

Doctoral Student Persistence in Completion of the Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the experiences of 21 doctoral candidates across seven CPED-affiliated universities in the southeastern United States, illuminating the complex journey of persistence and completion in doctoral programs. Through semi-structured interviews, participants representing diverse educational roles shared their motivations for pursuing a doctorate, such as career advancement, personal growth, and a drive for systemic programmatic and institutional change. Their narratives showed successful completion hinges on robust support systems, individual determination, structured programs, and purposeful goal-setting. The participant narratives echoed established theories in doctoral persistence, highlighting the multidimensional nature of motivation and the critical role of scholar community and ongoing support. By integrating dissertation work into coursework and framing the doctoral journey as a non-negotiable commitment, students navigate challenges and sustain progress. The article offers insights for program designers and faculty seeking to foster environments that enhance student success. The article also emphasizes the interplay of personal characteristics, support networks, and program structures in shaping doctoral persistence and completion.

KEYWORDS

persistence, motivation, doctoral completion, support systems, career advancement

This article uses Tinto's (1993) Model of Doctoral Persistence as a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex factors influencing Doctor of Education (EdD) student retention. The model organizes the doctoral journey into three critical stages: Transition and Adjustment, Attainment of Candidacy, and Completion of the Dissertation, each shaped by academic, social, and institutional dynamics (Tinto, 1993). During the transition and adjustment phase, personal characteristics such as academic motivation and self-efficacy are essential for navigating new academic demands and institutional cultures. These attributes significantly mediate the relationship between self-concept and academic performance, facilitating early-stage adaptation (Guo et al., 2024). As EdD students progress to candidacy, academic factors become increasingly central. The quality of the supervisor–student relationship is especially influential, with supportive supervision that reduces academic procrastination and enhances doctoral self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2022). Clarity in program expectations and institutional support structures is critical for helping students advance through this stage (Wang et al., 2022). Socioeconomic stability and strong support networks play a pivotal role in the final stage—completion of the dissertation. Students managing financial strain, caregiving responsibilities, or social isolation are at greater risk of attrition, making targeted support essential (Wang et al., 2022). Understanding and addressing these stage-specific factors is crucial for improving doctoral retention and supporting students throughout the academic journey.

The existing literature on EdD student persistence often relies on cross-sectional, survey-based studies that provide limited insights into the evolving experiences of students (Guo et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022). While these studies frequently highlight personal traits such as self-efficacy and motivation, they overlook the intricate interactions between them and external factors, including advisor relationships, institutional culture, and structural barriers (Wang et al., 2022). Consequently, persistence is sometimes portrayed as an individual responsibility rather than a collective challenge of institutions (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Furthermore, much of the research is limited to context-specific environments, such as individual universities or particular cultural settings, which restricts the generalizability of findings to broader doctoral populations (Wang et al., 2022). There is also a notable gap in addressing the experiences of marginalized student groups, including those from underrepresented racial or socioeconomic backgrounds, whose journeys are often influenced by intersecting social and institutional inequities (Wang et al., 2022).

This phenomenological study of 21 EdD graduates provides a valuable counterpoint to the limitations by exploring students' lived experiences across the whole trajectory of the doctoral journey. Unlike purely quantitative methods, this approach allows participants to reflect on how their motivation, self-efficacy, and institutional support systems evolved from the early stages of transition to dissertation completion. The rich, narrative data generated through phenomenological inquiry captures the complex interplay between personal and structural factors, offering a more holistic view of



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persistence. Furthermore, including a diverse participant sample allows the study to uncover the challenges underrepresented groups face, thereby providing a voice to perspectives often ignored in mainstream literature. Doing so contributes to a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of what supports or hinders EdD students' success.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Despite substantial personal, professional, and financial investments by both doctoral students and their institutions, EdD students' attrition rates in the United States remain persistently high over recent decades, with current research indicating that 50% of EdD candidates do not complete their programs (Abouzaki, 2024; Lively, 2022; McAlpine et al., 2022). This high level of attrition constitutes a significant loss of human potential, institutional resources, and broader societal contributions, especially as many students withdraw during the dissertation phase, often due to challenges such as social isolation and inadequate support (Abouzaki, 2024; McAlpine et al., 2022).

Emerging research underscores the need for innovative institutional approaches that address not only academic integration but also non-cognitive factors such as resilience and identity development, suggesting that a more holistic understanding of doctoral student experiences is essential for improving completion rates (McAlpine et al., 2022; Mosley, 2022).

RESEARCH PURPOSE

This article examined the experiences and factors that contributed to the successful completion of EdD degrees among 21 individuals who earned their doctorates at institutions affiliated with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). Guided by Tinto's (1993) Model of Doctoral Persistence, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the doctoral journey, from initial enrollment to successful dissertation defense.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Two research questions were addressed in this article. The questions were:

RQ1. What motivated research participants to pursue an EdD program?

RQ2. What motivated research participants to complete the EdD program, while others ended up with all but dissertation (ABD) completed?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This article contributes to the scholarly understanding of doctoral student persistence and completion by adopting a comprehensive, multifactorial lens. While prior research has often emphasized doctoral attrition or explored isolated variables within narrowly defined populations, recent studies call for a more holistic approach that integrates individual, academic, social, and institutional dimensions (McAlpine et al., 2022). Focusing on the experiences of individuals who have completed their doctoral programs, this article fills a critical gap in the literature. It provides

actionable insights into the strategies and support mechanisms that facilitate persistence and timely degree completion.

Grounded in Tinto's (1993) Model of Doctoral Persistence, the article offers qualitative evidence on how students navigate each stage of the doctoral process and how academic and social integration influence their progress (Mthombeni, 2024; Tinto, 1993). Recent scholarship affirms the continued relevance of Tinto's (1993) framework, particularly in light of the growing diversity of doctoral pathways—including online and nontraditional formats—which require more nuanced understandings of support and engagement (Abouzaki, 2024; Mthombeni, 2024). This study advances the application of the model by exploring its practical implications through the lived experiences of successful doctoral graduates.

This article has important implications for institutional practice. By identifying key factors associated with completion, such as effective mentorship, time management, peer support, and alignment between student goals and program structure, the article offers guidance for designing targeted support systems and curricular interventions (Abouzaki, 2024; Mensah, 2025). Particular emphasis is placed on transitioning from ABD status to completion, a phase frequently associated with attrition risk and psychological stress (Abouzaki, 2024; McAlpine et al., 2022). Insights gained here may inform the development of institutional strategies to support students through this critical juncture and enhance overall program effectiveness.

From a policy perspective, this article provides evidence to support data-driven decisions regarding funding allocations, doctoral program evaluation, and formulating national and institutional strategies to improve doctoral completion rates (McAlpine et al., 2022). Understanding the multidimensional factors contributing to successful completion can help stakeholders make more efficient use of resources while reducing the financial and human costs associated with attrition (McAlpine et al., 2022). Moreover, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse about doctoral education's purpose, design, and societal value in academic and applied contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The high dropout rates of EdD graduates highlight the complexity of the doctoral journey and the urgent need for evidence-based interventions to support student success (McAlpine et al., 2022). Contemporary research consistently emphasizes that doctoral persistence is shaped by a multidimensional interplay of individual, social, academic, and institutional factors (Lehan et al., 2021; McAlpine et al., 2022).

Individual-level characteristics such as motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy are foundational to doctoral student persistence (McAlpine et al., 2022). Many doctoral students are driven by intrinsic motivations, including personal growth, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to contribute to their field, as well as extrinsic factors like career advancement and professional recognition. These motivations align with self-determination theory, which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhance intrinsic motivation and academic persistence (McAlpine et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Resilience, another critical psychological attribute, refers to adapting to challenges and recovering from setbacks. Resilient students tend to navigate academic pressures more effectively, seek

resources proactively, and maintain a positive outlook on their academic journey (Lehan et al., 2021). These psychological factors work synergistically, creating an internal foundation that supports long-term academic engagement and degree completion.

Recent research underscores the central role of self-efficacy as a critical determinant for EdD students progressing beyond the ABD stage to degree completion. Self-efficacy, defined as belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute actions required to produce specific outcomes, is closely linked with perseverance in doctoral studies (Bandura, 1997). For EdD students, who often balance professional responsibilities with academic demands, high self-efficacy supports their confidence in managing complex dissertation tasks and overcoming challenges inherent in doctoral research (Chamadia & Qureshi, 2021). Recent empirical studies demonstrate that doctoral students reporting stronger research self-efficacy are more likely to sustain motivation, engage deeply with research activities, and complete dissertation milestones on time (Stevens & Caskey, 2023). Moreover, cohort-based program designs that offer targeted support in research and writing contribute to building self-efficacy through formative feedback and community practice, which correlates strongly with increased completion rates (McBrayer et al., 2018). These findings suggest that self-efficacy functions synergistically with motivation and resilience to form a self-sustaining foundation that propels EdD students through the demanding final stages of their doctoral programs.

Beyond individual traits, social support and sense of belonging are key contributors to doctoral persistence. Students who feel integrated into their academic communities and experience strong mentoring relationships with faculty are likelier to remain engaged and complete their degrees (Becker et al., 2025; Lehan et al., 2021). Positive relationships with advisors play a particularly significant role, influencing academic development, students' emotional well-being, and professional identity formation.

Moreover, peer support and familial encouragement provide essential emotional reinforcement and accountability, helping students navigate stress and maintain motivation throughout the doctoral journey (Becker et al., 2025; McAlpine et al., 2022). These interpersonal dynamics can either buffer the stress associated with doctoral study or, when lacking, contribute to feelings of isolation and attrition.

Institutional structures and program design also significantly influence doctoral student outcomes. Programs that integrate dissertation milestones into coursework, provide clear academic guidelines, and offer structured timelines tend to produce higher completion rates (McAlpine et al., 2022). Clarity around expectations, milestones, and timelines helps reduce ambiguity and anxiety, allowing students to maintain steady progress.

The availability of targeted support services, including academic writing centers, mental health resources, and professional development workshops, further enhances persistence. These supports are particularly critical for online, part-time, or non-traditional doctoral students, who may face additional challenges related to isolation, time management, or balancing academic and personal responsibilities (Mthombeni, 2024).

Financial resources also play a pivotal role. Access to scholarships, stipends, and tuition waivers can reduce financial stress and enable students to devote more time and energy to their studies (Becker et al., 2025). For students from historically marginalized backgrounds or with limited socioeconomic means,

financial support can determine their ability to persist through degree completion.

Recent scholarship calls for a holistic and integrative approach to understanding doctoral persistence (Becker et al., 2025; McAlpine et al., 2022). Isolating individual factors fails to capture the complexity of doctoral education, where personal, social, academic, and institutional dimensions are deeply interconnected (Becker et al., 2025; McAlpine et al., 2022). Therefore, practical strategies for improving doctoral completion rates must involve coordinated interventions across all these domains, fostering supportive environments that enable students to survive and thrive.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tinto's (1993) Model of Doctoral Persistence provided the theoretical framework for understanding the factors influencing students' decisions to remain in or withdraw from doctoral programs. Central to Tinto's model is that doctoral persistence is shaped by the dynamic interplay of personal, academic, and social interactions among students, faculty, and the broader institutional environment (Tinto, 2025). The model emphasizes that successful navigation of the doctoral journey depends on individual attributes and how well students integrate into their institution's academic and social systems.

The model remains a foundational framework for understanding student retention and persistence in higher education, including doctoral education. The model's core premise that academic and social integration within an institution are critical for student persistence has been widely applied, particularly in exploring doctoral student attrition and retention strategies (Nuuyoma & Sing, 2025). Recent studies highlight that fostering meaningful academic and social connections through mentorship, peer collaboration, and supportive institutional policies helps mitigate risks of isolation, a well-known challenge in doctoral education. However, scholars also note important limitations in Tinto's (1993) model, emphasizing the need to integrate additional theories that address systemic barriers, cultural differences, and diverse student identities to create inclusive retention strategies (Nuuyoma & Sing, 2025; Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). Overall, Tinto's model continues to influence retention research.

The model describes three important stages doctoral students go through during their academic journey. The first stage, Transition and Adjustment, marks the student's initial entry into the doctoral program and their adaptation to a new academic setting. This foundational period is essential for establishing a sense of belonging and academic identity. The second stage, Attainment of Candidacy, encompasses the coursework and examination phases, during which students hone their academic and research skills while confronting significant intellectual challenges. The final stage, Completion of the Dissertation, focuses on the research and writing required to produce and defend the dissertation, representing the culmination of the doctoral experience (Tinto, 2025). Throughout these stages, students' engagement in learning activities, their relationships with peers and faculty, and their sense of community all play pivotal roles in determining persistence (Tinto, 2025).

Using Tinto's model as a guiding framework allowed the model to be aligned with each stage of the doctoral journey and to explore the multifaceted nature of persistence. Questions about students' initial motivations and early experiences corresponded to the

Transition and Adjustment stage. At the same time, inquiries into academic and personal challenges were closely linked to the Attainment of Candidacy stage. Investigating factors that influence dissertation completion, especially for those who progress beyond ABD status, addressed the final stage of the model.

The role of academic and social integration in doctoral persistence was assessed by examining issues such as time investment, challenges, and positive experiences. Furthermore, soliciting advice for future doctoral candidates captured the essence of Tinto's interest in identifying the strategies and supports that foster student success, offering valuable insights for prospective students and institutions aiming to enhance doctoral retention and completion rates.

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

This study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to illuminate how doctoral graduates make sense of their journeys from enrollment through degree completion. IPA is designed to capture the essence of lived experience by combining an idiographic focus on individual cases, whereby researchers interpret participants' interpretations of their worlds (Montague et al., 2020). Such an approach is well-suited to the study's aim of uncovering the motivations, challenges, and supports that shape persistence in doctoral programs (Smith et al., 2022).

Participant Selection and Interviews

Twenty-one participants were purposefully selected using a criterion sampling method to select the graduates from the CPED-aligned EdD program to participate in the study. Initial participants from the university of the researchers referred the rest of the participants. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect rich descriptive data. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across core questions with flexibility to probe emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were conducted over the phone, which lasted on average for 50 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analytic Procedure

Analysis followed the iterative IPA cycle of repeated transcript readings to become familiar and engage reflexively with the participants' accounts, as well as extensive margin note-taking to explore the participants' meaning-making. From the notes, the researchers identified the themes that captured the essential aspects of the participants' experiences, providing interpretation beyond surface meanings across the 21 cases (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The findings are presented with a coherent narrative that includes rich descriptive quotes from participants to illustrate key themes, integrating interpretation with the data.

Participants

The participants comprised 21 holders of Doctor of Education diplomas in the following:

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	n
Field of Specialization	Higher Education Leadership & Administration	18
	Curriculum & Instruction	1
	Learning Organizations & Strategic Change	1
	Practice & Innovation	1
Current Position	University Directors	8
	University Faculty/Instructors	5
	School Principals	3
	K-12 Teachers	3
	School Counselor	1
	Non-profit Advisor	1
Time to Degree	3 years	18
	3.5 years	1
	4 years	2

To safeguard confidentiality while preserving authentic voices, each participant was assigned an alphabetic pseudonym (e.g., "Participant A," "Participant B") in all transcripts and reports (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDINGS

The first research question was: What motivated you to pursue an EdD program? Four themes emerged based on the participants' responses regarding motivations for pursuing doctoral degrees. The themes included career advancement and opportunities, personal growth and lifelong learning, systematic change and impact, and practical considerations and opportunities.

Career Advancement and Opportunities

Participants viewed the doctoral degree as a pathway to professional growth and new career prospects. This theme is evident in several responses: "I knew that earning a terminal degree could help me move into other positions at [the institution] if I desired," stated Participant A. Participant T echoed this sentiment, saying, "Earning a terminal degree would allow me the opportunity to advance in my career." Participant E highlighted the competitive advantage, noting, "If other folks had a doctorate and I did not, I felt like that would be an advantage they had, and I did not."

Participants mentioned teaching opportunities as a motivation, with Participant I expressing, "I wanted to be able to teach future teachers at the college level." Similarly, Participant C cited the "ability to teach graduate courses."

The theme of "Career Advancement and Opportunities" underscores a prevalent motivation for individuals pursuing doctoral programs, particularly professional doctorates such as the EdD. Participants frequently perceive the attainment of a terminal degree as a gateway to enhanced career trajectories, offering competitive advantages and fostering teaching opportunities that align with the EdD's practical framework. This degree is strategically pursued to qualify professionals for elevated administrative positions, broaden teaching credentials, and amplify their influence within educational institutions or their respective fields. Consequently, many EdD



graduates transition into roles such as academic deans, district superintendents, policymakers, or corporate trainers, where their advanced problem-solving capabilities and leadership skills are in high demand. Furthermore, the EdD's emphasis on applied research equips professionals to confront real-world challenges, rendering the degree a valuable asset for both personal and institutional growth. Ultimately, this theme illustrates the pragmatic and strategic dimensions of doctoral study as a transformative catalyst for professional development and the expansion of career opportunities.

Personal Growth and Lifelong Learning

Participants expressed a long-held desire to earn a doctorate as part of their personal development journey. Several quotes illustrate this theme: "It is a little corny, but it has always been a dream to earn it," shared Participant D. Participant L revealed a deeply personal motivation: "I have always dreamed of getting a doctorate since 5th grade or at least being a doctor of some sort." Participant H viewed the doctoral degree as the pinnacle of education, stating, "I wanted to continue to pursue something that I felt like there was nothing else I could do, as far as increasing my knowledge and education from a degree standpoint."

Participants' motivation to pursue doctoral study, rooted in personal growth and lifelong learning, aligns closely with scholarly findings highlighting intrinsic motivational factors as key drivers for EdD candidates. Research indicates that many EdD students seek to fulfill long-held educational aspirations and view the doctoral journey as a means to deepen their knowledge, expand intellectual horizons, and achieve a significant personal milestone (Gong et al., 2022). This intrinsic motivation is linked to higher research self-efficacy and sustained engagement, which are critical for academic success in demanding EdD programs (Miao et al., 2025). Moreover, pursuing personal growth through doctoral study often intertwines with professional identity development and the desire for transformative learning experiences beyond career objectives alone (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). Thus, the theme reflects a fundamental human drive toward self-actualization through education, underscoring lifelong learning as a personal and scholarly pursuit.

Systemic Change and Impact

Participants were motivated by the potential to change their fields significantly through doctoral-level research and expertise. This theme is evident in the following responses: Participant R articulated a clear goal: "My real goal and end goal is to impact national and international change in math for students with disabilities. I need to have this degree and work nationally." Participant J sought the degree "to be a better leader and advocate for educational change that provides positive outcomes for students." Participant M desired to "use research to create ways to improve life for others," highlighting the broader impact they hoped to achieve through their doctoral studies.

Participants' motivation to pursue doctoral studies to drive systemic change and make a significant impact is consistent with scholarship emphasizing the role of the EdD as a degree designed to prepare educational leaders as change agents. Research highlights that EdD programs cultivate scholar-activists who seek to influence policy and practice locally, nationally, and even internationally through applied research and leadership (Storey, 2023). These doctoral candidates are motivated by a commitment to advocacy, equity, and improving outcomes for diverse populations, especially

within educational systems (Ryan & Watson, 2021). The doctoral process often empowers students to develop skills and confidence to enact meaningful change in their fields, addressing complex problems of practice with evidence-based solutions that extend beyond their immediate institutions (Bonney et al., 2025). Thus, the theme of systemic change reflects a core purpose of the EdD, reinforcing its alignment with doctoral study as both a professional and a social justice endeavor.

Practical Considerations and Opportunities

Participants cited practical factors, such as financial support and timing, as influential in their decision to pursue a doctorate. Several quotes support this theme: Participant E mentioned, "Working in higher education and having access to assistance to fund that degree were both big factors." Participant N highlighted the financial aspect: "The opportunity to earn my doctorate debt-free because I work in a university served as a motivation." Participant K noted, "A partnership with [another university] offered a hefty discount to [county] employees."

Timing and life circumstances also played a role, as Participant B responded, "The right timing for him and his family." Participant F shared a poignant story of how a health challenge influenced their decision: "I decided to get my doctoral degree after I was diagnosed with brain cancer. It was something that I always wanted to do, but once I got diagnosed, which was a difficult and scary time, I did not know if I was going to live or die."

Practical considerations, such as financial support and personal timing, frequently play a pivotal role in motivating individuals to pursue doctoral programs. Financial assistance, such as institutional tuition support or discounts, reduces economic barriers, making doctoral education accessible and sustainable for working professionals (Leach et al., 2020). Funding availability often aligns with career-stage readiness, helping candidates decide the optimal timing for study alongside work and family obligations. Additionally, life events, including critical health challenges, can prompt individuals to reassess priorities and commit to long-held educational goals with renewed urgency (Leach et al., 2020). Practical considerations, such as financial support and personal timing, often play a crucial role in motivating individuals to pursue doctoral programs. Financial assistance, including institutional tuition support or discounts, helps reduce economic barriers, making doctoral education more accessible and sustainable for working professionals (Leach et al., 2020).

Funding availability typically aligns with an individual's career stage, assisting candidates in determining the best timing for their studies while managing work and family responsibilities. Significant life events, such as serious health challenges, can also lead individuals to reassess their priorities and commit to long-held educational aspirations with renewed urgency (Leach et al., 2020). These practical factors highlight the complex and contextual nature of doctoral enrollment decisions, demonstrating that, beyond intellectual ambition, practical resources and personal circumstances significantly influence motivation and timing in pursuing a doctorate.

The above themes illustrate the diverse motivations driving individuals to pursue doctoral degrees, ranging from career advancement and personal growth to aspirations of creating meaningful change and taking advantage of practical opportunities.

Theme Analysis 1 (Cross-Participant Analysis for RQ1)

To better understand the motivations for pursuing the EdD program, participants' responses were organized into four major themes. Table 2 provides a cross-participant overview that shows how each theme aligned with individual experiences.

Table 2. Research Question 1: Motivation for Pursuing an EdD Program

Participant	Career Advancement	Personal Growth and Lifelong Learning	Systemic Change	Practical Considerations
A	✓			
B				✓
C	✓			
D		✓		
E	✓			✓
F				✓
G				
H		✓		
I	✓			
J			✓	
K				✓
L		✓		
M			✓	
N				✓
R			✓	
T	✓			

As shown in Table 2, Career Advancement & Opportunities and Practical Considerations were the most frequently mentioned motivators across participants. Also, several students noted the importance of advancing professionally (e.g., A, C, E, I, T), while practical concerns such as program structure and flexibility (B, E, F, K, N) were also significant. In contrast, fewer participants emphasized Personal Growth & Lifelong Learning (D, H, L) or Systemic Change & Impact (J, M, R). This suggests that even though most students entered the program with pragmatic and career-focused goals, a subset were motivated by deeper personal or social commitments.

The second research question was: What motivated you to complete the EdD program while others ended up with an ABD? Three themes emerged from the analysis of participant responses explaining why they were able to complete their dissertations. The themes were support systems, personal determination and resilience, and dissertation integration with coursework.

Support Systems

Participants emphasized the importance of support from advisors, cohort peers, and family members. Participant D provided a detailed account of their support system:

I had a good team. I had Dr. X as my dissertation chair, and I think it made a difference because she was in it with me, no matter what challenge I faced; she was constantly checking in. She was like, you know, hey, we got this. We got this. Having those challenges and those struggles, I stutter, and it takes me longer to process information. Sometimes, I would get frustrated, but she is very patient. She was very encouraging. I also have my cohort and my team. I had others with me that we would check in with. I would check in on them, and they would check in on me, and we did it together.

Participant E highlighted the importance of support:

I had to have people along the way helping me, and my advisor was one of them. Every time they would come up with some other form I had to complete or something crazy that did not really mean anything if he was copied on the email from that point forward, he was addressing them. He was taking care of them. There were people here on campus who encouraged me.

Support systems emerged as a factor in doctoral completion, which aligned with recent scholarship highlighting the pivotal role of supportive relationships in program persistence. Participants' emphasis on advisor encouragement, reciprocity within cohorts, and affirmation from family echoes Roy et al. (2023), who found that advisor accessibility, dependability, and encouragement foster doctoral persistence. Similarly, Seçkin and Varol (2022) show that students embedded in strong academic and personal support networks demonstrate higher productivity and resilience. Estrada et al. (2016) confirm that social support from peers and family strengthens graduate student persistence. These studies affirm that support systems buffer students against procedural and academic challenges and provide the motivation and confidence necessary to cross the dissertation finish line.

Personal Determination and Resilience

Participants cited their persistence and determination as crucial factors in completing their degree programs. Participant G expressed this sentiment strongly:

Yeah, Lord's grace, a lot of support, and a bunch of stubbornness. I am not a quitter. I do not have quit in me. If you leave quitting as an option, you will like divorce, a different subject, but if it is in your mind as an option, you will probably hit the button eventually. It got so hard that if I was, you know, leaving it as a possibility, I think I would have quit probably a year into it or two years into it.

Participant F, who overcame significant health challenges, shared:

I think it was the persistence and discipline. I think it is from what I have been through. I think I had my reasons behind it. It is an individual choice; you must be motivated when you reach that end. I was motivating myself to do it. It was something I wanted.

Participant B referred to personal stubbornness as crucial in completing the degree by stating, "Personally, I was stubborn. I was not going to allow myself not to. I intentionally chose my chair because I knew she would help set my deadlines." Participant A said picturing the title of Dr. written in front of the name provided the determination. "I finished because picturing Dr. in front of my name was pretty exciting."

Many participants mentioned specific motivations and goals that drove them to completion. Participant E shared a deeper motivation:



Part of it was intrinsic. No one else in my family has done this, and I am still the same person, even though I have that after my name or before my name. I am still the same person, but I wanted people in my family to see that they can accomplish this. I have one of my favorite pictures, and I need to print it with my two grandchildren at graduation. They had made signs, and one of them said, Doctor Mimi.

Participant A expressed a clear motivational factor: "Picturing Dr. in front of my name was pretty exciting!" This demonstrates how the prospect of achieving the title was a powerful motivator. Participant D emphasized the importance of setting a clear timeline and maintaining focus:

I was determined to get out in three years. I did not want it to go much further than that. I did not think I could sustain it. I was like, I do not know if I could do this for five years. I could do it in three years. So, I just kept my eye on the prize.

Participant F highlighted the role of personal motivation and goal-setting:

I think it was the persistence and discipline. I think it is from what I have been through. I think I had my reasons behind it. It is an individual choice; you must be motivated when you reach that end. I was motivating myself to do it. It was something I wanted.

Participant G stressed the importance of commitment and not viewing quitting as an option:

I am not a quitter. I do not have quit in me. If you leave quitting as an option, you will like divorce, a different subject, but if it is in your mind as an option, you will probably hit the button eventually. It got so hard that if I were, you know, leaving it as a possibility, I think I would have quit probably a year or two years into it.

The theme of Personal Determination and Resilience highlights the crucial role of intrinsic motivation, self-discipline, goal-setting, and an unwavering refusal to quit in achieving persistence during doctoral studies. Participants exemplify this resilience through their commitment to envisioning themselves as "Dr." and establishing firm timelines, behaviors that align with findings from Chamadia and Qureshi (2021), emphasizing self-determination, a sense of purpose, and problem-solving abilities as essential for overcoming challenges. Similarly, Collier (2024) reveals that graduate student resilience flourishes when intrinsic motivation and the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fulfilled, enabling effective adaptation to difficulties. Furthermore, research by Deroncele-Acosta and Norabuena-Figueroa (2025) indicates that a combination of psychological capital, such as resilience and self-efficacy, and motivation significantly influences doctoral performance and helps mitigate motivational dips during the program. Overall, the narratives from participants centered on their tenacity, personal goals, and motivation underscore that determination and resilience are not just inherent traits but vital psychological resources that doctoral completers draw upon to navigate challenges successfully.

Dissertation Integration with Coursework

Participants believed that the degree program structure and how the dissertation process was integrated into the courses were factors in completing the program. Participant H emphasized the strategic choice of program structure: "I was very strategic in choosing a program that I could write my dissertation in tandem with my coursework." This approach allowed for better integration of

coursework and dissertation writing. Participant I provided a detailed account of how their program integrated dissertation work into the coursework:

My program supported many of our assignments, for our classes were towards our dissertations. So, they let us use those assignments to get ahead. So, we were already working towards it in our coursework, so from the lit review to, like, just like, a lit synthesis led into the lit review, which was the most significant chunk. And so we had my lit review done before the courses ended. I had that support through completing the lit review, which is one of the most complex parts.

Participant I also highlighted the ongoing support and accountability provided by the program structure:

Being still on campus and having people hold me accountable to finish that part made me realize that I can do this. They still met with us and set guidelines like they wanted us to, so they were very involved. The chair was very involved in ensuring we pushed forward.

Participant J said, "The collaborative program created accountability because your group depended on you to do your part at the right time. I value teamwork and collaboration more than anything, so this was a big factor in my decision." Participant K also confirmed that integrating the dissertation with coursework helped her to complete. Participant K explained, "My program was supportive in many of the assignments we did, for our classes were towards our dissertation. They let us use those assignments to get ahead."

Programmatic structures that embed dissertation tasks within coursework have been shown to enhance doctoral completion, reflecting participants' observations about the benefits of strategic program design, accountability, and early progress. Research indicates that when assignments are aligned with dissertation milestones, such as drafting literature reviews or conceptual frameworks, students report increased momentum, clearer expectations, and a smoother transition to independent research (Capello, 2020). Similarly, Hanson et al. (2022) found that structured integration and accountability mechanisms, including cohort collaboration and faculty guidance, reduce the likelihood of students reaching ABD status by fostering consistent progress. Breitenbach (2023) further emphasizes that program design plays a critical role in doctoral persistence, with embedded dissertation models offering scaffolding that supports productivity and completion. These studies affirm that integrating dissertation work into coursework is an effective strategy for sustaining persistence and ensuring timely degree completion.

The above themes highlight the multifaceted nature of doctoral dissertation completion, emphasizing the interplay between personal characteristics, support systems, program design, and individual motivations.

Theme Analysis 2 (Cross-Participant Analysis for RQ2)

Participants also described the factors that sustained them through program completion, distinguishing them from peers who did not finish. These motivations are summarized in Table 3, which maps persistence-related themes across participants.

As shown in Table 3, Personal Determination and Resilience were the most common factors mentioned by six participants (A, B, D, E, F, G). This finding points to the central role of inner drive and persistence in completing the program. Support Systems were also

noted, though less frequently, with two participants (D and E) highlighting the importance of encouragement from family, colleagues, or peers. In addition, four participants (H, I, J, K) emphasized Dissertation Integration, where connecting their research to professional responsibilities helped them stay motivated and finish. These results suggest that although personal determination was the most decisive influence, supportive relationships and the ability to align the dissertation with career goals also played significant roles in persistence to completion.

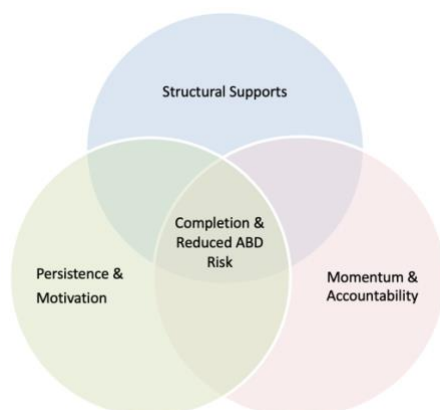
Table 3. Research Question 2: Motivation for completing the EdD Program (Versus ABD)

Participant	Support Systems	Personal Determination & Resilience	Dissertation Integration with Coursework
A		✓	
B		✓	
C			
D	✓	✓	
E	✓	✓	
F		✓	
G		✓	
H			✓
I			✓
J			✓
K			✓
L			
M			
N			
R			
T			

DISCUSSION

The conceptual model illustrates the interplay of motivational, relational, and structural factors that collectively shape doctoral persistence (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model Showing the Interplay of Factors Influencing Doctoral Persistence



The overlapping areas highlight how these elements foster persistence and motivation, maintain momentum and accountability, and reduce the risk of students remaining ABD.

Findings from the study demonstrate that initial motivations to pursue the EdD, career advancement, personal growth, systemic change, and practical opportunities, serve as the foundation for engagement. These represent the entry points into doctoral study, where students weigh pragmatic considerations such as financial support alongside deeper aspirations for knowledge, career advancement, or societal impact. As the model suggests, these motivations initiate the doctoral journey but are insufficient; persistence depends on the harmony of sustaining factors that emerge during the dissertation phase.

Support systems, including advisors, cohort peers, and family members, play a pivotal role in reinforcing persistence, serving as external anchors for motivation and accountability. The conceptual model reflects this by positioning support within the social and relational dimension of doctoral persistence. These relationships buffer students against bureaucratic hurdles, academic self-doubt, and personal challenges. At the same time, the model emphasizes that internal psychological resources, individual determination, resilience, and intrinsic motivation operate in tandem with external supports. The narratives of participants who described themselves as “stubborn,” goal-driven, or inspired by family legacy highlight how internal commitment interacts dynamically with support networks to sustain momentum. This interplay between inner drive and social affirmation explains why some students completed the program while others stopped at ABD status.

Finally, program structures, particularly the integration of dissertation work into coursework, provide an institutional scaffolding that connects initial motivations with long-term persistence. The conceptual model captures this structural dimension by highlighting how program design influences outcomes: when dissertation milestones are embedded into coursework, students report greater clarity, momentum, and accountability. This design feature reduces attrition by transforming the dissertation from an isolated, daunting task into a gradual, supported process. The model demonstrates that doctoral persistence is neither purely individual nor entirely external; rather, it arises from the reciprocal interaction of motivations, personal determination, support systems, and program structure. Each factor strengthens and amplifies the others, creating a dynamic ecosystem that sustains students through completion.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that doctoral motivation and persistence are shaped by a multifaceted set of influences, including personal determination, resilience, support systems, and program structure. Participants identified both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, such as career advancement, the pursuit of lifelong learning, systemic change, and the personal goal of attaining the title of “Doctor.” These insights align with prior research showing that doctoral students’ persistence is driven by professional goals, personal aspirations, and intrinsic motivation (Chamadia & Qureshi, 2021; Roy et al., 2023). Additionally, participants underscored the role of relational support from advisors, peers, and family, which echoes existing studies demonstrating that supportive networks foster academic progress and buffer against attrition (Estrada et al., 2016; Seçkin & Varol, 2022).



Novel Contributions

This study makes two important contributions to the literature on doctoral persistence. First, while prior studies have examined individual motivation and external supports separately, the findings reveal how these elements function dynamically. For example, personal resilience allowed participants to leverage the support of advisors and peers more effectively, while structural supports amplified individual persistence. Second, the integration of dissertation work within coursework emerged as a critical yet underexplored factor in doctoral completion. Participants described embedded dissertation models as essential for maintaining momentum and reducing the risk of becoming ABD, consistent with recent findings that structured integration and accountability foster persistence (Capello, 2020; Hanson et al., 2022).

Implications for Practice

The results highlight key implications for program design and faculty practice in EdD programs. Institutions should consider embedding dissertation milestones within coursework to provide students with early progress and reduce the sense of isolation that often characterizes the dissertation phase. Faculty advising structures should emphasize accessibility, encouragement, and consistent check-ins, as these practices directly impact students' abilities to persist through challenges (Roy et al., 2023). Furthermore, program designers should prioritize fostering cohort-based collaboration and accountability mechanisms that sustain motivation and provide peer validation throughout the doctoral journey. By acknowledging the interaction of personal, relational, and structural factors, institutions can create environments that reduce attrition and enhance doctoral completion rates.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should investigate the effectiveness of embedded dissertation models across diverse EdD program contexts to determine whether these structures consistently reduce attrition. Longitudinal studies could examine how the interplay of resilience, motivation, and support systems changes over time and affects degree completion. Additionally, comparative studies of students who completed their degrees versus those who became ABD could shed light on where attrition risk is highest and how targeted interventions may help. Future inquiry might also explore equity considerations by examining whether support systems and program structures affect underrepresented or nontraditional doctoral students differently, offering valuable insights into designing inclusive doctoral programs that promote persistence for all students.

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