent form expressing their willingness to participate in the study then received a demographic survey to be filled out and returned (see Appendix F for consent form and Appendix G for demographic survey). After participants returned the informed consent letter and demographic survey, I scheduled interviews with them. After the interviews I requested that they write a “Dear Abby Letter of Advice.” The final data collection method was a focus group.

The Researcher’s Role

The researcher is the key instrument in the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2013). I am also an advanced age adult pursuing a doctoral degree. I have always had a personal desire to achieve a doctoral degree. I received dual master’s degrees plus 67 doctoral degree hours while my children were in college. But to pursue a doctoral degree, I would have had to cross over into another state and pay out of state tuition, which was very expensive. Therefore, the doctoral degree was put on hold. Instead, we traveled the world. We also became aviators and built a home on an Airpark in a southern state and flew to points of interest in the U.S.

Now the traveling is not feasible, so my husband recommended that now is the time to work on my doctoral degree. Earning a doctoral degree has always been one of my passions. It was not possible when our children were in college. Now time is of the essence because there are not that many years left to pursue education. This degree is important for three reasons: (a) for personal satisfaction, (b) to encourage the grandkids to follow in grandma’s footsteps, and (c) to return to teaching at the college level. In this study, I wanted to ascertain the reasons other advanced age individuals pursued a doctoral degree.

As the researcher conducting a transcendental phenomenology, I focused less on my interpretations and biases and concentrated on describing the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). This involved epoche or bracketing myself out of the experience, so the reader has a fresh look at the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). This fresh look involved learning about the experiences of these advanced age individuals and hearing them describe the persistence and motivation that enabled them to complete a degree.

Besides bracketing out my experiences, transcendental phenomenology procedures consisted of identifying a phenomenon to study and collecting data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, my role was to analyze the data, reducing the data into themes for development of textural descriptions of *what* the participants experienced. I then created a structural description of *how* they experienced the phenomenon.

The textual and structural experiences were combined to describe the essence of the phenomenon studied. During the entire process, I was impartial and not favoring any one participant's lived experience over another. The participants were not known to me. My challenge as the researcher was to provide from the data collection and analysis a deep understanding of the phenomenon experienced by the participants.

Even though my experiences assisted me in understanding and analyzing the data, as the researcher, I bracketed these experiences out of the research. However, sharing and knowing the common experiences of the participants in pursuing a doctoral degree was valuable in understanding and analyzing the data and writing about the philosophical assumptions of the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell (2013, 2015; Creswell &

Poth, 2018), the researcher needed to decide how and in what way his or her personal understandings would be introduced into the study.

My role as researcher also involved the following: (a) to protect the confidentiality of participants by masking their names in the data (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018); (b) to learn what influenced their program choice; (c) to make backup copies of computer files (Davidson, 1996); (d) to develop a master list of types of information gathered; and (e) to safely store for three years all data per my school's IRB rules.

Each advanced age individual in this study chose a pseudonym to protect his or her identity and place of living. To conceal their identities, their pseudonyms in no way represented who they were, where they lived, or their culture. The choice of a pseudonym was entertaining to observe. After signing the consent form, the demographic survey was the first task to complete.

Data Collection

The data collection methods were rigorous and varied by using four different collection techniques. Data collection methods were (a) demographic surveys, (b) individual interviews, (c) letters of advice to anyone contemplating the doctoral journey, and (d) focus group session (University of Minnesota, 2017). The demographic survey allowed me to become acquainted with the participants and gain some insight into the participant's family life. Of all the data collection sources, interviews obtained in-depth data and were the one data collection method that was central to all research (Creswell, 2013). The letter of advice was a document of sage information from an older experienced individual to a younger inexperienced perspective student. The focus group was another means of collecting shared understandings from a group of people and was a form of interviewing (Creswell, 2015, p. 217). The data collection started

with the demographic survey. The participant descriptions on the demographic survey were organized in numerical order, beginning with the youngest participant and progressing to the oldest.

Demographic Survey

Creswell (2015) recommended the creation of a demographic survey and a demographic table. The demographics of each participant allowed the reader to visualize a picture of the individuals in the research study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The demographic table provided insight into the lives of advanced age individuals, their interests, and their individuality.

Quite interesting to note was the fact that most of the survey participants were still working. When asked that question, the answer was almost always because they felt they had a contribution to make. Some of them replied that they would be bored without an interesting occupation to occupy their time. It was interesting to note that the participants were almost equal according to sex. It was also very interesting and rewarding to see so many of the advanced age individuals obtained their doctoral degree while still working, and they continued working efficiently after receiving their doctoral degree.

There was a wide range in the ages of the participants – 62 to 84. The variance in age provided a wide range of interest in pursuing a doctoral degree during the later years of life. It was also interesting to note that many of the advanced age individuals were still interested in working and contributing to society. The doctoral degree gave these individuals more clout in pursuing their financial dream and professional expectations.

One interesting fact that surfaced on the demographic survey was the factor that few divorces occurred in the advanced age population. One idea was that they were not willing to

break up over small arguments or inconveniences. Another idea was that these advanced age individuals were following the traditions of their parents who stayed married until death parted them. Another idea pertains to the wedding vows they recited to each other during their wedding ceremony: they promised to “love and cherish until death do you part.”

The demographic survey gave the researcher an opportunity to get to know his or her participants and to relate to their life and activities. The information gleaned from the demographic survey included the following information: (a) participant’s age, (b) gender, (c) race, (d) marital status, (e) year obtained last degree, (f) age when retired, (g) technology use, (h) Internet available and usable, and (i) e-mail capability. The demographic survey sent to participants is in Appendix G.

After the demographic survey, the next data collection method involved interviews from the advanced age individuals. These interviews allowed the reader to obtain in-depth data about the individual’s participation in activities and clubs. This one data collection method was central not only to this research, but to all research that takes place.

Interviews

Interviews were the best source of data collection for a phenomenological research study (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994). To collect data via interviews, phenomenological researchers typically used long interviews. It is an informal, interactive process, and utilizes open-ended comments and questions (Moustakas, 1994; University of Minnesota, 2017). The biggest challenge in qualitative interviewing is the mechanics of conducting the interview (Creswell, 2013, 2015). Roulston, deMarrais, and Lewis (2003) listed the interview challenges as involving unexpected participant behaviors, inability to create good instructions, phrases, and questions, dealing with sensitive issues, and then developing good

transcriptions of the interviews. Since equipment can malfunction, Creswell (2013) recommended the researcher test and organize both the recording devices and the transcribing service in advance of the interview. Creswell (2013) further stressed that the researcher needs to have the ability to break the silence with icebreakers to get the interview going on a friendly and easy mode. Another big challenge for the researcher was the lengthy process involved in transcribing audiotapes from the interviews. Relying on participants to discuss the meaning of their experiences required patience and skill on the part of the researcher (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Patton (2002) described three types of approaches to open-ended interviews for researchers to use. They are the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview. The informal conversational interview relies on the spontaneous generation of questions in a natural interaction conversation. Because the conversation is so natural, the research participants do not realize that they are participating in an interview (Patton, 2002). The general interview guide approach involves outlining a set of topics to explore with each participant. The interview guide approach uses the assumption that there is common information to learn from each participant. Standardized questions were not written in advance of the interview. The interviewer chose the questions as the interview progressed (Patton, 2002). And the interview that this study used is the standardized open-ended interview which involves a predetermined sequence and wording of the same set of questions asked of each participant. This technique minimizes the possibility of bias. This interview format is appropriate when more than one researcher is conducting the interviews on the same topic. This method assures that the data obtained were systematic and thorough but involved less flexibility and spontaneity for the researcher and the participant (Patton, 2002).

Gall et al. (2007) recommended interviewing each participant at least once. Gall et al. (2007) even suggested using a variety of interview modes such as telephone interviews, computer-assisted telephone interviews such as Skype, and web interviews using e-mail and chat rooms. The advantage of computer-assisted telephone interviews and web interviews via e-mail and chat rooms eliminates the problem of recording the data inaccurately as the responses are recorded as they speak. Gall et al. (2007) further recommended that an interview guide be designed beforehand and that interviewers are trained to be consistent and relate positively to the participants. Patton (2015) published tips and tricks when writing interview questions. The careful wording of the interview questions is important for staying friends and asking the right question to elicit the desired lived experiences.

Creswell (2013) created eight stages of interviewing using the stages of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Rubin and Rubin (2012) as the basis for his logical sequence for interviewing. Creswell's stages are as follows: (a) Decide upon the questions for the interviews; (b) Identify interviewees who can best answer these questions based on purposeful sampling procedures; (c) Determine what type of interview (telephone, one-on-one, focus group) will be practical and will net the most useful answers from the research questions; (d) Use adequate recording procedures; (e) Design and use an interview guide; (f) Refine the interview questions and the procedures through pilot testing; (g) Determine the place for conducting the interview; (h) Use good interview procedures. This is important for one-on-one interviews.

Each participant participated in one interview (Creswell, 2015). Gall et al. (2007) recommended interviewing by telephone because it is less expensive than face-to-face interviews. However, the type or method for conducting interviews for this research study depended upon the equipment that each participant has at his or her disposal. A face-to-face

interview is considered ideal, but if this is not possible, videoconferencing through a method such as Skype could be used to conduct and record the interview. If the participant did not have Skype, the next choice would be the chat room, which also records the conversation. I quickly determined that the best method with these 10 participants would be Freeconferencecall.com which allowed everyone to talk to each other and to hear all the participants' views while recording the entire conversation.

The interviews were standard open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002). Interviews started with icebreaker questions to allow the participant and I to get to know each other and establish a friendly, positive relationship (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview was recorded and transcribed. Conducting the interviews in this manner allowed me, the researcher, and the participants to establish a rapport that resulted in accurate, concise answers (Creswell, 2013). These answers provided the data needed to arrive at an accurate description of the motivation, persistence, and ability of these advanced age individuals to earn their doctoral degree. Below is the list of standardized open-ended questions that I used for the interview. Once IRB approval was received, a pilot test of these questions could be used with volunteers (see Appendix D for a Sample Pilot Test).

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions and Telephone Conversation:

1. This research study is partial fulfillment for an Ed.D. in curriculum and instruction. I am so pleased that you are willing to help with this research study. The information you are giving in this research will prove invaluable to future individuals that want to travel the same doctoral journey that you and I have undertaken.
2. Please describe in detail your educational journey through life. What degrees have you earned? What educational programs were your majors? Minors?

3. Please walk me through your timeline for obtaining a doctoral degree. In what year did you enroll and start the doctoral journey and when did you finish?
4. What experiences would you say were the most significant or outstanding during your timeline of enrolling and studying for a doctoral degree?
5. What made these experiences significant?
6. Please tell about other unusual or outstanding occurrences that took place during your graduate studies timeline.
7. What prompted you to undertake the arduous task of working toward a new degree?
8. What reasons did you have for going back to college at your stage in life?
9. What were your plans after finishing the doctoral degree?
10. What support or lack of support did you have while undertaking the years of study?
11. What influenced your choice of a university in which to enroll for these studies?
12. What influenced your program choice for pursuing a degree?
13. What were the reactions from people when you first decided to earn your doctoral degree? Did anyone try to discourage you? What did your family think of the idea?
14. Please provide an example of how the professors and fellow classmates treated you because you were older.
15. How did your fellow classmates relate to you and include you and vice versa?
16. What was your motivation to return to academia and pursue graduate studies?
17. What obstacles did you have to overcome to pursue your educational goal?
18. To what do you attribute your persistence in enrolling, at your age, in a doctoral program and then persisting to completion in the program?

19. What conflicts, if any, did you experience with your family or friends or fellow classmates?
20. What successes or accomplishments do you feel that you have obtained throughout this doctoral process?
21. Why have you been a lifelong learner?
22. Tell why you would or would not do it again if you had the opportunity.
23. What would you do differently if you could start all over again?
24. What advice do you have for anyone who is interested in walking the same doctoral path as you?
25. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in this research study. What other advice or points would you like to make about your motivation, persistence, and ability to achieve your life's educational dream?

Question 1 was an introductory question designed to be an icebreaker, to put the participant at ease, to feel like he or she established a relationship with the researcher, and to provide a friendly informal atmosphere (Patton, 2002).

Questions 2 through 5 are concerned with or focuses on the timeline that the advanced age individual devoted to obtaining the doctoral studies/degree. These questions are non-threatening or non-intimidating and gave the researcher information on the amount of time it took this individual to obtain the doctoral degree. The timeline gave clues as to the seriousness exhibited in obtaining the degree or if it was a leisurely learning experience spread over a longer period of time (Joyner et al., 2013).

Questions 6 through 11 deal with inquiries as to the choices of a university, a doctoral program, and rationale for the choices the participant made. Education Dynamics (2017) listed ten reasons why students choose a college. Antczak (2014) gave five reasons to go back to college for adults over the age of 50. Kanar (2014) gave important information on how to choose a college and a degree program, how to relate to your classmates, and how to succeed in college.

Question 12 was an inquiry into program choice and the societal pressures or perceived norms of advanced age learners. The assumption that older age individuals are too old to learn is a societal piece of misinformation or judgment that has no foundation. Patton (2015) stated this type of question is highly vulnerable and he suggested delaying the question until the interview was well underway and a good rapport had been established.

Questions 13 through 17 were inquiries into the participant's successes, motivation, persistence, and ability to overcome obstacles and travel down the doctoral path to a doctoral degree. Deci and Ryan's (2001) SDT theory explains why the participant was able to persist to completion.

Questions 18 and 19 is related to the participant's assessment of self and the perceptions of the fellow classmates to the advanced age learner. Deci and Ryan's (2001) intrinsic motivation theory plays a role in the participant's view of being a lifelong learner. The intrinsic motivation to be involved continuously in educational endeavors creates a lifelong learner. The attitude of the participant, even as a lifelong learner, may not enhance the classmates' attitude toward the participant. Conversely, the participant may sense the lack of intrinsic motivation in the classmates and this would affect the participant's attitude toward the classmates.

Questions 20 through 23 are related to Erikson's (1959) stage eight in his eight stages of development. Stage eight is Integrity versus Despair on what one has done and has not done with his or her life. These questions gave the participant the opportunity to reflect on what he or she has accomplished and what was unaccomplished, and whether the participant made the right choice for integrity versus despair.

Questions 24 and 25 are the essence of a phenomenological research study. It is the description of the lived experiences of a person's life. In this case, it was the lived experiences of advanced age individuals and their educational journey through life. With Question 25, the participants had the opportunity to add more information or advice concerning their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gall et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Letters of Advice Like “Dear Abby”

The favorite task of the 10 doctoral participants was the letter of advice to “Dear Future Doctoral Student” sometimes referred to as a “Dear Abby” type letter of advice. These 10 letters were composed by the advanced age participants giving thought-provoking advice and tips, words of wisdom, encouragement, conflicts, motivation strategies, persistence advice, tips of handicaps and pitfalls to avoid, and success strategies. The letter of advice gave the participants an opportunity to open and relay their lived experiences throughout the doctoral program. The letter also gave the various individuals an opportunity to relay their lived experiences through the conveyance of advice to anyone considering the doctoral journey.

Using this unique data collection method, the advanced age individual assumed the role of a sage and composed a list of advice concerning the pitfalls, motivation, and persistence required to achieve a doctoral degree. The advice has not been altered in any fashion and it was

their advice, both good and pitfalls, while traveling the doctoral degree program. The “Dear Abby” type letters were also well-wishes from the advanced age individuals who traveled the doctoral degree program. This advice gave the participant a chance to open and relay his or her lived experiences throughout the doctoral program or convey advice to a friend considering returning to college to pursue a doctoral degree. These letters and the sage advice offered to future students may be found in their entirety in Appendices K through T.

Focus Groups

Focus groups provide an opportunity for the researcher to interact with several participants at the same time. The participants for the focus group vary according to the unit of study and their proximity to each other (Gall et al., 2007). Creswell (2015) recommended keeping the size of the focus group from four to six individuals. A small group allows all the members to participate in response to questions and lessens chance of one individual dominating the conversations (Creswell, 2015).

A focus group works best if all the participants congregate in the same location and discuss the topic face-to-face (Gall et al., 2007). A central neutral location that is non-threatening should be chosen after analyzing the participants’ addresses and their proximity to each other (Creswell, 2015). The demographics of the participants determine the type of focus group that works for the participants.

If a face-to-face focus group is not possible, then the focus group can be conducted online (Creswell, 2013). The Internet offers many avenues for conducting a focus group. These avenues include chat rooms, Skype, e-mail messages, weblogs, blogs, instant messaging, and videoconferencing (Nicholas et al., 2010). The advantage of online data collection is less cost involved, more time efficient, and participants have more time to consider their answer to a

specific topic (Nicholas et al., 2010). Online data collection also offers an alternative for participants who lived too far away to participate in a focus group for the research study (Creswell, 2013).

One focus group session was conducted one Sunday afternoon and involved four individuals plus the researcher. For the focus group session, freeconferencecall.com was used where all could hear each other and talk to each other while the conversation was recorded and available for playback. All the participants could hear their answers along with the others in the group. This type of focus group allowed them the opportunity to discuss and share together their experiences earning a doctoral degree. The focus group was an ideal place for these advanced age individuals to describe their experiences in earning the doctoral degree and to share what they were doing in their retirement years. This study wanted to know if they experienced the obstacles of family problems, age, gender, and ethnicity or choice of a college and program to fit their budget and educational expectations. The subject of college dropouts was discussed to find their opinions of why this happened, and if they ever considered dropping out of the doctoral program. Moreover, of vital importance, this study investigated how these individuals maintained their persistence, motivation, self-determination, and self-efficacy to succeed in the doctoral program and experience well-being.

While the focus group provided a means of the participants' meeting each other and sharing views, there could be a disadvantage to the focus group interviews. The first disadvantage was that it required the researcher to find consensus on questions so one score could be marked for all individuals in the group (Creswell, 2015). The second disadvantage could be where one individual dominated the conversation. If one individual starts to dominate the conversation, it could lead to responses that do not reflect the consensus of the group

(Creswell, 2015). Therefore, it was important for the researcher to be prepared with an interview guide and the ability to redirect the dominating individual back into the mainstream of the group (Creswell, 2015; Gall et al., 2007). It was meaningful that free conference calling audiotaped the group's discussion and expressions. The focus group questions were developed using the same format as the interview questions. First, introductions and general information set up an informal, friendly atmosphere. Then the focus group interview and questions began with the following nine questions. Additional questions followed as the group became more acquainted and relaxed.

1. What were your reasons and motivation for returning to academia to enroll and earn a doctoral degree?
2. What influenced your program choice and choice of university for earning the doctoral degree?
3. How will you use the knowledge gained from your doctoral degree?
4. What obstacles did you have to overcome to pursue your educational goal?
5. To what do you attribute your persistence and motivation for pursuing a doctoral degree?
6. What should universities do to support advanced age learners in their programs?
7. Thank you for being my participants and gathering for a focus group discussion (Patton, 2002).
8. We gathered a lot of information about your experiences in pursuing a doctoral degree. Is there anything else you would like to tell about your doctoral journey such as the obstacles encountered, interactions with professors and classmates, and the successes you enjoyed?

9. What advice do you have to guide others through the doctoral journey?

Questions 1 through 2 dealt with inquiries as to the choices of a university, a particular doctoral program, and rationale for the choices the participant made. Education Dynamics (2017) listed ten reasons why students choose a college. Kanar (2014) gave important information on how to choose a college and a degree program, how to relate to your classmates, and how to succeed in college.

Question 3 is an inquiry into the reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree at their advanced age in life. Antczak (2014) gave five reasons to go back to college for adults over the age of 50.

Question 4 inquired into societal pressures, perceived norms of advanced age learners, or obstacles faced. The assumption that older age individuals were too old to learn is a societal piece of misinformation or judgment that has no foundation (Patton, 2015).

Question 5 inquired into the participant's successes, motivation, persistence, and ability to overcome obstacles and travel down the doctoral path to a doctoral degree. Deci and Ryan's (2001) SDT theory explains why the participant was able to persist to completion.

Question 6 inquired about the school's facilities and the professors' willingness to work with and support the student.

Questions 7 through 9 thanked the participants for their willingness to share their experiences in the focus group and inquired if they had any other information that they wanted to share before closing the session.

After thanking the focus group members for participating in this phenomenological research study, the call ended, and transcription began. With these questions, the participants added more information and advice concerning their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gall et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Our focus group session occurred on a Sunday afternoon and consisted of four participants. It was conducted via freeconferencecall.com, and all members of the group were able to talk to each other. The conversations were recorded and played back for all to hear. The focus group session lasted about one hour after which the recordings were transcribed.

The focus group interview presented the perfect opportunity to do more in-depth exploration of the research questions of this study: (a) their experiences in earning the doctoral degree, (b) their motivation and self-determination to obtain the degree, (c) what influenced their program and college choice, and (d) their persistence to succeed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for transcendental phenomenology involved the process of phenomenological reduction. Data analysis started as soon as the first set of data was available, beginning with bracketing.

Bracketing

Phenomenological reduction included *epoche* or bracketing, which is a concept developed by Husserl (1931). Bracketing is the process of the researcher setting aside his or her experiences, as much as possible, to have a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (2013) suggested having the researcher first write his or her lived experiences with the phenomenon. I have done this in the Role of the Researcher section above and continued to reflect on my own experiences and assumptions as I collected and analyzed the data, intentionally bracketing my story to ensure the participant stories were told accurately.

Coding

After collecting all the data and transcribing interviews and focus group recordings, the

task of coding and analyzing the information began. Coding is the heart of qualitative data analysis (Aulls, 2004; Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding is the first step in identifying the themes in the data by finding major or first level concepts and second level categories or subcategories (van Manen, 1990). Then I continued coding each piece of data, line by line, into concepts and categories and proceeded with the clustering, textual descriptions, structural descriptions, and finally to the textural-structural, which is the description of the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The advantage of coding is that it allows entry of the data into the computer for analysis into themes, concepts, and categories or subheadings. Using the major concepts and the subheadings, I created a table to display these themes (van Manen, 1990). In this study, the phenomenon was the persistence and motivation to work toward completion of doctoral studies. The next step in the reduction of the data was horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994).

Horizontalization

Horizontalization is the process of going through interview transcriptions and other data and highlighting significant statements, sentences, and quotes that told how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). These significant statements provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). This step assigns equal value to each statement, which represents a segment of meaning (Merriam, 2009).

Clusters of Meaning

Next, I clustered the meaning or themes from these significant statements. Then I used the significant statements and themes to write a description of *what* the participants experienced. Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013) called this process of analysis textual description. The

significant statements and themes also were used to create a description of the context or setting that influenced *how* the participants experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) called this analytical process structural description. I clustered the segments into themes and coded the themes into a description of the texture (the what). This then ended into a description of the structure (the how).

The textual-structural description, also called the what and how, emerged and represented the meaning and essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). A textural-structural description was created for each participant by repeating the above steps. After creating these descriptions, they were combined into a universal description of the group's experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The final description explains what it was like for someone to experience the phenomenon of persistence and motivation and the ability to persist to completion of a doctoral degree (Moustakas, 1994). Polkinghorne (1989) explained that all experiences have an underlying structure and the readers should get the feeling from the phenomenological study that they now know what it is like for someone to experience that phenomenon.

Triangulation

The primary source of data analysis for this transcendental phenomenological research study was interviews, with additional data generated from the questionnaire, letters of advice, and a focus group. Crosschecking data from each collection method allowed for corroboration and verification of experiences across methods and participants. This process of corroborating evidence from different sources of data sheds light on a theme. The process of documenting a theme in different sources of data is triangulation of information (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Triangulation of data analysis occurred when the essence of each data analysis method resulted in the same findings (Erlandson, et al., 1993; Glesne &

Peshkin, 1992). Member checking enhanced the credibility of the study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). All of the 10 participants did member checking of their transcripts and the final themes generated from the analysis and triangulation of all sets of data.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is akin to validity and reliability in quantitative research, but in phenomenological research, trustworthiness refers to the four contexts of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When the work concepts of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were established, trustworthiness in the study occurred (Moustakas, 1994). Using Colaizzi's (1978) concept of trustworthiness established credibility.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility establishes the results of the research as believable. Sometimes credibility is reinforced by conducting a study with two researchers who read and analyze the material, then trade documents, reread the material, and rechecked the data. By doing this to all the methods of data collection, and reaching the same conclusions, the results of the research are more credible (Creswell, 2013). If an independent researcher checks the data analysis and arrives at the same results or conclusions, credibility is further established (Erlandson et al., 1993). Member checking, the process of having the participants review the statements in the report for accuracy and completeness and making corrections to factual errors, added credibility to the accuracy and completeness of the conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Three or more forms of data from each participant allowed me to triangulate and corroborate themes and findings from the participants.

Dependability

According to Patton (2015), dependability is defined as an inquiry process that is appropriate and high quality. Dependability is showing that the findings are consistent and can be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase the dependability, an audit trail was created of all steps and procedures, including a data collection log, and samples of each type of data collected. This allows for an external auditor to audit the trail and thereby increases dependability. Being consistent in the method of handling the material and protecting it from contamination ensured dependability. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) suggested that to insure dependability, allow only the trained researchers to have access to and handle the documents.

Confirmability

When the results are confirmed or corroborated by others, confirmability occurs. Validation of confirmability occurs when an external audit by someone who has no connection to the study examines the process and product and determines the study to be accurate (Creswell, 2013). Confirmability was increased by creating an audit trail of the study procedures and the data generated in appendices, allowing for others to audit the steps and confirm the findings.

Transferability

Transferability was increased through systematic sampling with an emphasis on variation in participant demographics and maintenance of well-documented audit trails. Rich, thick descriptions allow readers to make decisions regarding transferability (Erlandson et al., 1993). By doing this, readers are able to replicate the study at another site or choose to transfer and apply findings to their own population.

Ethical Considerations

A qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues that surface during data collection,

analysis, and dissemination of qualitative reports. To prevent ethical issues, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) recommended the following appropriate standards: (a) protect confidentiality of participants with pseudonyms or numbers; (b) tell participants they are in a study and the purpose of the study; (c) do not engage in deception about nature of the study; and (d) give only general information, not specific information about the study.

Other ethical considerations for this study were (a) gaining IRB approval, (b) gaining informed consent from participants, (c) protecting data for three years in a locked safe place, (d) confidentiality with only the researchers and analysts having access to data and results, (e) no gossiping about participants, and (f) creating boundaries and having member checking for data accuracy (Creswell, 2015). Further ethical considerations included using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. To protect the data in hard copy form, it is necessary to keep it securely locked in a safety lock box or vault while the data in the computer are password protected. Being consistent in the methods of handling the material and protecting it from contamination enhanced the ethical considerations.

Summary

In Chapter Three, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was restated and the research design, procedures, research questions, setting, participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were discussed. The role of the researcher was to oversee and conduct the study according to procedures and to serve as the human instrument for data collection and analysis. The primary method of collecting data was the interview, with secondary methods of documents or journaling, advice letters, and focus groups supplementing the data collection methods. The step-by-step data analysis was given, ending with the means to ensure that the data is accurate, rich, deep, and

secure. The end of the chapter addressed credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, trustworthiness, and ethics. My role was to have the study go as planned so that the voice of the advanced age adults and their lived experiences in pursuing a doctoral degree through persistence and motivation serves as a role model for those who follow.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Four is to present the experiences of the participants who earned a doctoral degree while in the advanced years of their life. The 10 participants in this study were 62 years of age or older based upon the accepted Social Security retirement age (U.S. Government, 2017), when they received their doctoral degree after several years of study in accredited doctoral programs in the U.S. This chapter describes their struggles, obstacles, motivation, persistence and the essence of their experiences while obtaining the doctoral degree.

Participants

For this study, 10 doctoral degree participants volunteered to share their doctoral journey with the hope that future doctoral students learn from their experiences. Surprisingly, I found that many of the 62 and older advanced age individuals were still employed and working successfully for their employer.

The following descriptive portraits give a brief overview of the Ph.D. and Ed.D. participants who volunteered to be members in this study. The information gleaned from the demographic survey included the following information: (a) participants age, (b) gender, (c) race, (d) marital status, (e) year obtained last degree, (f) age when retired, (g) technology use, (h) Internet usage, and (i) e-mail capability.

See Table 2 for information taken from the demographic survey. All participants chose pseudonyms to represent them in this research study. The participants in the following table were listed in chronological order of age from the youngest to the oldest, starting with Spirit-led who was 62, and ending with Duke who was 84.

Table 2

Demographic Survey of Participants

Participant	Age Now	Gender M or F	Race	Marital Status	Degree Earned	Ret. Status	Tech. Use	E-mail/Internet Capability
Spirit-led	62	F	AA	Widow	Ed.D.	Retired 1997	Y	Y
Shannon	65	F	C	M	Ed.D.	Working	Y	Y
Minnie F.	67	F	C	M	Ed.D.	Retired	Y	Y
Mary Grey	69	F	C	M	Ph.D.	Working	Y	Y
Jake	70	M	C	Single	Ph.D.	Working	Y	Y
Edward	74	M	C	M	Ph.D.	Working	Y	Y
Alexander	75	M	C	M	Ph.D.	Retired 1996	Y	Y
Linda	76	F	C	Divorced	Ph.D.	Working	Y	Y
Noci	77	F	C	Widow	Ph.D.	Working	Y	Y
Duke	84	M	C	Divorced	Ed.S.; Ed.D. pending	Working	Y	Y

Note: AA = African American; C = Caucasian

The portraits that follow touch upon the information I learned from their demographic surveys and the fascinating information relayed from their interviews, letters of advice, and the focus group session. The participants are from Site A, a public university, and Site B, a private faith-based university. The interviews are arranged in alphabetical order by pseudonyms, starting with Alexander and culminating with Shannon Quinn. The participants' ages ranged from 62 to 84, emphasizing that one is never too old to learn. Eight of the participants (Spirit-led, Shannon, Minnie F., Mary Grey, Jake, Edward, Alexander, Duke) have graduated within the last five years or are graduating this year; in addition, Linda graduated in 2009 at age of 66, and Noci was 65 when she graduated in 2007.

Alexander

Alexander is a 75-year-old male Caucasian. He earned his Ph.D. in 2012 at the age of 69 after he retired from the military. He honorably served the U.S. military for 28 years as an officer. He and his wife have been married for 46 years and have three well-educated children who have master's degrees and an associate degree. When not serving as a volunteer at the Tallahassee Senior Center, he likes to work in his garden and read books. He received his doctoral degree from Site A with his major in French Contemporary History and a minor in World History. He completed his doctoral research in Hungary, interviewing Hungarian women who served involuntarily as draftees in World War II in the German armed forces; before his research, their stories had been untold. Alexander was interested in improving his knowledge of the Hungarian culture and the hidden history of these women. Not only did he want to improve his knowledge of Hungarian history, he wanted to have educational competition with his children. He also wanted the knowledge and historical background to teach at the university where he obtained his degree. At the university, he experienced the respect of the professors and students because he was knowledgeable of the French culture having lived and worked in France for 13 years. The main difficulty he encountered while obtaining his degree was his limited knowledge of computers and what they could create; however, his steadfast determination for the doctoral degree resulted in his persistence to reach that goal. Alexander found that he was well accepted by his fellow students and professors and he improved his knowledge of English and French tremendously. Referring to his experiences in the military, he found that college studies were easier because the military was always training. Referring to his years in the military as lifelong learning, he remarked that he would do the doctoral degree program again due to the

learning benefits he obtained from the doctoral experience. In Alexander's words, "Do not be afraid to dive in and walk the doctoral path. If I can do it, then anyone can!"

Duke

Duke is a long-time student, starting in 1953 and finally finishing recently at Site B. Duke is a Caucasian male and has been divorced for 18 years. His two children are adults, and one has achieved a master's degree. It took him 11 years to reach the doctoral degree process. He first studied at Grand Canyon University and North Central University before entering Site B. At Site B, he earned an Ed.S. degree before continuing the process to earn the Ed.D. During his doctoral studies, he continued to work as his company's managing director.

Duke is very proud of his university years because he discovered his potential for making A grades. He remembers the time when he took a course and received an A, while much to his surprise, the rest of the class had an average grade of 65%. That was his turning point in education. At that point he knew that he was intellectually capable of earning all As, and that his age had nothing to do with poor academic grades. From then on, he strove to earn all As and be the best in the class. His transcripts show that he achieved his goals.

He is willing to help his fellow classmates and anyone who takes on adventurous and ambitious projects. His education has given him the skills and knowledge to be a managing director of a company. Duke has many fascinating stories and adventures to share with his classmates and his fellow man. He enjoys helping others as they walk the path toward a doctoral degree. He obtains his vast knowledge from the many forms of technology that he has available: smart phone, computer, television, video cassette recorder, recording devices, and Internet capability. The Internet gives him a means of accumulating his vast storehouse of information. With Internet capability, he has access to e-mail, Skype, Facebook, and LinkedIn sites which he

frequents.

Duke found that the professors at Site B were outstanding and willing to help, support, and offer him the needed advice to succeed. When the students and instructors discovered that Duke was in his 80s, they were surprised but respectful. Duke received his most outstanding occurrence from an Australian educator who is the leading authority on cognitive load theory. While studying the theory, Duke came up with an interesting detail about cognitive load. After Duke sent him the details of his idea, this expert responded via e-mail to Duke with the following message:

Sounds like an ingenious idea to me. One of the major findings (in fact the very first finding) of CLT is that requiring learners to search for information imposes a very heavy, extraneous cognitive load. The search process overloads working memory with processes that are extraneous to learning. If your technology works properly it is likely to be invaluable and very widely used.

With this affirmation, Duke knew he was on solid footing and wanted to finish his educational journey using cognitive load to the best of his ability. He had started his educational journey in 1952 and hoped to complete it with graduation in 2019. Duke is still working as a managing director for a company, a job he continued fulltime while working on his degrees. One of the things he quickly learned during his education was that elderly people do not “dumb down” a class and that he is as smart or smarter than the younger students.

Edward

Edward is a 2016 graduate from Site A, a public university. He graduated with a Ph.D., is 74-years-old, and is a Caucasian with seven children. Four of the children were from his marriage with his first wife and three step children are from his second marriage. Education is

an important milestone in his family: His wife and one of his children have master's degrees, while three more of the children have either a bachelor's degree or a junior college degree. Edward served 48 years as a minister before enrolling in the university for a Ph.D. The Ph.D. degree has enabled him to obtain a job as an adjunct professor at a nearby college. His life is quite busy with the dual role of ministerial work and college teaching. He feels that an active mind and a well-maintained body are the secrets to a well-balanced and productive life span. Throughout the years, he has kept his mind active by working toward earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in biology, a Master of Divinity degree in pastoral training, and a Ph.D. in humanities.

Edward began his doctoral degree in 1991 while ministering to his flock, and finished the degree in 2016 at the age of 72. Even though his degree work was in humanities, he was able to learn Greek and Hebrew, enabling him to translate many ancient biblical writings. Crediting God's help, he was able to pastor a church, attend classes, and complete homework without missing a class, while faithfully ministering to his church flock.

With "the help of the Lord," Edward found a professor to lead his doctoral project and to help him write his dissertation in Latin. He accomplished all this even though his computer was mangling his classwork and dissertation. He attributes the accomplishment of all these arduous tasks to the Lord's help. By learning Greek, he was able to teach the Bible in college whenever the opportunity presented itself. Not only was learning Greek and getting the doctoral degree important, it gave him the opportunity to teach in college and to write. Edward feels he was fortunate the professors and college students accepted him and treated him with positive feedback.

Edward is a light-footed romantic because he likes to hold a partner and dance to ballroom music. This activity provided him with the proper exercise to keep in shape and

maintain the health of his body. Because he found it difficult to get enough exercise while teaching in college and ministering to his church flock, finding time to dance was very important for the exercise and to spending time with his wife.

Edward attributed his persistence to enroll and complete a doctoral degree to God, who encouraged him and helped him focus on every new task. Reflecting on his university years, he now wishes he had written the dissertation in Greek instead of Latin; he claims he would have used the New Testament for the document.

Edward uses the Greek knowledge he learned while pursuing the doctoral degree to help him understand the Bible better and for teaching and preaching in his weekly ministerial sermons. In hindsight, he wishes he had done things differently for his doctoral degree. One of the things he would have done differently would be to start learning Greek sooner so he would be better prepared to understand the Bible. His recommendation to those who want to pursue a doctoral degree would be to investigate deeply into the programs offered and determine which area of expertise best suits one's personality and interests. He recommends that a person "figure out if it's God's will for you to do this, then move ahead and do not get discouraged."

Edward gave God the credit for giving him the ability, time, money, and support to accomplish the task of obtaining the degree. His advice is as follows: "Be in the right relationship with God based on grace and faith in Him as the Lord and Savior. If God is leading you to get a doctorate, then go for it, trusting Him to guide and provide."

Jake

Jake is a 70-year-old male Caucasian who has never been married and has no children. He is an educated man with three doctoral degrees, with his last doctoral degree earned in 2014 at the age of 66. The degrees are a DVM, Ph.D. in Therapy and Accounting, and a Ph.D. in

marriage and family. Jake enjoys learning new activities which explains why he has obtained all the degrees. He has worked at numerous occupations: veterinarian, school teacher, accountant, and preacher. Having served as a preacher since 1990, he also works as a certified public accountant. When he is not busy working at one of his occupations, he enjoys gymnastics, plays golf, likes to swim and fish, and enjoys working outside.

In talking with Jake, I quickly discovered that originally, he wanted to be a medical doctor, but he never had the time to educate himself in the medical field. Regardless of circumstantial happenings, he became proficient in psychology and counseling and spent many years as a successful counselor.

After his mother died in 2006, he felt lost, so he decided to return to school to obtain a Ph.D. He applied to two universities, and initially both rejected him. But shortly after the rejections, the Site A university called him with an opening in a paid program after two other recipients had canceled. Accepting the offer, Jake moved to Site A from Tennessee to enter a marriage and family therapy program.

The counseling program offered classes in the daytime and clinical hours in the evenings. Returning to his apartment at 9:00 or 10:00 in the evening left Jake with little time to study for his classes; he was so stressed that he seriously considered quitting the program. Fortunately, one professor recognized his depression and came to the rescue. Her understanding and expertise helped him continue in the program and regain the motivation to persist to finish the degree.

Before long Jake realized that while counseling was enjoyable, preaching was his passion. He had invested many years of work and clinical hours into the counseling degree, so

he knew it was unwise to change directions at that time. He decided to finish the degree and clinical hours because he knew that a minister would spend many hours counseling his flock.

To prepare for the ministry, Jake used his extra credit hours to take courses in Greek to better understand the Bible. He quickly learned that he was depending upon the Lord to help him through the doctoral program. Jake said, "Depend upon the Lord. He will help you grow as a person. Let the Lord lead you." He gives credit to the Lord for leading him to the doctoral program and it was the Lord that helped him through the period when he wanted to quit. It was the Lord who led the professor to recognize his stress, so the Lord sent her to assist Jake and help him get back on track to finish his doctoral degree.

Linda

Linda is a 76-year-old Caucasian female. She was married for 12 years but is now divorced. While married, she and her husband did not have any children. Linda used to have a career in civil service, but when the university system had an opening, she left civil service and became a college professor.

Linda was so successful as a college professor that for the last four years she was the program chair at the college. She is still in that position and doing so successfully. She obtained her Ph.D. in 2009 at the age of 67 and loves working in the education field. Her spare time involves service for community projects, and she is not contemplating retiring from the education field. When she has spare time, she enjoys traveling in addition to the sport of the education field. When she has spare time, she enjoys traveling in addition to the sport of golf and the hobby of gardening.

Linda is technologically savvy in the use of all types of electronic devices and Internet programs. As a native of Florida, her education has been derived from Florida universities. She

is talented in the field of graphic arts and had worked diligently at two jobs to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. That was only the beginning; Linda persisted to earn a MA degree and a position in Baltimore as a computer programmer trainee at the Social Security Administration (SSA). While working with Social Security, she decided to go back to school and earn another degree, a master of distance education (MDE). The MDE was a major turning point in her life as it gave her the idea to start a career in education. This idea inspired her to return to education to pursue and complete a Ph.D. degree in Instructional Systems with a Minor in Cognitive Science. That was the beginning of her career in education.

Linda's whole life has been devoted to educational pursuits. She is impressed with the changes that have been made in education over the years. Throughout her Ph.D. program, she studied with students from Germany, England, Turkey, Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Australia, Israel, Belize, and many others. The fact that educational programs have become very international and filled with diversity shows how the world is maturing and advancing intellectually. Linda was pleasantly surprised at the changes that occurred in the universities from the time she started college to today's international mix and age range of students. She feels that advanced age individuals should not feel out of place in the classroom today because the classes are filled with a wide range of ages from the very young to the very mature. Linda concluded, "I believe these experiences were evidence of the advancement in education and attitudes toward diversity and life-long learning."

Financial support from family or lack of it should not stop someone from obtaining a degree. Linda had no financial support from her family, yet she managed to work and pay for 14 years of education on her own through campus jobs, scholarships, and graduate assistantships. Throughout the 14 years of education, no one tried to discourage her, and she found that the

professors and fellow classmates treated her as an equal. She found that mature students were very welcome in the classrooms because their work and life experiences enhanced the learning experience for both younger students and mature students.

One factor that led Linda to pursue a Ph.D. was the fact that a Ph.D. would prepare her for anything that she might want to do and that the credentials would open doors that otherwise might be closed. To recap Linda's words, "The Ph.D. is the capstone of a specific educational journey. I always seek to achieve the pinnacle of anything I pursue."

Linda did not consider graduate study to be an arduous task. A Ph.D. need not be more difficult than a master's; what she discovered was that a Ph.D. was a test of perseverance more than anything else. Because she always sought to achieve the pinnacle of anything she pursued, she has enjoyed success, explaining, "It is a part of who I am. If learning and contributing is your joy — do not let anything stop you!"

Mary Grey

Mary Grey is the next to youngest recipient of a doctoral degree participating in this research. Mary Grey is a Caucasian, married, and 69 years old at the time of her interview. She and her husband reside in Florida and have been married for 26 years. They have two adult children; both of her children and her husband have earned Associate of Arts (AA) degrees.

After high school, Mary attended college for a year and then dropped out to get married. When she was 25, she returned to college to get her bachelor's degree in journalism and mass communication. She took a hiatus from school until she was 57 when she returned to the university to receive a master's degree in applied linguistics and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Mary Grey obtained her master's and Ph.D. degrees at a Site A. Mary is another one of the participants who has never retired and continues to work for the state of Florida, accumulating 28 years of service in that capacity.

Returning to higher education increased Mary Grey's enthusiasm for education, and she soon decided to pursue a Ph.D. degree. Mary Grey obtained her Ph.D. in 2014 when she was 65, thus making her the next to youngest member of the research participants. When she is not working, she likes to go bird watching and identify the various species of birds. In addition to bird watching, she likes to read and improve her mind.

Mary Grey was pleasantly surprised to find that the younger students in the college classes accepted her, and she quickly became friends with many of them. Transitioning to a doctoral program and a new degree was a challenge, but her love of being in the classroom, love of reading, and desire to learn new things made it easier to assume the arduous task of working for the state and going back to school for a new degree. While many of the younger students in her classes were not working while in school, Mary Grey continued working for the state. She enjoyed a great deal of support from her husband, children, employers, advisor, and fellow students and was very pleased when the students and professors accepted her as an equal, making her feel included. No one treated her differently except one Asian student who told her that she thought of Mary Grey as her grandmother.

When asked what obstacles she had to overcome to pursue her doctoral degree, Mary Grey replied, "Just finding time to do it while I was working full time. I am a persistent person. Once I make up my mind to do something, I nearly always do it." When Mary Grey was asked what successes or accomplishments she obtained while pursuing her doctoral degree, she replied, "The pride of completing the degree and the respect of the co-workers. I love learning new

things and I would definitely do it again because it was so rewarding.” Her parting advice for anyone interested in walking the doctoral path was as follows: “You have to really want to do it, you have to have the commitment, you have to plan out your path, and you have to have the complete support of our partner.”

Minnie Fearon

Minnie Fearon is a vivacious 67-year-old Caucasian female living in the western part of the U.S. She has been married for 35 years. Minnie and her husband have three adult children who are well-educated. Both her husband and her children pursued higher education after high school with all four earning a bachelor’s degree and two continuing on to earn a master’s degree. During research on universities with online classes, she found that most of the universities had no interaction with the professors and classmates. Minnie chose Site B university because all the online courses included interaction with the professors and the classmates. At Site B, she pursued and earned an Ed.S. degree first before undertaking the doctoral program and its required studies. Site B was also her choice because it was a Christian university and she hoped to someday open her own Christian school.

Serving as an educator, Minnie’s degrees are centered around adult education and curriculum and instruction. For the last five to six years, her dream has been to start a Christian school after finishing her doctoral degree. The goal is not just to start a Christian school, but to start a free, no tuition Christian school. She wants to offer a Christian education available to everyone.

Because online college courses were not available in her younger years, Minnie had to wait until recently to obtain her dream of a doctoral education. She believes that her professors and classmates treated her no differently because she was older.

Minnie encourages everyone to go after his or her lifelong goals because as an older advanced age individual, she experienced no conflicts or differences while pursuing her doctoral degree. Throughout her educational school experiences, she encountered no road blocks in her educational path. The only thing that she would do differently would be to accept more help from others to make the educational path easier. To anyone interested in walking the same doctoral path as she did, Minnie advises: “Persist! Do not give up. Whatever you choose for a career, work directly toward it. You can do it!”

Noci

Noci is a 77-year-old Caucasian female who was widowed after 40 years of marriage to an enlisted man. She and her husband have four children. The husband and the oldest son both earned bachelor’s degrees. Noci served her community as a teacher and spent more than 40 years teaching in elementary, secondary, and higher education. Retired from teaching public school, she facilitates classes at the Center for Lifelong Learning and at a university in west Florida. Although she acquired a Ph.D., she is currently working on an AA degree in art.

Noci learned to read at the age of three, then attended a one-room Nebraska country school from kindergarten through eighth grade. After graduation from high school, she worked in a bank until she married and enrolled at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. After a divorce and a 6-year hiatus from the university caused by lack of financial resources, Noci returned to school for a year and a half. Remarried and with a child, she returned to college whenever her husband was overseas. When he was called to return to Labrador, Newfoundland, the family went to Labrador where she organized women’s discussion groups and directed plays at the recreation center.

When she returned to the United States, Noci returned to school, finishing a BS in Reading and English. Noci and her husband lived in England twice when he was in the service and were assigned to six different locations stateside. She started her Ph.D. in 1995 and finished in 2007.

Noci had significant experiences with her professors as she was the same age as they were and older than the other students. She was a “been there, done that,” audio-visual aid in many classes. Deaths of her father, mother, father-in-law, and husband, plus her own breast cancer surgery and treatment were among the most significant experiences during her matriculation. Taking formal and informal classes during the years, she never stopped learning.

Though she received two scholarships, she continued her college education using her own money. Over the years, she would drop out of school and work until she had the money to continue. No one attempted to dissuade Noci from going to college or taking any class. When she began to study Adult and Continuing Education, she found her niche, with the Comparative and International Education Society providing extra support.

An autodidact, Noci has constantly struggled to continue her learning. Because of constant moves and little financial support, she struggled to continue her formal education, even though family was not always supportive. She was a mentor, a friend, and an inspiration to the younger students in college.

If she had to do it all over again, Noci guesses there would be few changes. She advises students of any age to keep persisting. "Your life experiences cannot be discounted, and you cannot erase them from your memory. They shape your worldview." Noci believes older fellow students and colleagues can see problems that younger people cannot, and these older

students are an invaluable resource for every course of study and college in the U.S.

Spirit-led

Spirit-led is the youngest participant in this research. She is 62 years old, a widow with two children, and a mixed ethnic background of African American and Native American Indian. Currently a military veteran, she was Spirit-led to enroll and obtain a doctoral degree in leadership. She admitted she had never used a computer until enrolling at Site B for the Ed.S. degree. She professed it was difficult teaching herself to use the computer for classwork and obtaining the doctoral degree online. She continues to work as a self-employed director and executive producer of a production company. Not only was she a flight attendant, but she was also a veteran of the military before she undertook the path to an Ed.D. in educational leadership. In her spare time, she likes reading and speaking French and Spanish, dancing, traveling, swimming, and snowboarding. She also volunteers at a local youth center and with cancer organizations. In her “Dear Future Doctoral Student” letter, she listed the pitfalls of a doctoral degree after retirement in addition to points to remember while on the doctoral journey.

Spirit-led admitted that it was difficult to go back to school for the doctoral degree because 17 years had passed since she obtained her MA degree; it was hard to return to academia and start as a student again. To return to academia for the prestigious doctoral degree, she pursued the Ed.S. degree first. She found it hard to learn to use the computer on her own and to learn how to be a student all over again. Registering for online classes was a challenge for her as she said, “I had no clue about operating a computer, let alone attending online classes.” For the first two years, everything from enrolling to attending classes made her uncomfortable. She was nervous about everything: discussion board forums, her instructor’s syllabus, and exams. However, she really enjoyed communicating with fellow students online and looked forward to

that activity. These forums were her opportunity to express her personal feelings to her fellow classmates; the problem was that each semester a new class began, so the process started all over again.

The campus intensive classes were “unusual” and “challenging.” She admits she would have never undertaken the doctoral program if she had not been “Spirit-led.” The only reason she went back to college for the degree was because God told her to do it. That was the reason she chose a Christian university for her degree pursuit. Because the Spirit of the Living God told her to go back to school for a doctoral degree, she did not mention it to anyone for the first two years that she had been “Spirit-led” for this decision. While attending intensive classes on campus, she did not look her age, so the students related to her as if she was within their age bracket. Whenever she faced an obstacle or lacked motivation, she talked to God for help and motivation. She attributes her persistence to pursue the degree to God and her strong faith in God. Her persistence to pursue the degree to completion came from God, who kept her focused on getting the degree.

One of her biggest successes or accomplishments achieved from obtaining the degree was learning to use the computer and functioning in a virtual classroom with students who lived in various parts of the world. If she could do it all over again, she would worry less and would pray all the way through her degree in psychological counseling. Her advice for future students includes the following: “Be proud of yourself for choosing to embark upon the doctoral journey. Know that you have taken the first step toward achieving one of the highest degrees a student can earn. Challenge yourself, motivate yourself, and be proud of yourself.” That is her advice for future doctoral students.

While Spirit-led is younger than most of the participants in this study, it was difficult to find volunteers who were much older when they received their doctoral degree. Therefore, Spirit-led was invited to join the research as she was anxious to write the Dear Future Doctoral Student letter to advise future doctoral students.

Shannon Quinn

Shannon Quinn is a 64-year-old female Caucasian and is widowed with four adult children. The children are all well-educated with bachelor's and master's degrees. Before entering Site B for a doctoral degree, she spent 23 years in the U.S. Army as an officer and 17 years as a high school foreign language teacher. While serving in the military, she obtained her first master's degree in International Economics and Soviet Studies and taught economics at West Point. After her assignment to the United States Military Academy, Shannon was selected to be a Foreign Area Officer and was in a three-year Russian immersion program. Upon completion of the program, she was awarded an International Diploma in Russian.

Shannon was an Army Exchange Officer at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and earned a master's degree in National Security. While teaching high school Spanish, Shannon earned her third master's degree in Spanish Language and Linguistics. She was now proficient in English, Russian, Spanish, and German, having studied German for nine years while living twice in Germany.

When she felt the urge to return to school again, she chose Site B university because it is a Christian university. Shannon left her teaching position in 2016 and became a full-time student after her sister developed cancer, had surgery, and came to live with her. At the same time, Shannon was tending to her parents, who later moved into assisted living after living with her for

four years. Her parents were buried in January and June 2018. As she explained, she invested a tremendous amount of emotional energy into taking care of her sister and her parents.

After caring for her parents, she began devoting her full time to her doctoral degree education, pursuing the program in curriculum and instruction education because she was an adjunct professor at a local community college and wanted to transition into higher education after graduating. In October 2018, Shannon joined Site B university as an adjunct faculty member. While attending Site B, age was not a problem because her classes included students with a wide range of ages. Her motivation for returning to college was obtaining the doctoral degree that she was unable to do when younger.

Shannon Quinn is a lifelong learner and believes that there is always more to learn; she is determined to always finish whatever she starts. Shannon believes her education at Site B improved her research skills, made her more comfortable talking to people she does not know, and deepened her relationship with Christ. The importance of education was drilled into her when a child. She reminisces, “In a world where things are changing so fast, being a life-long learner is essential.” Shannon would do this again: “Education is never wasted, and it can never be taken from you.”

Results

The interview transcripts, Dear Future Doctoral Student letters, and focus group transcription were analyzed in accordance with the procedures described in Chapter Three. Throughout the process, I bracketed myself out of the phenomenological study to take a fresh perspective in examining the phenomenon experienced by the advanced age participants. Forthwith, the experiences were examined as if “everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). I first identified all significant statements, eliminated

overlapping statements, grouped similar statements into categories, and then reduced these categories down into the themes presented, organized by the research questions, below.

Themes

Central Research Question: “What are the experiences of advanced age individuals who are pursuing their doctoral degree?”

For most, it took several years to start and complete the degree process because almost all participants were employed while attending classes. Nine of the 10 participants experienced bumps in the road and summed it up as just another day traveling down the doctoral road. They all stressed that it was important to remember they were going to be persistent and get that degree. The themes that related to this research question were (a) personal challenges, (b) program-related challenges, and (c) significant successes.

Personal challenges. Nine of the 10 advanced age individuals faced personal challenges while pursuing a doctoral degree. Because eight of the 10 participants were working full-time jobs plus attending classes, their degrees took each of them many years to finish.

Finances. For nine of the 10 participants, money to finance the doctoral journey was a challenge. Spirit-led recalled that for the first two years of doctoral study, she never told anyone that she was going to college and paid the expenses with her own money. After two years of secrecy, she finally told her mother what she was attempting to do: earn a doctoral degree because “God had instructed me to do so.”

Mary Grey also encountered financial problems. While her husband and children knew she was pursuing a doctoral degree, they did not support her efforts with mental or financial assistance. With no financial support from her family, Mary Grey said, “You have to really want

to do it, you have to have the commitment, you have to plan out your path.” Without these, the goal of a doctoral degree is extremely difficult.

Because Linda did not have a family to help with finances, she had to support herself, her home, and other expenses while attempting to attend school for a doctoral degree. The lack of sufficient finances almost stressed her to the quitting point. Linda explained that, fortunately, “my studies were financed through (a) campus jobs, (b)scholarships, and (c) graduate assistantships.” Without these additional jobs, she would not have been able to finance the cost of her doctoral program.

Health problems of loved ones. Eight of the 10 advanced age participants had serious health problems strike their family while attending college for a doctoral degree. For four years while pursuing her degree, Shannon Quinn cared for both of her elderly parents until she could no longer care for them and moved them into a care facility where they lived for a short time before dying. During the time she was caring for them in her home, her sister had surgery for uterine cancer and needed someone to help her recuperate. She moved in with Shannon and received her care for four months. Even with all the health problems that invaded Shannon’s life, she said, “Don’t give up! It is doable!”

Jake had a similar problem. Being single, he was left with the care of his mother by himself. She lived with him until she died, making it impossible for him to travel any distance to attend school. When she died, he remarked, “I was devastated and lost.” That was when he decided that it was a good time to attend school, even if it was quite a distance away.

Most of the participants in this study are quite healthy except for one. Spirit-led, having served in the military, spent most of her career going to doctors in an attempt to find the cause of her illness. She was finally declared “medically incompetent” when they could find no cause for

the illness. After retiring from the military, she continued to fight this illness but without success. That was when “God told me to go back to school, a Christian college,” so she enrolled in Site B. All through the courses, she fought her disease and thought she would have to quit, but the Lord told her to continue. With the help of the Lord and her professors, she finished the degree, admitting that the process was extremely difficult to persist to the finish.

Fatigue and burnout. Because eight of the 10 participants were working throughout their coursework for the degree, the work to complete the degree took much longer. The one who experienced the highest amount of burnout was Jake. Jake chose a degree which was quite lengthy to finish: marriage and family therapy. This degree required years of counseling service and extra coursework in addition to the regular classes. Between the classes and counseling services, his day began early and lasted until late every evening, after which there was homework to do for his classes. He admitted that “the stress of the heavy load almost caused me to quit.” One professor noticed his high level of stress and with God’s help and the professor’s assistance in extending his deadlines for turning in assignments, Jake was able to make it to the finish. Jake admits that getting the doctoral degree took its toll on intimate relationships. While Jake is single, he noticed that a lot of marriages and dating relationships ended for his fellow classmates due to the stress and inability of time to make the relationships last.

Not all the participants reminisced about fatigue and burnout during the doctoral process, however. Linda’s constitution appeared to be strong and she remarked that the college process was no more arduous than a bachelor or master’s degree, and a doctoral degree was no more stressful than any other degree. She explained, “A Ph.D. need not be more difficult than a master’s. I found that it was more a test of perseverance than anything else.”

Shannon Quinn, while never experiencing burnout, experienced fatigue and worries. With both elderly parents in her care, she was attempting to provide their care in her home and make them as comfortable as possible. Then her sister had cancer surgery and needed someone to care for her, so Shannon became her caregiver as well. During that period of time, Shannon remarked, “I do not think that I am going to make it.” Emotionally, a tremendous amount of energy had been invested in taking care of her sister and her parents.

Program-related challenges. For many advanced age individuals, returning to academia can be a challenge after being away for many years. Challenges related to their program choice were encountered by nine of the 10 participants.

Computer challenges. It had been 17 years since Spirit-led enrolled in distance education classes or courses of study. Encouraged by God, she decided to return to academia and attend a faith-based college for her degree. First, she obtained an Ed.S. and then continued on to receive an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. Returning to academia meant learning to use a computer when she had never used or even owned one. With severe health problems and computer problems, she almost decided an advanced education was not possible. However, Spirit-led admitted, “God convinced me to continue,” and she attributed her persistence to finish to God and praying her way through to the end.

Edward also had computer problems which mangled his dissertation and made it difficult to do assignments and hand them in on time. He started classwork with Windows 7. His dissertation was due, and he was still having problems with the computer, so he switched to Windows 10 hoping to solve the problem. Much to his dismay, Edward remarked, “This did not fix the problem and the same problems existed.” Edward explained that the deadline for the dissertation was due and his dissertation was not ready, but fortunately, the deadline was

extended and “the person in charge fixed it [the computer] so it [the dissertation] could be submitted.” As Edward remarked, the Lord helped him, and he was able to submit and receive the degree.

Duke is experiencing similar problems. At the time of his interview, his community had received 21 inches of snow on top of ice. He took his dog for a walk and slipped on the ice buried under the snow, fell, and broke his hand. This injury made it difficult for him to take notes or type. The doctors said that he would need surgery on his hand, and, to his dismay, he is in the final stages of his dissertation and needs to be able to finish it.

The dissertation. Dissertations are a big project, and some make it to the dissertation and then quit with an ABD (“all but dissertation”). However, all 10 advanced age participants admitted that they were persistent and would finish the degree no matter what came their way.

For Edward, Windows 10 operating system mangled his dissertation, but the professor extended the deadline for his dissertation and Edward was able to find someone who could solve the computer problem. As Edward later said, “The Lord helped me.”

For Spirit-led, her committee chair asked her to rewrite her dissertation according to her directions. Then her committee member asked her to rewrite it a different way, so she did, but her committee chair made her change it back. Finally, Spirit-led told them, “This is my dissertation and let me write it my way” without changing it to suit someone else. The committee agreed, and Spirit-led finished her dissertation with her words and ideas and had no more interference from the committee members.

Alexander had a slight problem with his dissertation topic. Originally, his dissertation topic was French literature. After he took this preliminary subject for his dissertation, he found that he had made a miscalculation and that he needed to change his dissertation subject to French

Contemporary History. He realized that although he was a voracious reader, he was not a voracious reader of literature, so he had to change his path away from literature and concentrate on French Contemporary History. Alexander's advice to students pursuing a doctoral degree is, "Don't give up. Thousands before you have done it. It is worth it."

Significant successes. All 10 of the participants for this study experienced significant success in pursuing a doctoral degree, even though there were disappointments and failures along the way.

Working with students from around the world. Four of the 10 participants talked freely about the opportunity to study and learn from others and admitted this was an education one does not forget. Linda, when she entered Site A for her doctoral degree studies, quickly exclaimed, "I was pleasantly surprised that Site A had changed substantially since I left after my MA in 1971." Site A now had many international students. Linda loved the "opportunity to study with people from around the world." She found that in most classes, she was studying with 28 students from 11 different countries. These included students from Germany, England, Turkey, Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Australia, Israel, Belize, and many others. She found this to be a most rewarding experience.

Edward was pleasantly surprised to find that he also was studying with foreign students at Site A. Not only was he studying with a lot of international students but also many young students. This did not bother Edward, who remarked that he never noticed much difference in the ages of his fellow classmates, and he had no conflicts with young, old, or international classmates. His conflict was with liberal professors who wanted him to agree with their theologies or lack thereof. He attributed his persistence to complete the degree to God. He said,

“God gets the credit. He encouraged me and helped me to just focus on the next task. I tried to never think of all that I had to do to get the degree.”

Mary Grey was also delighted with the international mix of students in her classes at Site A. She remarked, “Most of my fellow students were much younger and many of them did not work. I worried that I would not be able to relate to them, but the opposite was true. They accepted me and I became friends with many of them.”

Experiencing academic success. None of the 10 advanced age participants experienced failure in their attempt to obtain a doctoral degree.

Linda experienced academic success in all her undertakings and doctoral classes. Her academic progress was so significant that she is the holder of several degrees. She admitted that when she graduated from Site A, she did not “have to go looking for work, it came to me.” She was offered and accepted an adjunct professor position at three different institutions. She was so successful at these three positions that before long she was offered a full professorship and the full-time position of program chair.

Noci is another student who experienced academic success in her doctoral classes. Her student successes started early in life when she could read successfully at age 3. Her accomplishments have been numerous since then. Both she and her deceased husband had successful careers, so she did not want to stop working as a teacher, yet she did not want to receive pay for her work. She volunteers as an adjunct professor at a college and also at a Center for Lifelong Learning. Her famous saying to her students is, “Keep on truckin’!”

Another advanced age participant who experienced great academic success is Duke. During his earlier collegiate years, he thought he was an average student. When he enrolled at a famous university, he was stunned when he discovered he had earned an A while all the other

students in his class were in the 65% range. He graduated summa cum laude. From that time forward, all his work at Site B has earned an A, and he expects to graduate summa cum laude again. Duke's advice to anyone who wants to walk the doctoral path is, "Discipline yourself to do your work on time and turn it in on time."

Sub Question 1: "What motivates advanced age learners to earn their doctoral degree?"

While there was very little literature on the subject of advanced age learners in doctoral programs, all ten of the volunteer participants were vocal on their motivation. Participants were motivated by (a) professional advancement, (b) their high value on education, (c) the joy of learning, and (d) as a role model for their children and grandchildren.

Professional advancement. All 10 of the advanced age individuals undertook the grueling task of earning a doctoral degree for two reasons: the joy of learning and career advancement.

Minnie Fearon began the doctoral degree process, not to advance in her elementary school job but to receive training to develop a free Christian educational system. Her dream is to start this Christian school so all can afford to offer their children a good Christian education. In her own words, "I wanted to continue to learn and grow" so she would have the knowledge and training to start and make the Christian school a successful undertaking.

Alexander's dream was to become a college professor; he undertook the grueling doctoral degree process in the hopes that it would make him more marketable for a college teaching position. His desire after earning his doctorate was to find a college interested in hiring him for a job teaching French or French history. To make his degree more interesting, he even traveled to Hungary and interviewed the women who were forced at age 18 to serve in the German army and fight against the Allies in World War II. From these interviews told to him in whispers

because the women still feared for their lives, he learned valuable information that was never made public after the war. His advice to future students is, “Try to enjoy the learning experience. Don’t give up. Thousands before you have done it. It is worth it.”

Once Linda started the doctoral program, she discovered that she wanted to finish the degree and change her position in life to teach higher level education. She finished her civil service career and the doctoral degree opened new doors for her in education. After she finished the doctoral degree, she was quickly hired as an adjunct professor at three colleges. These positions soon led to a full-time teaching job and a position as program chair for her college. Linda concluded, “Not only would I do it again, I might yet pursue another degree.”

High value on education. All 10 of the advanced age participants placed an extremely high perception and value on all educational endeavors. They all admitted they were “lifelong learners” and have always valued the education they were able to receive.

Jake admitted that the reason he returned to academia was guidance from above to obtain a higher level of education. He wanted to return to ministerial work and the Lord knew a higher level of education was needed to succeed in this occupation. Jake acknowledged that, at one point, “I was willing to quit.” But because he had a high value on the education he was receiving, he decided to continue and complete his degree.

Linda is another participant who places a high value on the education received from any degree or university. To her, there is no such thing as having too many degrees or too much education. In fact, she is now planning on obtaining another degree. In her words, “The world needs people with experience. Adding a long-life experience to education can enhance the opportunities to help make the world a better place. What counts most is what you have to offer.”

Mary Grey is another participant who places a high value on education and feels that more education makes one a more knowledgeable teacher. She admitted, “I am a person who loves a challenge. I loved being in the classroom reading, and learning new things.”

Six of the participants not only placed a high value on education but were extremely religious and wanted a good Christian education. The four Site B participants—Duke, Minnie Fearon, Shannon Quinn, and Spirit-led—chose the faith-based university for the purpose of receiving a Christian education. Although Edward was enrolled at a non-Christian university, he credited everything he did and received to the Lord who was watching over him. Jake was also at Site A, and was there because he received a grant to attend the school. He discovered that the students in the grant program were less Christian than he desired, so he searched for students in other programs that thought of the Lord as he did; these students became his compadres.

The joy of learning. The joy of learning was the motivation for all 10 participants in this study to begin and persist in their doctoral program. A reply echoed by all the participants was, “The joy of learning is my motivation.” While most faced fatigue and burnout at some point during the long and arduous process, all admitted that their love of learning helped them to persist and kept them going to the finish.

It took Linda 14 years of collegiate study to reach the finale of her doctoral degree. She said it was not an arduous task and that the joy of learning was a test of perseverance more than anything else. No one tried to discourage her from this task; her friends were supportive and encouraging. Linda found that the joy of learning was more common in formal education for both middle age and older adults. As Linda said, “Adding a long-life experience to education can enhance the opportunities to help make the world a better place.”

Mary Grey is another participant who experienced the joy of learning. Every opportunity

that came available in her life, Mary was engaged in taking classes to improve her knowledge and skills. She loves being in the classroom, reading, and learning new things. She did not go to college to improve her earning value. Instead, she wanted to advance her career and improve her knowledge as a teacher. Mary works for free in her community, demonstrating that the education she received was for the joy of learning. Mary enjoys learning and said of her doctoral journey, “I would definitely do it again because it was so rewarding.”

Noci is another of the 10 participants who loves learning. Even though her husband was in the military and they were constantly moving to his next station, she went to school because she enjoyed learning new things. If no college was available for her to attend, then she taught classes to those who wanted to improve their mind. Would she do it all over again? Noci’s advice to anyone is, “Keep on truckin’! Your life experiences cannot be discounted, and you can’t erase them from your memory. They shape your worldview.”

Role model for children and grandchildren. Edward mentioned that he has a very strong family and loves working with children and youth in his church. He has four children and his second wife has three, so his household is booming with lots of children and probably grandchildren. He mentioned that his fellow students and his children were very helpful when he was working on his doctoral degree, but Edward gives all the credit for his success with a doctoral degree to the Lord: “The Lord gave me the persistence and desire to go back to school for the doctoral degree.”

Shannon Quinn is another participant who has strong family ties. At first, when she was talking about going back to school for a doctoral degree, her family laughed at her. But when they saw what she was accomplishing, they reversed their thinking and supported her. The advice Shannon gives to prospective students who are thinking about going back to school

is, “Don’t let your age get in the way.”

Minnie Fearon has adult children and grandchildren, with the children all being very well educated with bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Her children support her idea of a Christian school where all desirous children will be able to attend free of charge. She hopes she will serve as a role model to start and run the desired Christian school. Her advice for anyone interested in pursuing a doctorate is, “Just persist and do not give up.”

Sub Question 2: “How does program choice influence the persistence of advanced age learners pursuing a doctoral degree?”

During the interviews, answers were varied, but two clear themes were identified in the data: (a) online education is flexible and affordable and (b) the participants desired to study at a Christian university.

Online education is flexible and affordable. Site B was definitely the choice for Spirit-led when she was looking for a university to attend. Having served in the military, she was eligible for a military discount which made the doctoral degree more affordable. Since she was paying for the education with her own money, it was necessary to watch the cost. When the money became low, she did not take classes until the money was more plentiful again. Spirit-led wants to remind everyone, “When life happens (financial problems, separation, divorce, illness, death, etc.), do not carry the burden alone.”

Another proponent of online education at Site B was Shannon Quinn. Because she had served in the military, she also received a big discount which made it possible for her to attend the university. She also lived a far distance from the school so the opportunity for online classes made Site B more attractive. She did not want to give up her teaching job, so the online classes made her education while working very flexible and possible. Shannon reminisced, “In a world

where things are changing so fast, being a lifelong learner is essential. Online education makes this possible.”

Online education at Site B was the best choice for Duke because, as he explained, 84-year-old men like the flexibility of not having to rise early to attend daytime classes. Classwork assignments for online classes allow students the freedom to do the classwork at a time of day when they are in their best thinking mode. Duke’s advice for online students is, “Discipline yourself to do your work on time and turn it in on time. Then you will succeed in online classes.”

Desire to study at a Christian university. Four of the 10 advanced age participants admitted that they wanted only to get their doctoral degree from a Christian university, and they turned down opportunities at other colleges and universities because they were not faith-based.

Spirit-led very quickly told me that the only choice for her degree was a Christian university. She turned down a university in the Midwest because she was determined to attend a Christian school. Because she was Spirit-led by God, she waited until a Christian university had an opening for her. Even though she struggled on the GRE and the GMAT test, she persisted until Site B had an opening for her to obtain an Ed.S. degree, after which she persisted to obtain the Ed.D. degree in Educational Leadership; she was not going to be deterred from obtaining a Christian education. Many asked her the question of why she wanted to go back to school at her age. She replied, “God told me to go back to college” and this school was to be a Christian university. Even though she could have gone elsewhere, her desire for a Christian university was to follow God’s wishes.

Jake wanted to further his ability to be a good minister. Even though Site A was not considered to a Christian university, he was offered a grant to obtain his doctoral degree. He

chose Marriage and Family Therapy for his degree because he wanted to be able to counsel his congregation. Later, he wished he had chosen a less rigorous degree, but admits he has used his counseling degree continuously in ministering to his flock. Jake admitted his degree has helped him “understand other people’s problems and help them with better advice.”

Minnie Fearon also places a high value on Christian education. Her intent in obtaining the doctoral degree was to make her qualified to develop a free Christian educational system so all families can afford to offer their children a Christian education. She had the encouragement and support of her community members and her family. Since finishing the degree, she plans on going forward with her plans for a free Christian day school. Her advice to anyone else who wants to pursue this path is, “Just persist and do not give up.”

Shannon Quinn also had the same desire: to study at a Christian university for her doctoral degree. When asked what influenced her choice for a university, she replied, “Being a Christian university was a very BIG plus. I have only taught in religious schools, so I was very glad to find a Christian university.” When asked if she would do it again, she said, “It gave me a purpose when reading the Bible. Education is never wasted, and it can never be taken from you.”

Sub Question 3: “To what do advance aged learners who earned or are working toward a doctoral degree attribute their persistence?”

After listening to all 10 participants talk for about an hour, I had no doubt about their commitment to persist in earning a doctoral degree. The participants were able to clearly articulate the motivation behind their persistence, which centered around the following themes: (a) support from classmates, professors, and family members, (b) personal commitment to

“complete what you start,” and (c) faith in God. For all 10 participants, it was a journey or stepping-stone for lifelong learning.

Support. The participants experienced support from three primary sources: (a) classmates, (b) professors, and (c) family members.

Support from classmates. All four of the Site B online participants received support from their fellow classmates, and five of the six Site A participants were also supported by their fellow peers.

Mary Grey was surprised to find her fellow classmates were much younger than her, plus they were not working as she was. She worried that she would not be able to relate to them, but the opposite was true: “They accepted me, and I became friends with many of them.”

Noci was also well supported by her fellow classmates. She quickly became friends with her fellow classmates, who discovered that she had many interesting stories to relate. The students were interested in hearing her stories about the Women’s Institute (WI) which was started in rural Ontario, Canada, during World War II. The WI was something that was never published in the history books and her fellow classmates wanted to know all about it. “Your life experiences cannot be discounted, and you can’t erase them from your memory. They shape your worldview.”

However, not everyone received support from their fellow classmates. Jake reported being harassed by his fellow classmates. At first, he had some support from his fellow classmates, but as time passed, he felt that “most of my support was from students in other colleges.” Jake felt that this was due to his advanced age compared to the other students in his classes. He ignored them as much as possible.

Support from professors. Jake's first semester at Site A did not go well. Jake commented, "I was looked down on by some professors" and he was ready to quit. But fortunately, Jake articulated that God realized his problem and sent a professor to his rescue. This professor took him under her wing and worked with him until the end. He is thankful that the Lord led him to get the doctoral degree.

Linda is another recipient of support from her professors. The professors always made her feel welcome "because her work and life experiences enhanced the learning experience for both younger students and mature students." After she graduated, she became an adjunct professor at three colleges and then was quickly hired by Site A for a full professorship and program chair position.

Edward was another recipient of great support from the professors and classmates. Edward commented, "Most professors and classmates treated me well. Although, some professors seemed to want to concentrate on younger students." Edward remarked that the only conflict he had was with liberal professors who wanted Edward to agree with their theologies or lack thereof or with professors who only wanted to hear their own ideas coming back from students on tests and papers."

Support from family. Family support was often cited by participants. Alexander, Mary Grey, and Edward all expressed joy and empathy from all the family support they received. Alexander was the recipient of lots of support from his wife and children. His family even encouraged him to go to Hungary where he interviewed Hungarian women for his doctoral research. Alexander commented, "Don't be afraid to dive in. I would do it again because of the fantastic learning benefits."

Mary Grey was another of the advanced age participants who received a great deal of

support from her husband, children, employers, advisor, and fellow classmates. Many admired her for going back to college and have asked her about the process. Mary Grey explained, “My family supported me in all my endeavors.” She further commented, “You have to really want to do it, you have to have the commitment, you have to plan out your path. It helps also, if you are married, to have the complete support of your partner.”

Edward was another recipient of good family support throughout his doctoral journey. Edward commented, “God supported me through my family and the church.” Even though he had the complete support of his family, he gave all the credit for his degree to God who gave him the “ability, time, money, and support to get it done.”

Personal commitment to “complete what you start.” All 10 of the advanced age participants commented that they always complete what they start. Even though they experienced fatigue and burnout and even thought of quitting, they always remembered their commitment to finishing what they had started.

Shannon Quinn served as the main caregiver for her elderly parents and also her sister during her recovery from surgery. Although she feared that these responsibilities would force her to quit pursuing her degree, she persisted, because in the back of her mind, she remembered that “you always complete what you start.”

Duke encountered a problem which he fears will interrupt the completion of the degree he started. His recent fall on ice broke his hand and required surgery. While typing is now difficult, he always completes what he starts. It is now hard to follow the advice that he gives to others, “Discipline yourself to do your work on time and turn it in on time,” yet somehow, he will accomplish it.

Jake was so discouraged after the first semester at Site A that he considered quitting. He remembered how some professors looked down on him, and he was harassed by some of the graduate students. However, he remembered that he was getting a grant to attend the college and he was not a quitter, so he continued to persist. He said, "I would not have stuck with the work to completion except I am stubborn, I wanted very much to complete the program."

Faith in God. Nine of the 10 advanced age participants all gave credit to God for helping them persist, in spite of burnout and fatigue, to finish their degrees. For one participant, it was extremely important to achieve this mission because God had told her to pursue the degree. This caused Spirit-led to enroll and achieve the degree at Site B. Spirit-led commented that without God she would never have made it to the end because of all her illnesses and belief that she was dying. God motivated her and encouraged her when she was confused. Whenever she had difficulties, she would talk to God and obtain His help to continue the mission. She explained that God was with her all the time during the program, encouraging and pushing her to the finish. She believes, "I would not have made it to the finish if not for God's help." She feels she accomplished her degree through praying to the Lord.

Jake was another participant who relied on God to help him and guide him through the doctoral process. He believes that God saw that he needed support to continue, so God revealed Jake's predicament to a professor who encouraged him to finish the doctoral process. Jake attributed his accomplishment of his degree to the Lord. Without God's assistance, Jake felt that he would not have been able to persevere on his own. He admitted that his first semester at Site A was very difficult, but the Lord helped him get past the first semester and then he was comfortable and enjoyed his studies. As Jake replied, "I felt guided to move forward."

Edward acquired his support for achieving the doctoral degree from God and he gives God the credit for all His assistance and encouragement. Edward advised, “Figure out if it’s God’s will for you to do this, then move ahead and don’t get discouraged.” Edward commented in his Dear Future Doctoral Student letter that “first, if you are not a Christian, become one. Being a Christian enabled me to make it through this process.” Edward also suggested that future students should ask God if he or she should seek to obtain a doctorate and if so, where and in what. Edward remarked that “if you feel God is guiding you to get a doctorate, move ahead in seeking to do so. Be in the right relationship with God, let God lead you to pursue the degree, let God help give you the motivation, depend upon the Lord when you need help, and trust God to provide you guidance and provide for you and your family.”

After working with these advanced age individuals, I realized that their themes of persistence and motivation were aptly spoken through sub headings or categories related to the themes of persistence and motivation.

For persistence, the advanced age individuals talked about stick-to-it-tive-ness to reach their goal, stubbornness by refusing to give up on obtaining the degree, and aggressiveness in being persistent to reach the end goal of the coursework. These persistent participants were the individuals who followed the rules, were always on time, and always finished what they started.

They all expressed the age-old adage that “once you start a project, you do not quit.” Without these persistent attitudes, the “Joy of Learning” is not achievable.

From the findings of the 10 advanced age participants, I was able to substantiate the participants’ motivation for achieving a doctoral degree. Advanced age individuals expressed their motivation to further their education through themes such as wanting to succeed and being a role model for their family. Not only did they want to be an asset for the family, but many

were anxious to advance in the workplace, obtain a more successful job, or be promoted to a top position in a company. Some had the goal of starting a new career, keeping the mind active, and being more global.

While all of the advanced age participants were hoping that the new degree would open doors for them, they also desired to keep their mind active and involved. These themes and the codes or subheadings were the outstanding focus derived from the demographic surveys, interviews, letters of advice, and focus group session.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the research results depicting the personal, social, and institutional factors that influenced the persistence of advanced age individuals who pursued a doctoral degree. The description of their experiences and the results of these experiences addressed the motivation and persistence to reach the desired degree. An analysis of the data collected via demographic surveys, interviews, letters of advice, and a focus group indicated that the motivation to persist to the end of their doctoral journey came from multiple sources, including peers and professors, loved ones, and their personal love of learning and commitment to finish what they start. The participants all exhibited an inner drive to complete their ambitious goal of obtaining a doctoral degree despite the strain of continuing to work and dealing with life's challenges, distractions, and traumatic events. Their persistence serves as a reminder to all that with motivation and "stick-to-it-tive-ness," all can achieve life's goals while living on God's earth. To recap what Linda said in her interview, "A Ph.D. need not be more difficult than a master's. I found that it was more a test of perseverance than anything else." Edward further stated, "I give all the credit to God, who gave me the ability, time, money, and support to get it done, plus throwing in some miracles along the way."

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the persistence and motivation of advanced age individuals who returned to academia to pursue doctoral degree studies. Prior research was lacking on advanced age individuals who undertook the strenuous journey of pursuing the doctoral degree. This study not only filled the gap in the literature by exploring the persistence and motivation to achieve this prestigious degree, but also highlighted that advanced age individuals were motivated to continue to work in occupations beneficial to mankind. The participants in this study shared their lived experiences as they pursued an arduous educational journey. Their stories may encourage other advanced age individuals to realize life is not over yet. They not only had the time but also the opportunity to continue to grow academically and professionally by returning to academia to pursue a doctoral degree. This chapter provides a summary and discussion of the findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The first research question of this study was “What are the experiences of advanced age individuals who are pursuing a doctoral degree?” All 10 of the advanced age individuals who volunteered for this study shared a multitude of personal challenges they encountered while pursuing a doctoral degree. These challenges included a lack of finances, health problems, and fatigue and burnout.

While nine of the 10 participants were holding daytime jobs, in addition to going to school, fatigue and burnout were prevalent. This accounted for the lengthy time period each participant required to completing the studies for the degree. It should be noted that they all

ended the same: they all were highly motivated to obtain a degree and they all had the persistence to obtain a doctoral degree.

Prior research on advanced age individuals who pursued a doctoral degree was nonexistent. Research studies on younger individuals pursuing a doctoral degree exist but no research existed on older individuals reaching the pinnacle degree. Some of the authors of these research articles thought the doctoral degree was a waste of time and money for anyone to pursue at any stage in their life. However, as Juznic et al. (2006) asked, “Who says that old dogs can’t learn new tricks?”

The next research question for this study was sub question 1, “What motivates advanced age learners to earn their doctoral degree?” All the advanced age participants were highly motivated to obtain a doctoral degree, either for professional advancement or because God instructed them to obtain the degree. All 10 of the participants placed a high value on education and were determined to finish due to this mindset. Six of the participants mentioned the importance of a good Christian education that led to a joy of learning. All but one had families and expressed the importance of being a good role model for their children.

As to motivation, they were all highly motivated to obtain the doctoral degree. Regardless of problems with professors and coursework, they were motivated to face these problems and pursue the coursework to completion. They were motivated to achieve the end of their effort: the doctoral degree completion and graduation.

The next research question, sub question 2, asked, “How does program choice influence the persistence of advanced age learners pursuing a doctoral degree?” While nine of the 10 participants were pleased with their program choice, one advanced age individual realized perhaps his interests were in a different degree than the one he was pursuing. Because he was so

close to completion, he decided it was wise to finish the degree he had started. He found in his new profession that the degree he had received played a major role in his ability to counsel to his flock. His doctoral degree was not wasted, and the information learned while pursuing the degree served him well in his new profession. For four of the 10 participants, an online education was the answer to their receiving a doctoral degree.

Not only was the online degree flexible, but it was very affordable because of military discounts. This increased their desire to study at a Christian university.

The last sub question was this: “To what do advanced age learners who earned or are working toward a doctoral degree attribute their persistence?” Again, the advanced age individuals flooded me with their persistence and determination to finish anything they would undertake, no matter the age or the time in their life. These 10 advanced age individuals were not only highly motivated, but were extremely persistent to finish to completion anything and everything they undertook.

Nine of the 10 members enjoyed the support of classmates, professors, and family. However, one participant encountered problems with a liberal professor his first semester, but surviving that semester made the rest of the doctoral studies easier. All 10 participants were highly committed to completing whatever they started. All had the mindset of finishing anything and everything they undertook. Six of the participants quickly gave God the credit for their convictions and willingness to complete the degree.

Discussion

Doctoral research and articles were largely nonexistent on advanced age individuals pursuing a doctoral degree. However, several articles examined why younger individuals pursued or did not pursue doctoral degrees and the logic behind their decisions (Antczak, 2014;

Findlen, 2014; Gopaul, 2015; Jindal, 2014; Woulfe, 2016). Many researchers mentioned that the monetary gain from this endeavor did not compensate the individual for the cost and time to undertake this task. According to my 10 advanced age participants, this was not a concern because eight of the 10 participants continued to work full time while attending the university.

Discussion Related to Research Questions

The 10 advanced age individuals who participated in this study were extremely motivated and persistent in all endeavors they undertook to pursue, even though they were wage earners working full-time jobs for their respective families while attending school. From the findings of the 10 advanced age participants, I was able to substantiate the major themes expressed in the central research question. In spite of personal and program-related challenges, all the participants rose above fatigue, burnout, financial problems, and health issues to attain their goals. As a result of overcoming these adversities, the participants experienced the joy of learning, advanced in their careers, and became a role model for their family. These findings were in conflict with articles found during the research stage that claimed advanced age individuals “dumbed down” a class because of their inability to keep up with younger students (Angielski, 2017; Budden et al., 2010; Golde, 2000; Turtle, 2016). On the contrary, the participants in this study were able to hold their own and keep up with the younger individuals in the class.

Personal problems can occur at any time during an individual’s lifetime. The 10 participants had many personal challenges while working on their degree. Research noted that finances play a significant role in one’s ability to attend college and persist to completion (Angielski, 2017; Canon & Gascon, 2013; Economist, 2016; Jain, 2015; Pivik, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). However, when finances ran low, the research participants in this study

remarked that instead of quitting, they took time off to recoup their finances. Perhaps this practice was part of the reason why it took longer to finish the degree.

Health problems could affect students at any age. Some research articles remarked that older adults were reluctant to go back to school because they feared that health problems would force them to quit (Phipps et al., 2013). These attitudes of poor health and mental stability could affect anyone's ability to succeed in college regardless of age (Beder, 1990; Phipps et al., 2013). These health problems affected both Spirit-led and Shannon Quinn and seriously affected their ability to continue in the doctoral program. Both thought they would have to quit, but they continued to persist and were able to overcome the health problems.

Another problem for the participants was fatigue and burnout. These challenged Jake, Shannon Quinn, and Spirit-led to the point where they thought they would have to quit school and forfeit the degree. A research article by Angielski (2017) reiterated the reason younger students dropped out was the responsibilities of caring for small children; however, this was not the problem for my advanced age individuals. What all students need, regardless of age, is a family dedicated to education who provides support to the person obtaining a doctoral degree (Cross, 2013; Feinstein & Peck, 2008; Griess, 2014; Haynes et al., 2012; Joyner et al., 2013; Mansfield et al., 2010; Peters & Daly, 2013; Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2009; Schmidt & Umans, 2014; Showers & Kinsman, 2017; Veal et al., 2012). While the participants in this study were no longer raising children, they did experience fatigue and burnout from doing two jobs: attending school while still working full time (Angielski, 2017; Budden et al., 2010). This stress prompted three of the participants to consider quitting, especially Jake, but they recalled their passion of finishing the degree, so they journeyed onward.

Program-related challenges can be common to someone who has not planned well for his

or her course of action in obtaining the doctoral degree. Branch-Mueller and Schulz-Jones (2017), in their research article, stressed checking out a college and its programs before undertaking the degree process. Although Jake feared he had chosen the wrong degree path, he decided it was too late to change his course of study. Once he completed his degree, he discovered that the path he had chosen worked well in his ministerial profession and was thankful he had not changed the degree he earned.

Computer challenges were a theme in this study as computer difficulties and breakdowns were a common occurrence among the participants. In his research study, Buglione (2012) found that even the younger college students were beset with computer breakdowns and computer programs with which they were not familiar or did not know how to fix. Most of the participants in this study were able to solve their computer problems or locate a technician to fix the problem.

Site A university was a magnet for foreign students. Linda was thrilled to discover all the international students in her classes. She quickly became friends with them and maintains contact with many of them. She remarked to me that when she earned her undergraduate degrees from Site A university, there were no international students in the classes. She admitted that she was pleasantly surprised to have international students in the classes and she enjoyed working with students from around the world. While this information was not a theme in this study, the occurrence of international students in the classroom means the professors need to be more cognizant of their teaching strategies (Boone, 2013; Fain, 2015).

Many articles have been written on tips and points to remember for academic success. One of the success tips came from Duke who advised that one must complete every assignment on time and not get behind. Peters and Daly (2103) wrote an article on graduate school and

expectations of success. In their article, they explained that “utility value drove participants’ decision to return and complete graduate programs, and participants had a high expectancy of success in earning their graduate degree” (p. 244). Cross (2013) identified grit and fortitude as two requirements for academic success. The participants in this study demonstrated both.

In answer to sub question 1, “What motivates advanced age learners to earn their doctoral degree,” the 10 participants said: (a) for professional advancement, (b) for the joy of learning, and (c) for the high value they place on the importance of education. Ryan et al. (2009) alluded that this motivation was the result of self-determination (p. 107). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), the SDT theory was evident in the research participants’ intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being (p. 68). In addition, all the participants were motivated to achieve the doctoral degree so they would be a good role model for their children, grandchildren, and others to admire and follow. To be this role model, four participants chose a faith-based university for their doctoral degree program.

Numerous articles were written on success and professional advancement; however, these articles were not on professional advancement for advanced age individuals. King and Williams (2014) listed barriers to completing the dissertation, applicable to all ages, but their barriers did not stop advanced age participants from completing their degrees; in fact, the participants professed that nothing would make them quit. Doctoral success was the dream of these research participants, and they had the strength and willpower to see it finished to a successful conclusion (Peters & Daly, 2013).

Sub question 2 asked, “How does program choice influence the persistence of advanced age learners pursuing a doctoral degree?” To explain the high value on education, the advanced age participants attributed it to support from their classmates, their professors, and their family.

To this end, six of the participants claimed that their success was due to their faith in God.

Doctoral research on persistence is ample (Barnett, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 1994; Deci et al., 1999; Mason, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Persistence is necessary at any age to achieve success while working on doctoral studies. Site B offers online education that is flexible and affordable, plus it is a faith-based university. The 10 advanced age participants in this study are hoping that their adventure in the doctoral program will convince others to follow in their footsteps. However, research articles emphasize that it is important to choose a program carefully that will suit one's needs and profession and will not later bring regret (Barnett, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 1994; Deci et al., 1999; Mason, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Discussion Related to Significance

Sub question 3 pertained to significance. Sub question 3 inquired, "To what do advance aged learners who earned or are working toward a doctoral degree attribute their persistence?"

Support from classmates helped students at Site A. Six of the 10 participants attributed their persistence to support from their fellow classmates. Deci and Ryan (2009) wrote many articles on the SDT theory and achieving success in college. Peters and Daly (2013) also wrote about expectations of success and support for doctoral students. At Site A, the interaction with their fellow classmates allowed them to obtain help with assignments in remediation of skills and knowledge deficiencies.

Universities should ensure each doctoral student has help when it is needed. At Site B, coursework was completed online from home so fellow classmates were not aware of someone's age. This gave the participants the feeling of being accepted as equal in spite of the age difference. Only two of the 10 advanced age participants encountered lack of support from

professors, and these professors were only encountered for one semester. One of these professors was expressed a liberal bent and acted as though everyone should believe, speak, and act as he did. The other advanced age participant encountered a professor that would only call on younger students to talk or participate in his class. Hannon (2015) found that the educational system prevented older adults from returning to college because professors preferred adults who were in their 20s. Buglione (2012), Collins (2015), Devos et al. (2016), and Feinstein and Peck (2008) also found the same results in their research studies. To counter this problem, Hannon (2015) suggested that professors should rethink their classroom techniques to make the older students feel more comfortable in the classroom.

Although some of the participants had no financial support from their family, nevertheless their family and friends encouraged them and wished them well. Characteristics exhibited by reentry adults, which distinguished them from the younger college students, were circumstances due to their age and position in life (Beder, 1990; Phipps et al., 2013; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The person who had no family support was Linda because she was single, had no children, and her parents were no longer living. Linda discovered that her professors replaced her family when she found that they not only played a relevant role in her success in school, but they also became her family (Phipps et al., 2013). Also noted were the roles the professors from Site B played in the lives of their students. In online classes, the professors became like distant members of the participant's family (Phipps et al., 2013).

While the literature seemed to focus on the younger students with no mention of advanced age individuals, it was assumed that all students should be committed to finishing whatever they start (Buglione, 2012; Collins, 2015; Dortch, 2016; Phipps et al., 2013). My

research participants were all committed to finishing whatever they started. Even though it took several years to finish their degrees, they all admitted that they were going to finish the degree: “no matter what!”

This commitment to finish whatever they started often came from their faith in God. All of the participants except one mentioned that it was their faith in God that made it possible for them to get through the trials and tribulations of pursuing a doctoral degree. Three of the participants remarked that they talked to God every day and asked for His help when they were having a problem. The students at Site B, the faith-based university, admitted that they would not have gone to a university that was not faith-based, and they were pleased with the education they received from the faith-based professors who handled their online education. As one participant remarked, nothing is possible without God at your side. While they were less skillful in some areas, and out of practice with some skills, God gave them the confidence to be successful and finish the degree (Peter & Daly, 2013).

There were many research articles that outlined the advantages and disadvantages of earning a doctoral degree. Findlen (2014) foretold of the inability for some to recoup the cost of the doctoral degree within a reasonable timeframe. Veal et al. (2012) also hinted that the student would be further ahead to stay on the job and not pursue a degree which would not allow them a quick return on the cost of the degree. According to the 10 participants in this study, these researchers were “off base” because all the participants had the commitment to “complete what you start.”

All of the participants except one mentioned their faith in God to help them through the trials and tribulations of pursuing a doctoral degree (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). The four participants at the faith-based university were adamant that they would not attend any university

that was not Christian based. The two ministers who attended a public university, Site A, acknowledged that God was with them throughout their entire doctoral studies. They attributed the goal of obtaining the doctoral degree with courage and fortitude. They admitted they had outlined a program for their doctoral studies using the techniques similar to the techniques found in the article by Mason-Williams and Washburn-Moses (2016).

What was significant was the attitude and fortitude of these advanced age individuals who said that they had a lot to contribute to society before they become “too old” to function effectively in today’s world (Berenson, 2015; Jamieson, 2007; Jindal, 2014; Juznic et al., 2006). To the participants, individuals who retire and sit at home are the ones who are dragging society down in today’s fast-paced world. To these 10 participants, the doctoral degree was the highest level of achievement and afforded them the respect and opportunity to succeed in their given field of work. The participants in this study believed everyone’s life span would be longer and more productive if everyone kept functioning and producing effectively in today’s busy world. This view was supported by research findings that expounded the theory that it is never too late to learn (Warhurst & Black, 2014). Mansfield et al. (2010) suggested that keeping one’s mind active and engaged increased well-being. Veal et al. (2012) wrote a research article that suggested that persistence and well-being increased success for ethnically diverse students. They found that well-being emerged when the students were true to oneself. Schmidt and Umans (2014) explored well-being among female doctoral students in a world that has been largely dominated by men. Haynes et al. (2012) researched well-being in female doctoral students and found that it was unique and constantly evolving as the students developed realistic social, economic, and personal expectations.

Implications

This study holds a range of implications and associated recommendations for research, theory, and practice.

Empirical Implications

Because people are living longer, individuals who are happy in their careers are still contributing to society. Only one of the 10 participants is presently not working but is hoping his future holds an opportunity to teach at the college level. The 10 participants in this study finally achieved the doctoral degree they were unable to pursue when younger. When they reached retirement age, they wanted to achieve the educational degree they could not pursue when younger. Research on why students returned to academia for further studies is not new but is largely limited to the younger age group of 25 to 50 (Hannon, 2015).

The reasons many do not return to academia for another degree were often the result of family responsibilities, raising children, and working to support the family. The 10 advanced age participants in this study had the time to return to academia and pursue a degree which opened doors and provided advancement opportunities in their occupation. Nine of the 10 participants are still working. The new doctoral degree recently obtained gave some of the advanced age learners advancement in their chosen profession and for the others, it opened doors to a new career. The findings of this study demonstrate that empirical studies on persistence, motivation, and self-determination are applicable to all ages, genders, ethnicities, and all stages of life (Haynes et al., 2012; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). What is important was the effort an individual made to achieve an ambition or goal, and this goal was the crux of this phenomenological study: to describe the persistence and motivation of the 10 advanced age individuals who returned to academia in pursuit of the coveted doctoral degree.

Theoretical Implications

Obtaining this new doctoral degree motivated the 10 participants to persist through the long process of improving their education. The persistence and motivation of these advanced age learners were enhanced through their participation with professors and classmates in the doctoral degree classes. Findings from these 10 advanced age participants who vividly described their doctoral degree experiences support Deci and Ryan's (1991, 1994) theory of self-determination as they were extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to earn the degree. All 10 participants were extrinsically motivated to obtain the degree in order to increase professional opportunities before or after formal retirement. However, intrinsic motivation was also evident in the joy involved in earning the desired degree despite the years it took each to obtain.

The doctoral degree classes allowed the 10 participants the opportunity to develop more intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and also to increase their self-determination to earn the degree (Deci & Ryan, 2001). This research on advanced age individuals is significant because doctoral degree research to date has not centered on advanced age learners. Although the highest attrition occurs when students are ready to enter the dissertation stage of the doctoral program, leaving many All But Dissertation (ABD), such was not the case with the 10 participants in this study. Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon (2016) attributed this ABD stage to (a) poor motivation to do the research for a dissertation, (b) problems with dissertation advisors, (c) poor academic attitude, (d) bad committee, mentor, and peer support, (e) poor college environment, and (f) lack of grit and persistence by the student.

Research articles concerning doctoral degree attrition also noted that women experienced a higher rate of attrition compared to men (Brown & Watson, 2010; Schmidt & Umans, 2014). Researchers found that women has more difficulty in handling all their roles as wives, mothers,

and students (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). While this was a problem with younger female doctoral students, my advanced age participants were past the child-bearing and rearing years. They either had the full support of their husbands and/or family or no financial support while having no family interference.

There is no doubt after reading the research articles that females need more support services to promote doctoral persistence than the males. Universities that provide support services, strategic curriculum and instruction, academic and social integration, and program structures that foster social integration with faculty, peers, and familial integration would be the institution of choice. According to the 10 participants in this study, universities that provide these services will be better prepared for the challenges and setbacks of a strenuous doctoral program and will be the school of choice for future doctoral degree students.

Another interesting research article on female doctoral students found that they faced more challenges at universities than their male peers (Schmidt & Umans, 2014). These female students reported their race, class, gender, age, national origin, and language were considered deficits to their success in college. My six female participants did not complain about being more challenged than the males and they all expressed feelings of well-being, self-worth, and self-efficacy in their classes.

Deci and Ryan's (1991) SDT theory adds credence to stage eight of Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development, Integrity versus Despair. When the participants used the self-determination theory to complete college assignments, they were displaying Erikson's (1959) integrity by leading successful lives. The intelligence of my 10 participants to successfully complete graduate work dispels the research articles commenting on the lesser ability of advanced age individuals, the slower classroom ability of the older adult, and the

unacceptance of the older adults with his or her fellow classmates. My 10 participants did not find these problems in the classroom. In the faith-based university, the classes were on line so nobody saw or knew their age, so they were accepted as an equal. In the classroom in the public university, the older adults found that they could outperform their younger classmates. Noci even commented that she was often considered the “guru” of the class because she had traveled more and had more experiences from these lifetime travels. The participants often became the mentors to the younger students because of all their experiences and knowledge. These findings relate to Erikson’s (1959) integrity phase of stage 8 rather than the despair portion of Erikson’s theory.

Not only was Erikson’s (1959) self-efficacy important to well-being, but research stressed that self-efficacy was an important factor of well-being. My female participants reported that not only were they accepted by their fellow classmates, but that the availability and mentoring style of their supervisor promoted their well-being and acceptance.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (Ryan & Siebens, 2009), fewer women completed doctoral programs than men. This article, written by Ryan and Siebens (2009) for the Census Bureau, gave women less time to contribute in a professional role. This may be true for younger women because of their motherly role and family sacrifices, but for the advanced age individual, they are beyond the birthing and mothering years and it was possible for them to complete a doctoral degree in the same timeframe as the men. The advanced age females in this study found that it was easier to manage time for studying, easier to manage time for family and friends, and easier to have intrinsic motivation through faith in God.

Additionally, the six female participants in this study discovered that the younger females had higher dropout rates because they considered college too complicated for them to handle. Feinstein & Peck (2008), Phipps et al. (2013), and Rodgers (2013) discovered that the younger

adults' intentions were good, but these younger adults were unable to overcome their inhibitions, personal attributes, responsibilities, and personal obstacles to complete a doctoral degree. To counter the above findings, some researchers studied the success rate of students who persisted through the dissertation stage. While they were studying younger students, they found that grit, persistence, motivation, and a welcoming environment in the educational program were critical for success (Cross, 2013).

Practical Implications

The lived experiences of these advanced age learners provides a valuable understanding for others who want to embark on the same doctoral journey. This doctoral journey would not only be beneficial to the students, but also beneficial to the faculty and program administrators.

Advanced age doctoral students. For other advanced age individuals who want to trek on the same doctoral path, according to the 10 advanced age participants, the sooner they start, the better: the sooner an individual embarks on a doctoral study or any study which will improve their experiences and education, the better it will be for their mind, health, and the betterment of society. These findings have been confirmed by these 10 participants who successfully obtained the doctoral degree because they were willing to work toward that end in spite of obstacles and setbacks. They knew what they wanted to accomplish before starting the degree and what they hoped to accomplish. Failure to do so often means the candidate will probably reach the dissertation part of the degree and then select attrition (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; Varney, 2010).

Failure to matriculate and graduate may be influenced by other factors and perspectives. Finishing a degree is often influenced by one or more of the following: (a) poor supervision; (b) lack of financial support; (c) lack of social and mentor support; (d) low self-efficacy; (e) inability

to find a field of study; and (f) inability to find a subject for their dissertation about which he or she was passionate (Devos et al., 2017; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Because of this, it is important for the prospective student to plan well and avoid as many obstacles or possible setbacks. The 10 participants who volunteered for this subject were able to overcome the one factor which did influence them: the point where finances were low. When they encountered this problem, instead of quitting, they took a break and worked to shore up their finances so they could continue their studies.

Another factor which affected three of the 10 participants was poor relationships with faculty. This factor prompted Jake to consider quitting. However, because problems occurred with only one professor over one semester, his desire to attain a doctoral degree superseded his frustration.

While most of the personal challenges were overcome, the program-related challenges were another challenge that some of the participants faced. For Spirit-led, she had never used a computer, so she had to buy one and practice using it so she would be somewhat proficient in her online classes. The computer was a major hurdle for her to overcome.

Edward had both problems: computer challenges and dissertation problems. His computer mangled his dissertation to the unreadable stage; however, his professor came to the rescue and was able to fix the computer problem. This problem could have been avoided if Edward had taken the computer to a repair shop and had it thoroughly tested and reprogrammed before classes started. The computer repair shop could have installed Windows 10 for him and had it working proficiently.

While six of the participants were in classrooms, four of the participants were enrolled in a distance education program, (Site B). At Site B, all the work for an online class was computer

work. Therefore, it was necessary for the four Site B participants to have a proficiently working computer and computer program.

Implications for faculty. The experiences of these 10 advanced age individuals may inform colleges and universities of the necessity of having professors willing and available to work with the students. It is important to develop programs and support services that will better serve learners of all ages. The faculty needs to be available, willing, and trained to work well with students, especially with online classes. For the participants in this study, obtaining help from the faculty was invaluable when a student did not comprehend the work involved in a lesson; knowing that they could contact the professor for help when needed was extremely important. Knowing that help is quickly available would be a tremendous selling point to encourage students to choose that school for their degree. Because the dissertation was an arduous and time-consuming process, the university needs to reevaluate the dissertation process to prevent ABD and increase their graduation statistics. A possible solution would be to assign an academic advisor to each student when he or she enrolled at the university. The advisor would keep the students informed of the classes they should take to graduate and keep them on schedule so that at graduation time they had completed the necessary classes for their degree.

University and program administrators. University and program administrators need to recognize that there is a large population of advanced age individuals who have much to gain and much to offer their programs. Advanced age learners do not have many of the responsibilities that inhibit persistence for younger doctoral candidates (family responsibilities, professional responsibilities, etc.). This is a unique population, and if supported, has the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to persist and therefore increase university retention rates. Specifically, administrators who seek to grow and market their distance education programs would be wise to

market to this population, a population which seeks a flexible and affordable program.

Once this population is recruited, it is important for universities to provide the program supports students need to persist. Like other researchers have discovered among general populations (King & Williams, 2014), advanced age learners need good advisors and remediation in skill and knowledge deficiencies. It is important to orient students at different stages of the program to the different challenges they will experience in each stage, and to share strategies for persisting and overcoming challenges in each stage (i.e., coursework, the dissertation). Universities should also ensure each doctoral student is paired with an advisor who is knowledgeable of his or her program and who can connect the student with university supports that aid persistence. Some supports identified include computer support, writing support, statistics support, and program support. Carefully selecting professors that are interested in the well-being and success of the students are important in maintaining good relationships with the students and will improve the ratings of the university.

Limitations

This study's findings were limited in scope because they do not represent all advanced age learners in the various sections of the U.S. Findings were limited to the experiences of the 10 advanced age learners who completed their doctoral degrees at only two sites, a public university in the southern portion of the U.S. and a faith-based university in the middle section of the U.S. East Coast.

Additional limitations could be implied because the advanced age participants in this study were doctoral students in the educational field and the field of counseling for the ministerial field. Doctoral students in other disciplines may or may not share the experiences expressed in this study.

The final limitation may be related to the fact that these 10 advanced age participants were volunteers and perhaps were of a giving and helping nature. If they could be of service, then they were willing to do so. Whether these findings would have been the same with advanced age individuals who were randomly selected is unknown.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because studies of advanced age individuals returning to academia for a doctoral degree were nonexistent, there was an opportunity for more research to be conducted investigating advanced age individuals who returned to academia. In other sections of the country, the doctoral degree persistence and motivation of these advanced age individuals could be different.

Another recommendation would be to interview these participants in five years to see if they are still satisfied with the education they received while obtaining their doctoral degree. It would be interesting to hear them recount their stories of obtaining the degree and if they wished they would have taken another route in the doctoral degree program. It would also be interesting to revisit these advanced age doctoral degree holders in 10 to 15 years from now and see if they are still capable of maintaining their ability to hold their jobs and earn a living.

An additional recommendation would be to determine if these advanced age doctoral degree recipients recouped the cost of earning the doctoral degree, and if the doctoral degree enabled them to advance in their field or position (Boulos, 2016; Budden et al., 2010; Fahlman, 2015; Economist, 2016; Woulfe, 2016).

It is hoped that future studies of this nature will investigate a more diverse population of attendees in the doctoral program. Through research using convenience and snowball sampling, there will be more individuals from all walks of life returning to colleges and universities to improve their minds and status in life.

Another recommendation would be for colleges and universities to offer doctoral degree programs for advanced age individuals that are more affordable for the public, thus encouraging more advanced age learners to enroll in doctoral programs. As noted by the advanced age individuals in this study, keeping the mind active in the senior years maintains a more healthy and advantageous body for living longer and for being more productive in societal contributions.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of advanced age individuals who returned to academia for a doctoral degree. A transcendental phenomenological qualitative methodology was used to determine the motivation and persistence of advanced age individuals who returned to academia. Hopefully, the results of this study will add to the body of research and will show the motivation and persistence experienced by advanced age individuals as they matriculated through the doctoral degree experience. Through their sharing of experiences and reasons for pursuing the doctoral degree, other advanced age individuals may see the opportunity and gain insight regarding the pursuit of similar degrees.

It is equally important to note that the retirement years of life need not be wasted. Keeping the mind active is not only important for society, but for extending life and happiness. Spirit-led offered these hopes and prayers to all future doctoral degree participants: “Live your best life” and “Learn” from the points and pitfalls life offers. As Linda aptly remarked in closing, “If learning and contributing is your joy – don’t let anything stop you!”

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APPENDICES**Appendix A: IRB Approval****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 10, 2019

Elaine G. Phillips

IRB Approval 3581.011019: A Phenomenological Study of Advanced Age Individuals Pursuing a Doctoral Degree

Dear Elaine G. Phillips,

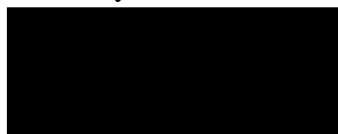
We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

The Graduate School

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.

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Appendix B: Letter to Universities for Candidate Information

Date _____

Name of University or College Address
City, State, Zip Code

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Elaine G. Phillips and I am a graduate student at Liberty University. I am pursuing an Ed.D. in curriculum and instruction. I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the doctoral degree.

The title of my research project is A Phenomenological Study of Advanced Age Individuals Pursuing a Doctoral Degree. It is a phenomenological study, and the purpose of my research is to describe the persistence and motivation of retired advanced age individuals either who have earned a doctoral degree from any doctoral program at your university. For this study, advanced age individuals are defined as adults 62 years of age or older based upon the accepted Social Security retirement age. I have secured IRB approval from Liberty University and will send you the IRB approvals, if needed.

I am writing to request your help in identifying candidates from your university records who meet the criteria for the study. To contact these potential research participants, with your permission, I would like to request a list of advanced age candidates who are potential participants for this study. I will need their name and contact information so that I can contact them personally and invite them to participate in this study. I will not share their contact information with anyone, and everyone will be given pseudonyms including the name of your university unless you prefer your name mentioned in the research.

This research will not be conducted on university property and the university will have no liability in the study. The research for this study will be conducted through questionnaires, interviews, journals, and letters of advice to anyone who is starting the doctoral journey. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to release names and contact information of potential candidates who meet the study's criteria, please provide a signed statement on approved letterhead indicating your approval. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at the following address: [REDACTED] My phone number is [REDACTED] and my E-mail is [REDACTED] I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Elaine G. Phillips, Principal Researcher

Appendix C: Letter to Provide Feedback on Interviews Questions

Dear Doctoral Colleague:

As part of my requirements for a doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction, I am conducting a research on advanced age individuals who have earned or who are presently pursuing a doctoral degree. I am conducting a phenomenological research on the persistence and motivation required by advanced age adults for obtaining this degree.

The title of my research project is A Phenomenological Study of Advanced Age Individuals Pursuing a Doctoral Degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the persistence and motivation required to persist to completion of graduate work. The candidates for this study will be advanced age adults who are 62 years of age or older based upon the accepted retirement age by the Social Security Administration. I will secure IRB approval from Liberty University before any potential participants are contacted. I am happy to share the IRB approvals with you once received.

I am writing you to request your participation in a pilot test of the interview questions, which I will be using in my study. I would appreciate your time and effort to review wording and provide feedback of any changes you feel need to take place to increase the readability of the prompts.

Thank you for considering my request to ensure the questions and prompts I use are clearly understood by my participants. Please return to me as soon as possible. If you have any questions, please call me at [REDACTED] or E-mail me at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Elaine G. Phillips, Principal Researcher

Enclosure: Pilot Test Questions

Appendix D: Sample Pilot Test of Interview Questions

Interview Project: A Phenomenological Study of Advanced Age Individuals Pursuing a Doctoral Degree

Date and Time of Interview:

Place of Interview:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

The purpose of this study and interview is to learn the participants lived experiences of attending a college or university to obtain a doctoral degree from a doctoral program offered by the university. This study is interested in the lived experiences of the participant in obtaining a doctoral degree during the retirement age of their life. This study is interested in having the participant describe all the obstacles, joys, successes, setbacks, identity problems, and reasons for returning to academia. This study is especially interested in the persistence and motivation of the participant in their ability to persist to completion of the degree.

Questions:

1. What are your experiences in earning or presently pursuing a doctorate at your age in your life cycle?
2. What motivated you to return to academia to enroll and earn a doctoral degree?
3. What influenced your program choice and choice of university for earning the doctoral degree?
4. To what do you describe or attribute your persistence and motivation for pursuing a doctoral degree?
5. What are your reasons or motivation for returning to academia for doctoral work?
6. What are your plans after earning the degree?
7. Please describe in detail any other information pertinent to obtaining or enrolling in a doctoral program.
8. (Thank the individual for participating in this interview. Assure him or her of confidentiality of responses and potential interviews.)

Appendix E: Invitation to Participate in Doctoral Study

Date:
To:
From:

Dear _____

My name is Elaine G. Phillips and I am a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, pursuing an Ed.D. in curriculum and instruction. I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. I am interested in why retirement age adults returned to college to pursue doctoral studies. The purpose of my phenomenological research study is to describe the lived experiences of advanced age individuals who return to academia in pursuit of doctoral degrees. I am especially interested in the persistence and motivation exerted by these adults to persist to completion and receive a degree. Participants in the study must be 62 years of age or older based upon the accepted Social Security retirement age and have earned or are working on a graduate degree in any doctoral program.

Because you fit the profile, I am writing to invite you to participate in the study. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to sign and return this invitation, to fill out a consent form, a demographic survey, participate in digitally recorded interviews, provide journals, e-mails, or notes of your experiences, and write a letter of advice to anyone who may be considering going down the doctoral journey path. You may also be asked to be part of an online focus group, which may take place after completion of preliminary data analysis. You will have the opportunity to look over my findings.

Your participation will be completely anonymous, and you will be given a pseudonym in the study. No personal identifying information will be required or published in the study. There will be no monetary compensation for taking part in the study. The only compensation will be the satisfaction of helping a doctoral student and providing advice to anyone who in the future wants to travel the doctoral journey.

If you are willing to participate, please e-mail me indicating your willingness to become a participant in this study. You can e-mail me at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions, please call me at [REDACTED]. Once I receive your willingness to participate, I will mail you a consent form and a demographic survey to fill out, sign, and return to me as soon as possible.

The consent document contains additional information about the research. It is important you sign the consent form, fill out the demographic survey, and return to me as soon as possible. If you wish, I will give you a copy of the consent document. I am looking forward to having you as a participant in this research study.

Sincerely,

Elaine G. Phillips, Principal Researcher

Appendix F: Participant Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study of Advanced Age Individuals Pursuing a Doctoral Degree.

Elaine G. Phillips
Liberty University
School of Education

Dear Participant,

You are invited to be in a research study of advanced age adults who returned to academia to pursue a doctoral degree at or over the age of 62. You were selected as a possible participant because you have currently finished your graduate degree or are working on a dissertation for a doctoral degree. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Elaine G. Phillips, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, with emphasis in curriculum and instruction, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of advanced age individuals in doctoral studies. This study wants to research the persistence and motivation required to have the ability to persist to completion of a doctoral degree. If you agree to be in this study, I will be asking you to do the following things: sign the consent form, complete the demographic survey, participate in digitally recorded interviews, share any journals or records pertaining to the degree journey, and write a letter of advice to anyone who may be considering pursuing an advanced degree. This letter could be like a Dear Abby reply to a request for advice on considering the doctoral journey. The demographic survey will probably take less than 15 minutes. You can describe your life and lived experiences in as much detail as you wish to share anonymously as all participants will receive pseudonyms and the only one who will have access to your true-identity will be me, the researcher. In the letter of advice, you will have the opportunity to explain in writing your experiences that have shaped your pursuit of a doctoral degree. The participants will take part in an interview, which can last if they wish. This is your doctoral journey and I want you to describe it in as much detail as you desire. The interview will give you the opportunity to explain orally your experiences. The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks in this study are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. There are no direct benefits to participants for taking part in this study. The indirect benefits from taking part in this study will give anyone, especially older adults, the impetus to return to academia to pursue their educational dreams and goals. You will have a pseudonym, but you may request the university or college not have a pseudonym. This study will be good advertisement for them and their doctoral programs.

Compensation:

There will not be any financial compensation for participating in this study. The only compensation will be the satisfaction of helping a doctoral student in fulfilling the dissertation portion of the doctoral program.

Confidentiality:

The electronic records of this study will be kept private on a password-protected computer and paper copies will be kept in a locked facility. Only the researcher and research assistant, if any, will have access to the data. To everyone else, you will be known only with a pseudo name. In any sort of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Any quoted statements in the dissertation will be entirely anonymous. The results will be presented in the dissertation. After three years, the raw data will be deleted from the researcher's computer, the paper copies of study, the demographic survey, the interviews, the researcher's notes, the participant's journals, and letter of advice will be shredded, and the audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or any other university. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

Should you choose to withdraw from the study, you may withdraw within two weeks of when data collection begins. Data collection is tentatively scheduled to begin October 2019. Any collected data will be shredded or deleted. Please contact the researcher by October 2019, if you would like to withdraw from the study.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Elaine G. Phillips. You may ask any questions you have now or later by contacting her at [REDACTED] or E-mail her at [REDACTED] or ephillips15@liberty.edu. or the dissertation committee chair Dr. Lucinda Spaulding at 1-434-592-4307.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than me, the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu. Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

IRB Approval for this study: _____

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix G: Demographic Survey

To the Participant:

Please fill out the demographic survey and return with the consent form to the researcher. Participants' names will be pseudonyms and will be anonymous to all except the researcher and the committee chair for the dissertation committee.

Feel free to add any additional demographic information, which you feel is pertinent to the study.

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Race:

Marital Status:

Number of Years Married:

Number of Children:

Education Level of Family Members:

You

Spouse

Child 1

Child 2

Child 3

Child 4

Last Degree You Obtained:

Year Obtained Last Degree:

Occupation:

Number of Years at That Occupation:

Date Retired:

Number of Years Retired:

Are You Now Working at Another Job/Occupation?

If so, what is your job?

Religious Affiliation:

Hobbies:

What Do You Do in Your Spare Time?

Do You Volunteer? If so, where?

Last College or University Attended:

Did You Obtain a Degree at that University?

If so, what degree?

Are You Presently Enrolled in a University?

If so, what degree are you pursuing?

Forms of Technology You Use:

Smartphone/cellphone

Computer

TV

VCR
 Recording Devices
 Internet
 Other

Do You Have and Use Any of the Following?

E-mail
 Skype
 Facebook
 Twitter
 LinkedIn
 Any other social media?

Give Contact Information for the Following:

E-mail address
 Skype name
 Facebook name
 Twitter name
 LinkedIn name
 Other social media name

Your Permanent Home Address:

Home Telephone:

Do you have an answering machine?

Cell Phone:

Fax Machine:

Best Time of Day or Evening to Reach You:

Any Other Information You Would Like to Share

Thank you for participating in the demographic survey. All information is anonymous, and you will have a pseudonym in the research study. No one will see this information except the researchers so feel free to give any information that will add to the reasons why older adults return to academia and why they have the motivation and ability to persist to obtain a graduate degree.

Sincerely,

Elaine G. Phillips, Principal Researcher

Appendix H: Interview Questions

1. This research study is partial fulfillment for an Ed.D. in curriculum and instruction. I am so pleased that you are willing to help with this research study. The information you are giving in this research will prove invaluable to future individuals that want to travel the same doctoral journey that you and I have undertaken.
2. Please describe in detail your educational journey through life. What degrees have you earned? What educational programs were your majors? Minors?
3. Please walk me through your timeline for obtaining a doctoral degree. In what year did you enroll and start the doctoral journey and when did you finish?
4. What experiences would you say were the most significant or outstanding during your timeline of enrolling and studying for a doctoral degree?
5. What made these experiences significant?
6. Please tell about other unusual or outstanding occurrences that took place during your graduate studies timeline.
7. What prompted you to undertake the arduous task of working toward a new degree?
8. What reasons did you have for going back to college at your stage in life?
9. What were your plans after finishing the doctoral degree?
10. What support or lack of support did you have while undertaking the years of study?
11. What influenced your choice of a university in which to enroll for these studies?
12. What influenced your program choice for pursuing a degree?
13. What were the reactions from people when you first decided to earn your doctoral degree? Did anyone try to discourage you? What did your family think of the idea?
14. Please provide an example of how professors and fellow classmates treated you

- because you were older.
15. How did your fellow classmates relate to you and include you and vice versa?
 16. What was your motivation to return to academia and pursue graduate studies?
 17. What obstacles did you have to overcome to pursue your educational goal?
 18. To what do you attribute your persistence in enrolling, at your age, in a doctoral program and then persisting to completion in the program?
 19. What conflicts, if any, did you experience with your family or friends or fellow classmates?
 20. What successes or accomplishments do you feel that you have obtained throughout this doctoral process?
 21. Why have you been a life-long learner?
 22. Tell why you would or would not do it again if you had the opportunity.
 23. What would you do differently if you could start all over again?
 24. What advice do you have for anyone who is interested in walking the same doctoral path as you?
 25. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in this research study. What other advice or points would you like to make about your motivation, persistence, and ability to achieve your life's educational dream?

Appendix I: Focus Group Questions

Focus groups provide an opportunity for the researcher to interact with several participants at the same time. The participants for the focus group can vary according to the unit of study and their proximity to each other. It is recommended keeping the size of the focus group to four to six individuals. For this study, the questions were as follows:

1. What were your reasons and motivation for returning to academia to enroll and earn a doctoral degree?
2. What influenced your program choice and choice of university for earning the doctoral degree?
3. How will you use the knowledge gained from your doctoral degree?
4. What obstacles did you have to overcome to pursue your educational goal?
5. To what do you attribute your persistence and motivation for pursuing a doctoral degree?
6. What can universities do to support advanced age learners in their programs?
7. Thank you for being my participants and gathering for a focus group discussion (Patton, 2002).
8. We gathered a lot of information about your experiences in pursuing a doctoral degree. Is there anything else you would like to tell about your doctoral journey such as the obstacles encountered, interactions with professors and classmates, and the successes you enjoyed?
9. What advice do you have to guide others through the doctoral journey?

Appendix J: Sample Letter of Advice

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

I am writing to you to help you choose whether you want to return to academia and pursue a doctoral degree. There are many fine colleges and universities in your home state and the tuition would be in-state and would be much lower than if you went to an out-of-state college or university.

The first thing I would do is make a list of colleges and universities that you might want to attend. Write down their phone number or a person to contact. Start calling the prospective colleges and universities. Inquire about the requirements to be admitted to their school. Ask them to e-mail you an application for their school. Inquire about their courses and the degrees they offer. Ask them to send you a catalog which has the procedure for application, courses offered, degree programs, and other vital information about their school. Inquire about the admission requirements and the fees per semester. Inquire if they have reduced fees for in-state students, out-of-state students, honorably discharged veterans, or any other discounts.

Inquire about housing facilities, distance from classes, fees per semester, availability, bath facilities, equipment furnished, size of rooms, or how many students per room. If dorms are not available, ask if they will give you a list of available facilities for rent that accommodate students, proximity to the school, and if they know the price and other pertinent information.

Inquire about online programs and the tuition per semester. Ask for details on how the online classes work. Will you have a professor with whom you can talk and ask questions? Ask what the tuition cost is for online classes per semester. Ask how many credits you need to obtain to receive a specific degree.

I would ask for a detailed list for the cost of room and board, books, student union fees, activity fees, dining hall meal tickets, sporting event fees, books, sports and social events, bookstore availability, and any other fees for certain activities in which you like to indulge.

I would beware of schools in which you have no contact with the professor or the other students taking the class. In this situation, you are probably taking an online course with no one to whom you can ask questions or who will explain the course material as you understand what you are supposed to be learning. In these situations, you are on your own and if you do not understand the material, how are you going to learn whether it is important and valuable for your career or interests?

A wise thing to do if the college sounds interesting and affordable would be to visit the school and inspect the grounds, facilities, and dorms. Further advice would be to find someone who has taken classes at the school and ask them for advice on the pros and cons of the school.

A Former Student

Appendix K: Advice Letter Number One: Duke

Letter number one is from a student who is in the final phases of the dissertation at Site B.

January 29, 2019

Dear Future Doctoral Student

Somewhere in the U.S.

North America, U.S.A.

I am a non-traditional student who will be 85 years old this October. I have a business background and live in Prescott, AZ. I am currently a managing director of two web based educational efforts. I went to Linfield College in 1953 and then served in the military for four years. I went to the University of Washington, both full and part time, from 1957 to 1962 but did not graduate.

After developing a web- based search system for Christians and a text to help people in studying the Bible and commentaries, I decided to return to school. I went to Grand Canyon University as an online student and graduated August 2011. I then took a program titled Master of Education in Educational Leadership at Northcentral University. I completed that in December 2012. After reviewing four universities for a doctoral program, I chose [REDACTED] for that goal. I finished my Ed.S. on March 2015. It felt very good to finish that part of my education and be approved for the Ed.D. program.

My objectives in this doctoral degree effort in education, is to help students get better grades using technology. I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. My recent experiences in education has inspired me to help other students, especially, non-traditional students as well as all students. The two web-based educational efforts can be accessed at these links.

<http://www.topgunscholar.com/>

<http://www.doctrinepublishing.com/>

Best wishes for a successful doctoral journey

Duke

Appendix L: Advice Letter Number Two: Mary Grey

Letter number two is from a Site A graduate.

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

I received my Ph.D. four years ago and it was an amazing moment – walking on that stage and shaking hands with the president of a major university, being cheered by my family and fellow students, and celebrating afterwards. Those were the images that I had in my mind when I started my doctoral program and I would encourage you to have images and goals in your own mind as you begin and continue your journey.

These goals and images will keep you on track when you reach the hard parts – because there **WILL** be hard parts. There will be times when you do not know why you even started, times when you are exhausted and can't write another word or read another research paper, times when your advisor or committee makes you redo some of the tasks you have already done. Those are the times to remember your visions, goals, and images of success. You will need these so that you can remember to maintain your commitment, to remember why you started, and remember not to give up when the going gets hard.

The second thing I would encourage you to do is reach out to others who are also working on degrees. There are online forums and support groups that can be very helpful – one is called phinisheD.org and it is a very helpful resource for all stages of graduate study. Be sure to have some study partners. I would not have been able to pass the statistics course were it not for my study buddies who met with me every Saturday to review the week's materials. Your university may also have information about support groups that can be helpful to you. You do not have to do this journey alone.

Third, be sure you understand every single requirement of your program. Ask and ask again. Find the best sources of programmatic information in your school and rely on them to help you know what courses you need to take, when is the right time to take them, and who are the most helpful professors. The requirements can be confusing, and you do not want to miss anything that you are required to do.

Fourth, develop an “elevator speech” about what you are studying. Be able to explain your research topic in 3 to 4 sentences.

Fifth, make use of online tools such as Mendeley.com to help you manage your research and resources. Also be sure to attend every seminar, class, or lecture about research management.

Finally, become best friends with your university research librarian. This person will provide immeasurable help to you in so many ways.

Good luck to you!
Mary Grey

Appendix M: Advice Letter Number Three: Shannon Quinn

This letter is from a doctoral degree graduate of Site B university.

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

Congratulations on your decision to pursue a doctorate! The first step is to select a program that is a good fit for you. Are you looking for a face-to-face program or an online program where you can take courses at your own pace? Are you considering a public, private, or religious university? Is cost a concern? I suggest that you first decide what emphasis you want in your degree and then search for a program and a school.

Do not let your age get in the way of making the decision to return to school. I think you will find many seasoned adults are returning for advanced degrees.

Before you begin your studies, have in mind what you might like to research for your dissertation. You can use your ideas to inform your writing assignments as you make your way through the course requirements. By the time you are at the point where you present your dissertation prospectus, you will be way ahead of the game.

It is important that you have the support of your family and friends. I would tell your loved ones about your upcoming academic journey. Ask them to pray for you and at the same time let everyone know that there are times you may not be as available to them as you have been in the past. At the same time, remember to keep a work-life balance. Perhaps you can block out specific times during the week that will be dedicated to your studies. You should also block out time dedicated to your family and your spiritual needs.

Seek out the advice of those who have been on this journey. If possible, maintain regular contact with your classmates. Be open to views that are different from your own and respectful when addressing their posts in your learning management system.

It is important to stay current with your classwork and work at a consistent pace throughout the semester. Don't leave everything to the end. You will just be playing catch-up and become frustrated.

The professors want you to succeed – it is a good idea to get to know them. Ask questions! If you run into problems beyond your control, let them know as soon as possible.

Most important, don't give up! This is a journey worth taking!

Blessings,

Shannon Quinn

Appendix N: Advice Letter Number Four: Spirit-led

This letter is from a doctoral degree graduate of Site B university.

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

As a recent graduate, I am writing in support of your educational journey as a doctoral student. In this letter, I will provide you with a bit of advice based on my experience as a doctoral candidate which includes: Points to Remember and Pitfalls of Being a Student After Retirement.

Points to Remember

- Communicate with your fellow doctoral classmates.
- Be encouraged and encourage others because the doctoral journey is challenging.
- Meet each instructor's class requirements.
- Write down notes you may need *before* taking a timed or open-book exam.
- Keep an updated dissertation handbook (constant updates may affect your original idea for a dissertation study by the time you reach that phase).
- Do not be discouraged when you receive feedback/suggestions from your (*Chair, Committee members, Research Consultant, Editors, SOE, & IRB*). Make sure they are ALL on the same page and you are not rewriting, adding, or omitting the *same* chapter, paragraph, or statement. Feel free to bring it to their attention.
- Stand firm on what you believe in and what you want to say about your subject of interest.
- When life happens (financial problems, separation, divorce, illness, death, etc.), do not carry the burden alone.
- Lean on a higher power and/or someone to support you while on this doctoral journey.

Pitfalls of Being a Student After Retirement

- **Age:** The thought of thinking one can keep up with the younger students and the world they inhabit can potentially be embarrassing and affect one's performance (grades). It takes more time to bounce back from an all-nighter for older students.
- **Instructors:** Having them see you as a peer but treat you like a young freshman.
- **Doubts about:** operating a computer, functioning in a virtual classroom, and having enough time to make it in the field. Most students will have 20 years or more to pursue their degree and work in their field.
- **Health:** At risk for more debilitating illness/diseases. It may take more time to heal from an illness or disease. Keeping doctor's appointments, not getting enough sleep, and finding time to walk (exercise) is important.
- **Financial Issues:** In addition to paying normal living expenses on a set retirement income, it may become difficult for one to find money to pay for tuition, books, computer, gas, and travel: room and board for incentive classes or study abroad.

You have made a giant step towards achieving the highest degree a scholar can achieve in education. You should feel confident enough to press on to be successful in all your future endeavors. My hope and prayers are that you "*Live Your Best Life*" and "*Learn*" from the points and pitfalls life offers you. Stay blessed!

Spirit-led

Appendix O: Advice Letter Number Five: Alexander

Letter number five is by a doctoral degree graduate of Site A.

LETTER TO A FUTURE DOCTORAL STUDENT

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with suggestions, lessons learned, and ideas which might be helpful in your efforts to proceed in future doctoral studies. The following comments are on the assumption the student has or has nearly reached retirement age.

First, the motivation. I sincerely believe that the most important thing that you will glean from a successful doctoral program is the personal satisfaction of having achieved your goal of obtaining a Ph.D. which explicitly recognizes your place among the academic elite. Since so few continue beyond an M.A., just obtaining your doctorate raises you in the upper levels of, not only, academia but also in the estimation of those around you. So, to a certain extent, the diploma validates your academic, social and personal worth. Two of my three extremely competitive children have M.A. degrees. The fact that their “old man” got a better degree on the academic scale and got it after he retired, engenders greater pride and love in their father than previously. All the above said in a simpler manner: the degree means that you are good and can be recognized as worthy of attention when you speak, especially on your subject of study.

Second, recommendations. These are based on personal experiences or experiences observed of others during my studies for my degree.

Don't be afraid, because you are older than your colleagues, to launch yourself into pursuing a Ph.D. degree. Your academic “peers” won't really care that you are older. Just do not be condescending about your vastly larger and more numerous life accomplishments.

Identify as early as possible your future dissertation topic. This will permit you to tailor your graduate studies to best prepare for when the research will be called.

Reach out early to academic advisor who may eventually become your research professor. The close relationship between professor and student can play an important role in ensuring your success. A close partnership is essential when you become stressed and frustrated.

Finally, try to enjoy the learning experience. Not only the academics but also your interface with your younger “peers”. You will realize that you are rejuvenated.

Best of luck. Don't give up. Thousands before you have done it. It is worth it.

Alexander

Appendix P: Advice Letter Number Six: Jake

Letter number six is from a Site A doctoral degree graduate.

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

I wanted to list a few points of advice that you should weigh carefully before beginning a program of study to obtain a doctoral degree.

1. Obtaining a doctoral degree is much more difficult than a program of study to obtain a master's degree!
 - a. A master's degree is a step child to obtaining a doctoral degree.
 - b. It will probably be a lot more work than a master's degree.
2. The stress level when working on a doctoral degree is high.
 - a. There is always more grading.
 - b. More papers to prepare.
 - c. More classes to prepare for.
 - d. More preparation of teaching assignments.
3. Working to obtain a doctoral degree takes its toll on intimate relationships.
 - a. I am single but noticed several married doctoral students divorcing.
 - b. Students in dating relationships break up.
4. If you do not receive university support or obtain a grant, higher level education is very expensive.
5. Also, it is my best advice to steer you away from working to obtain a doctoral degree unless you want to become a major university professor or research scientist.
6. Unfortunately at a Florida university, I did receive some age-related harassment and discrimination.
 - a. I was looked down on by some professors.
 - b. I was harassed by some graduate students.

I would not take anything for my time at a Florida university. I would not have stuck with the work to completion except I am stubborn, I wanted very much to complete the program, and each semester my major professor gave me part-time work as a teaching assistant and a research assistant. I was there except for one summer. I was a Florida university student from fall semester of 2006 through summer of 2011. Then I went back to the university from fall of 2012 to summer of 2014.

Good luck with your decision.

Sincerely,

Jake

BS, DVM, MS, and Ph.D. in Marriage and Family Therapy

Appendix Q: Advice Letter Number Seven: Minnie Fearon

This letter is from a Site A doctoral degree graduate.

Dear Future Doctoral Candidate,

Congrats! You have finished your prospectus, identified a problem, designed an experiment, narrowed the focus, and chosen a thesis. You're ready to make progress, to create something new or to expand the use of something. You will turn your idea into something that educators will use to improve their teaching or students will use to improve their learning. Unfortunately, there are no instructions or limits to what you can or should do. Each one needs to discover this process is full of hurdles. Coming up with the idea was the biggest challenge! You have already accomplished that part!

Remember to have fun! Your research will be an incredible learning experience for you as well as for others. Embrace the subject matter! Learn as much as you can about it! Take the time to keep an annotated bibliography for each article. It will save time and energy along the way.

Remember that your previous education has not prepared you for this experience. It will challenge you and it will frustrate you.

Remember this is a process. One of my colleagues shared, "I find myself still mired in an unending cycle of hurry up and wait. I can't seem to progress no matter what I do. It is a case of two steps forward and backwards five steps. I seem to find myself in the same spot, when I started the semester." Even though it may seem like an endless cycle, progress is being made. Patiently wait on the LORD. In His time, He will produce a great work. As I read through Genesis this year, I am reminded that when people try to speed up God's timing, messes happen. When Abraham and Sarah tried to speed up God's promise of a child, Ishmael was born. When Rachel and Jacob tried to speed up God's timing, many sons were born, and rivalry occurred. Relax and patiently wait! It may take one year or five years, but in the end, you will have achieved a goal that very few people even begin.

Remember you are the one in charge of your research. You are the one who knows your subject and focus best. When you receive criticism, embrace it, but do not change your research plan. Take the time to explain why the plan you have chosen will produce the results you seek. Your dissertation and your understanding will improve. You will have knowledge and resources to share with future educators and students.

Also remember you are not alone. You have your cohort. You have your committee. There is the library to help. There is a designated Graduate Student Librarian. The Writing Center is also very helpful. Also, I found it helpful to read and reread other dissertations related to my research.

I look forward to your finished project! Keep up the good work.

Minnie Fearon

Appendix R: Advice Letter Number Eight: Edward

This letter is from a graduate of Site A university.

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

I thought about advising, as Dante said, “Abandon hope, all you who enter here”, but I will make a few suggestions.

First, if you are not a Christian, become one. Being a Christian enabled me to make it through this process. A Christian is one who has put faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, understanding that salvation is a gift of God’s grace, not something earned through effort or deserved. After repenting of sins, faith in Christ means to believe, trust, and commit your life to Christ. Doing good works and seeking to follow Christ are the results of being a Christian. Every day a Christian repents of sins to restore his or her fellowship with God.

Second, you can now pray and ask God if you should seek to obtain a doctorate, and if so, where and in what. I believe it is important to have some level of passion about getting a doctorate, otherwise you can grow weary in the process. I never thought about the amount of time and money it would take to get the degree, so that I would not get discouraged. I just focused on the immediate task ahead, taking one step at a time. The next thing you know – you are through.

Third, I would continue to grow as a Christian and walk in the Holy Spirit so that God can guide you through the doctorate. I enjoyed the whole process and was able to have a ministry throughout my classes. The dissertation phase was unnecessarily hostile, but the Lord got me through it.

Fourth, older students should not let a lack of familiarity with computers and electronic equipment deter them from doctoral work. It's good to learn new things and stretch yourself.

So, if you feel God is guiding you to get a doctorate, move ahead in seeking to do so. A lot of prayer and guidance from people who have your best interest at heart will be there to help you when you need it.

Best Wishes,

Edward

Appendix S: Advice Letter Number Nine: Noci

Letter number nine is from a doctoral degree graduate of Site A.

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

You have come this far in the world of academia. Why not go on?

Your experience in the real world helps you see connections and generate ideas younger and less-educated people cannot. Why not go on?

Your willingness to compete with yet mentor less mature scholars, shows age is only a number. Communication and competition between you and youngsters will amend their worldview.

Only you can square up to a jingoistic undergraduate – or hedonistic new graduate student in your seminars – and intone, “We ‘who?’”

Why not go on?

Good luck and powerful insights.

Best wishes,
Noci

Appendix T: Advice Letter Number Ten: Linda

This letter is from a Site A doctoral degree graduate.

Dear Future Doctoral Student,

As you consider returning to study, you may wonder: (1) will I feel out of place among other students? (2) will I find a return to study too difficult? (3) how can I use my advanced degree? and (4) is the outcome worth the effort?

I will share my own experience in completing a Ph.D. program at the age of 67. I have several recommendations that I hope you will find helpful as you embark on this exciting journey!

1. Don't let chronological age define you. In the first semester of my Ph.D. program, I found that many students there looked like me - mature persons preparing for advancement or career changes. Because I do not think of myself in terms of chronological age, even the younger students accepted me as a colleague, and my professors treated me the same as the other students. I also was elected as Vice President of our program's student association. If you think of yourself as someone who is eager to learn and contribute, chances are others will look at you that way, too. If you have health issues or a learning disability, students of all ages can have those issues. If you request accommodation, let it be because that is what any student is entitled to rather than that age makes you less capable.
2. Set goals to guide and encourage you. Determine your reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree. You may not have a specific job in mind (I did not) but consider what the degree will enable you to do. How can your degree enable you to "give back" and perhaps help make the world a better place? If your only goal is for your own feelings of prestige, then perhaps a university's scarce resources for supporting doctoral students would be better invested in someone else.
3. Be open to new opportunities. There are many opportunities available for mature persons today. After graduation, I quickly had enough work to fill my days. Later, I accepted a full-time position with a large university. Age was never a factor in my work opportunities, and if I choose, I can go back to consulting and other part-time work for as many hours as I choose to be employed. An advantage of earning an advanced degree as a mature person is that your life experience and formal education make you a highly valuable colleague while in the classroom as well as an attractive applicant for work opportunities, including starting your own business. Look for where there is a need for what you have to offer and then get to work! We are no longer limited to seeking full time work with a single organization. The world is full of opportunities if we look for them! Is it worth the effort?

For me, the doctoral program was worth every minute I invested. In fact, if I decide to add another discipline to my qualifications, I may yet continue for another degree. Lifelong learning is a way of life for me. I don't ever expect to stop learning and contributing. I wish you great success in your future and hope you will find new ways to share your life experience and accomplishments with both fellow students and those you will serve after earning your degree.

Best regards, Linda

Appendix U: Sample of Interview Using CATalyst

Explanation: Sample word and number search of interviews. Example: Abby(2) – 1:8, 1:30 means: the (2) means two examples of Abby in the interview. 1:30 refers to the place where the word Abby is located. The 1 means page 1 and 8 means the 8th line on page 1. The 1:13 means page 1 and line 13 on page 1 in the interview document.

1	abnormal [1] - 13:8	22:18, 23:9, 23:16, 24:11,
1 [1] - 16:24	absolutely [1] - 20:10	24:22, 25:1
10 [2] - 4:20, 12:15	absolutes [2] - 19:10,	answers [1] - 7:5
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18 [1] - 20:21	accept [1] - 13:19	applied [1] - 17:8
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1970 [1] - 11:6	[1] - 19:14	25:3
1991 [1] - 3:4	According [1] - 3:4	approve [1] - 13:22
	achieve [1] - 24:10	area [2] - 23:5, 24:2
2	acted [2] - 11:15, 13:7	attribute [2] - 16:19,
20 [3] - 11:7, 12:10, 12:13	active [2] - 21:22, 21:23	16:20
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20s [1] - 12:12	administration [1] - 9:19	
21 [1] - 11:7	advice [4] - 1:15, 23:13,	B
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	afford [1] - 16:16	bad [2] - 6:9, 22:4
3	age [2] - 12:10, 16:20	ballroom [3] - 20:17,
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5	20:24	become [3] - 6:17, 6:19,
50 [1] - 3:10	ahead [2] - 5:13, 21:3	20:15
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6	ambition [1] - 20:11	belief [1] - 14:16
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	ANSWER [60] - 1:19,	best [1] - 10:5
7	1:24, 2:12, 2:14, 2:16, 3:1,	better [7] - 6:5, 7:10, 7:12,
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	4:5, 5:10, 6:15, 7:1, 7:10,	bible [4] - 8:4, 17:15,
9	7:21, 7:24, 8:3, 8:8, 8:14,	17:22, 18:19
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	11:6, 11:12, 11:18, 12:6,	biggest [1] - 13:14
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