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Women of African Descent: Persistence in Completing A Doctorate

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WOMEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT:

PERSISTENCE IN COMPLETING DOCTORATES

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by

Vannetta Bailey Iddrisu

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To: Interim Dean Delia C. Garcia
College of Education

This dissertation, written by Vannetta Bailey Iddrisu, and entitled Women of African Descent: Persistence in Completing Doctorates, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Thomas G. Reio, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 9, 2010

The dissertation of Vannetta Bailey Iddrisu is approved.

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Florida International University, 2010

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my child, Kayla Shawntavia Bailey who went to class with me throughout this graduate process-what a trooper.

To my dad, Mr. William James Bailey II, who has been my constant stream of support and guidance. Finally, I am getting out of school.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

WOMEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT:

PERSISTENCE IN COMPLETING DOCTORATES

by

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Miami, Florida

Professor Thomas G. Reio, Major Professor

This study examines the educational persistence of women of African descent (WOAD) in pursuit of a doctorate degree at universities in the southeastern United States. WOAD are women of African ancestry born outside the African continent. These women are heirs to an inner dogged determination and spirit to survive despite all odds (Pulliam, 2003, p. 337).This study used Ellis's (1997) Three Stages for Graduate Student Development as the conceptual framework to examine the persistent strategies used by these women to persist to the completion of their studies.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed for the 10 study participants. The study examined their beliefs, roles, and support systems utilized during their studies to help propel them to succeed. Interview data were analyzed using cross-case analysis to discover emerging themes and patterns. A comparative analysis was used to analyze the participants' experiences and discover themes and patterns to review against the historical data.

The findings showed that WOAD experienced feelings of isolation, neglect and racial prejudice as doctoral students. Their ability to formulate supportive relationships among each other and in their communities outside the university was key to their persistence to graduation. There still remains a need to create a more engaging and inclusive environment for nontraditional students, particularly those who are WOAD. The study concludes with six strategies of success used by these WOAD to persist to completion. Those six strategies include 1. Keeping the goal of earning a doctorate and graduating foremost on your mind. 2. Set a class and study schedule that allows you to balance family, work and study. 3. Take care of yourself, physically, mentally and emotionally. 4. Keep a goal chart to track your strides toward completion/graduation. 5. Establish a strong support system among your family, friends, colleagues and community; and 6. Do not let the “isms” (racism, sexism, and ageism) deter you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

Introduction

> The road to gaining access to higher education for Black women has not been an easy one. It has been one of struggle, perseverance, and enlightenment. In analyzing the education of Black women, one must take into consideration that the educational system was not developed for Black women, but for wealthy White males. Education was offered to Black women as a tool of socialization and as a compromise to assist Blacks after the Civil War. (Collins, 2001, p. 39)

In 1921, the University of Pennsylvania made history by conferring the first doctorate to a woman of African descent (Giddings, 1984). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2004), since 2001 there has been continued growth in the number of doctorates conferred on women in general, and women of African descent (WOAD), specifically. In 1989, b. hooks wrote that the educational history of WOAD, documented their path as one of constant struggle, confrontation, resistance, negotiation, and marginality. Moreover, the limited research on WOAD in higher education has suffered from scholarly disinterest and has been filtered through perspectives that either are androcentric or ethnocentric (Brown, 2001; Howard- Vital, 1989).

Despite years of academic preparation and socialization, research has shown that WOAD may not feel entirely comfortable adopting and reinforcing a world view that is not their own (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). The integration of this world view may be problematic for women scholars of African descent since it may mean accepting that White men are the only ones able to “create” knowledge and receive the most value as evidenced by being the group most often studied. This perpetuates the thought that individuals, including WOAD,-

will be more “worthy” or “acceptable” as topics of scientific inquiry to the extent that they behave in accordance with a White male worldview that has been reinforced by the literature (Collins, 2000). Collins further stated that female scholars of African descent experience an internal struggle when given the full opportunity to choose the topics that they study or investigate. This struggle stems from discovering a lack of fit between one’s own experiences and those experiences that are described, theorized, and analyzed within the literature, and subsequently perpetuated by colleagues. The lack of fit is the unique position of living with the double jeopardy of racial and gender oppression. The double jeopardy that WOAD encounter in terms of race and sex is viewed by some as a reason for conducting research specifically on WOAD and their contributions to academia and to American society (Brown, 2001).

Increasingly, as WOAD return to the academy as students to pursue advanced degrees, the universities need to address issues facing both women and WOAD specifically. The reality emerges from the knowledge that WOAD report that they hope an advanced degree will help them with their careers, but are pessimistic because they do not perceive the world as being fair to women of African descent (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). They are a part of the growing trend of nontraditional students who are usually older, female, and members of a minority ethnic group. These students face many obstacles that impede their entry or success at the graduate level (Tisdell, 1993). According to the NCES (2008), students who are enrolled part-time or who delays entry into college after high school; are married with children or single parents and working full-time, are at a higher risk of not completing their degree. Statistically, 60.2% of nontraditional graduate

(master's and doctoral) students are women. Of that number, only 50.2% of them earned a master's degree and 1.8% earned a doctorate between 1993 and 2003 (NCES, 2008).

Background of the Problem

When Oberlin College was established in Ohio in 1833, it became the first college in the nation to accept women and Black students (Collins, 2001,). The increased enrollment of women in higher education since that time has irreversibly changed the diversity of American colleges and universities (Collins, 2001). In 1870, an estimated one-fifth of the resident college and university students in the United States were women. By 1900, the proportion of women students had increased to more than one third. Between 1970 and 2000, women students in graduate education increased from 39% to 58%, which meant that in a 30-year period, women had grown to a little more than one-half of the graduate student population. The graduate school enrollment for women of African descent during this time period increased from 7.6% to 13.7%. In contrast, the male enrollment in graduate education decreased from 61% to 42% during this period. Overall, women had a 19% increase in earned master's degrees and a 32% increase in earned doctorates. The rate of master's and doctorates earned by women of African descent, however, only increased from 1.9% to 6.1 % and 6.0% to 8.1%, respectively (NCES, 2008).

Graduate study, by any means, is often a daunting task for which success is based upon the working relationships between student and faculty and their ability to build trust, integrity, opportunity, and understanding (Patton & Harper, 2003). WOAD often

approach graduate study with the understanding that there are unwritten rules which govern the "ivory tower" of academia and thus actively seek out both formal and informal support to assist them in "getting through" this process (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). The women seek out assistance from friends, relatives, professional colleagues, and other graduate students who are, themselves, maneuvering the academic process. For the purposes of emotional, spiritual, and, at times, academic support, these women scholars often develop strong relationships with their mothers, sororities and peers (Patton & Harper, 2003).

Racial/ethnic environment also can serve as a buffer or barrier for WOAD. Those WOAD who complete their undergraduate studies and or graduate studies at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) often find that their experiences at HBCUs were more nurturing and supportive. Research shows that HBCUs tend to promote a philosophy of educating the whole person. Students who attend these colleges and universities find a learning environment that is non-hostile, optimistic, and a strong interpersonal climate between students and positive Black role models. These campuses often have a "strong emphasis on values and social consciousness" (U. S. Printing Office, 1996, p.15) which can be attributed to the fact that many of these schools were founded by churches and or social activists before and after the Civil War. "HBCUs effectively combine values transmission and social consciousness-raising, the enhancement of self-worth and self-esteem, with a quality education in a supportive learning environment" (U.S. Printing Office, 1996). The bonding among the students and faculty, particularly those who hold membership in Greek-lettered organizations, become lifelines of support

and encouragement throughout one's lifetime. Paula Giddings (2006) noted "the particular needs of Black students in general, and women in particular, made the history of Black Greek –letter groups distinct both in degree and kind from those of their White counterparts" (p.18).

The influence of the civil rights movement of the 1960s had a direct impact on the pursuit of graduate education for women of African descent. The challenges of segregation limited the opportunities available for Blacks who wanted to pursue graduate study. Graduate study for Blacks was rare, even at HBCUs, and even rarer at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Ellis, 1997). Women of African descent in particular had been subjected to isolation in the academy, thus placing them among the last group(s) to penetrate the walls of graduate education. In her research, Johnson-Bailey (2001) discussed how Black women students reported that they were discouraged and stifled in the higher education environment in specific ways: "(1) They were ignored when they raised their hands. (2) They were interrupted when they spoke.(3) Their comments were disregarded.(4)They voluntarily remained silent out of fear, habit, or necessity and (5) They were intentionally excluded from the student network" (p. 137).

To counter these feelings of isolation and neglect within the confines of the academic community, these women of African descent sought support, counsel, and guidance outside their departments because they did not feel accepted in the doctorate community within their departments (Ellis, 1997). As a result, these women had to create alternative frameworks of negotiation within academia. b. hooks (1989) indicated in her research that women of African descent have a different set of educational experiences

than any other group. The author recounted her own graduate experiences as one in which she dreaded speaking face-to-face with her White professors- particularly White males. hooks (1989) experienced their racism and sexism toward her in subtle ways when they would “forget to call my name when reading the roll, avoiding looking at you, pretending they do not hear you when you speak, and at times ignoring you altogether.”(pp. 56-57) On more than one occasion during her graduate school career, hooks was told that she “did not have the proper demeanor of a graduate student” (p.58). In spite of the subtle or direct racism and sexism that women of African descent encounter, their pursuit of a graduate education at the doctorate level involves intensive study, concentration, and sacrifice along with academic skills. Their goal is to finish their studies, and the catalyst to their completion is persistence.

Academically, persistence centers on the attrition of students and their ability to complete a course of study that leads to a degree. According to Tinto (1993), persistence includes a student’s ability to adjust to college, specifically the student’s ability to meet a number of minimal standards regarding academic performance. Tinto further indicated that most institutions of higher learning are made up of a variety of academic and social communities and groups. These communities and groups influence the patterns of intellectual and behavioral interaction. These social communities and groups often transform into subcultures based on their shared characteristics, such as race, age, or gender. Tinto found that the subculture was a viable contributor to the persistence of students of color because “the absence of compatible student groups does appear to undermine the likelihood of persistence.” (p. 60)

Student persistence has been an issue of considerable scholarly interest in higher education for decades. Historically, the studies have centered on undergraduate students. Increasingly, studies were advanced to explain persistence for ethnic and gender specific groups. Of late, the focus is taking a turn from that of studying graduate students who matriculated to graduate school immediately following graduation from undergraduate school and is focusing on student persistence at the graduate level (Tinto, 1993). The prior studies looked at the years to completion, gender and race, particularly those students who returned to graduate school classified as nontraditional. The problem with existing studies at the graduate level is that they parallel studies on the undergraduates by clumping all students together. Very few have explored persistence for female doctoral students, and even fewer studies have looked at the persistence of women of African descent pursuing doctorates.

The lack of student persistence in higher education programs specific to WOAD was a reason for researchers to develop theories that attempt to explain the persistence in higher education of WOADby (Malone, Nelson, and Nelson, 2004). Tinto's (1993) theories of persistence centered on undergraduates and advocated looking at students' classroom experiences and involvement in collaborative strategies of learning communities as a key to measuring student persistence in college. Tinto contended that doctoral persistence was more likely than undergraduate persistence to reflect the specific character of student-faculty interactions. These views tend to represent a White male perspective because the majority of recognized experts on persistence (i.e., Tinto, 1993; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1985) are White males and their perspectives are not

adequate to explain this phenomenon in graduate studies among women and women of African descent in particular.

Belenky (1986, p.5) as cited in Culpepper (2004),

> In spite of the increase in the number of women students in higher education and professional schools, faculties usually are predominantly male, argue against a special focus on women students and resist open debate on whether women's educational needs are different from men's(p.18).

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), (2008) data on full-time instructional faculty in degree-granting institutions, by race and ethnicity, sex, and selected characteristics found that White faculty members represented 82.7% of all full-time faculty, and male faculty represented 58% of total faculty.

Statement of the Problem

The problem that exists in the educational research on persistence in higher education was the limited research on WOAD in pursuit of the doctorate. While many current studies present theories that attempt to explain persistence in higher education (Clewell, 1999), the focus of most of these has been at the undergraduate level. While the literature suggests an increase in the number of women of African descent in graduate programs (Jones, 2001), studies of their graduate level persistence have been limited. The urgency to conduct research on the educational persistence of WOAD is a necessity in combating the general notion that all doctoral students are the same. The research reflects the changing face of the U. S. student population and addresses their needs. Women's graduate experiences are compounded by the factors of gender, class, race, and ethnicity (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Collins, 1999).

Carroll (1982, p. 126) as cited in Howard-Hamilton (2003), “there is no more isolated subgroup in academe than Black women. They have neither race nor sex in common with White males who dominate the decision - making stratum of academe; Black males in academe at least share with the White males their predominance ‘over women.” Historically, Black men, like their White counterparts, statistically entered and completed college before their women.

Williams, Brawley, Reed, White, and Davis-Haley (2005) found that “the experiences of Black women in higher education have not been well documented in research literature” (p.182). The minority position in research literature can be attributed to a White society that has historically denied the contributions of WOAD among other minority groups. This denial was often expressed through denial of access to educational and employment opportunities and even equal participation in the first women’s suffrage march. In 1913, the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the Congressional Union, then the two largest White suffragist organizations at the time, denied Ida B. Wells and her Alpha Suffrage Club, the first Black suffrage club in the state of Illinois, the right to march alongside the White suffrage group from the same state. Black suffragists were directed to march in the rear of the line (Giddings, 2006).

This study examines Women of African Descent’s beliefs about persistence, the role of race and ethnicity and support systems that helped them succeed in their pursuit of a doctorate degree. The fact that the research literature about graduate experiences of WOAD was limited presented several opportunities for the researcher to examine those experiences and to document the role of persistence in the completion of the doctorate.

As stated by Culpepper (2004), “much of the literature on successful graduate students examines the programmatic, external factors that influence a candidate’s successful completion of a doctoral program. The internal characteristics that contribute to achieving this goal are often minimized” (p. 2). Culpepper further explained these internal characteristics as those school and home experiences which affect the academics of women graduate students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study examined the educational persistence of WOAD in pursuit of a doctorate at universities in the southeastern United States. This study contributes to understanding the obstacles encountered and should support needed by the WOAD during their doctorate studies. The study should help higher education professors and administrators to develop better strategies for recruitment and support for this group. As noted by Culpepper (2004), the goal is to help women now enrolled to survive and succeed.

Research Questions

The overarching question explored was, “How do women of African descent persist in their pursuit to earn a doctorate degree? Three secondary questions were explored:

1. What were the beliefs of women of African descent regarding persistence?

2. How did women of African descent perceive the role of race and ethnicity in their academic persistence?

3. How do women of African descent perceive the role of gender in their academic persistence?

4. What support systems did women of African descent attribute to their success while pursuing their doctorate?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is Ellis's (1997) Three Stages for Graduate Student Development. Ellis combined the theoretical frameworks of both Beeler (1991) and Tinto (1993) in order to develop her conceptual framework. Her framework examined the racial, gender, and age factors in relation to individual isolation and transition, new community association, and academic and professional integration (see Table 1.).

In Stage 1; Ellis (1997), contends that the socialization, or lack thereof, in the transition into a new academic environment could lead to feelings of isolation from peers, faculty, and administrators who had a great influence on students' success or failure in graduate school. These feelings could lead to what Beeler (1991) termed as an *unconscious incompetence*, where the student questions his or her own academic abilities. Isolation, according to Tinto (1993), is the crucial time for when graduate students should seek to establish relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. Ellis concurred that as the student

makes the transition to becoming a part of the graduate community, this isolation can lead him or her to question his or her qualifications and commitment to becoming integrated socially and academically and in completing the graduate degree.

Table 1.

Conceptual Framework Model for this Study

Beeler's Four-stage development theory	Tinto's Theory of doctoral persistence	Ellis's Three stages for graduate student development
1.Unconscious incompetence 2.Conscious competence	1.Transition and adjustment	1. Individual isolation and transition
3. Unconscious competence	2.Attaining candidacy (development of competence)	2. New community association
4 Conscious competence	3. Completion of the doctoral dissertation	3. Academic and professional integration

In Stage 2, Ellis (1997) described *new community association* as the critical stage. It is the stage in which the graduate student is embraced by the faculty members or senior doctoral students. The new graduate student either becomes a part of the *new community association* or becomes more isolated. This isolation can occur when the student is deliberately kept out of study groups, not informed about research opportunities and not being acknowledged for his or her contributions to class discussion and/or group research. The later can result in the graduate experience being "unrewarding and traumatic" (Ellis, 1997).

Becoming more isolated creates a barrier to opportunities to discuss academic issues with faculty and other graduate students, both of which are key components in the graduate school socialization experience. The graduate student who does embrace the new community association finds acceptance by his or her peers as equals and learns to share the pains and rewards of graduate study together. At this stage the graduate students begins to explore their own research agenda, develops professional ties in organizations, and formulates a clearer idea of what he or she wants to do beyond the completion of her degree. Ellis (1997) pointed out that by doing so; the graduate student can make an easier transition into the new community. This transition requires initiative on both the side of the new graduate student and the faculty, staff, and fellow graduate students at the university. Ellis stated that "the information obtained from other students who have gone through this stage successfully, helps the students complete their academic requirements and build confidence along with a greater awareness of their own competence" (p. 37).

Academic and professional integration is Stage 3 of Ellis's (1997) framework. At this stage, a graduate student has built strong relationships with graduate faculty and is now working closely with a mentor or advisor and peers with similar academic interests. Graduate seminars, teaching, writing, research and presentations become a part of her agenda. Familiarity with the graduate environment gives the student the opportunity as an experienced graduate student to reach out to new graduate students and assist them in maneuvering the obstacle course of graduate study. They are preparing for the final stage of graduate study by writing their dissertations.

Ellis's (1997) three-stage framework prepares the graduate student for successful integration into the academic and professional community of the university. This integration helps the graduate student to establish a research agenda as well as working relationships with advisors, faculty, and administration. Recognizing that no two graduate students experience graduate study in the same way, Ellis's three-stage framework was the model used to examine the doctoral experiences of the participants in this study.

Significance of the Study

This study sought to examine the educational persistence of WOAD pursuing a doctorate at universities in South Florida. WOAD "are heirs to an inner dogged determination and spirit to survive despite all odds" (Pulliam, 2003, p. 337). This study contributes to the understanding of the support systems and engagement needed to encourage women of African descent who are pursuing a doctorate. It could be used to facilitate retention policies, theory, and empirical research and practices among higher education institutions. In addition to contributing to the increasing body of knowledge about the success of WOAD in academia, it should also serve as a roadmap for African descent women to find where and how to gain access and support.

Delimitations of Study

This study focused on the persistence of WOAD in their pursuit of the doctorate degree in South Florida. Results were limited to the 10 women of African descent who were interviewed. They were each over 35 years of age, educated, middle class, and professionally employed. They resided in the South Florida metropolitan area where there

was a large Hispanic population. Further research would be necessary to determine the persistence of women of other ethnic or racial groups. The dynamics and levels of community and university support might be different in another region of the state or country.

Definitions of Terms

The following are definitions of terms that were used in this research study:

Black. A term adopted following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The terminology used to describe African Americans and is tied to the rise of the Black consciousness in the United States. Following the Civil Rights Movement (1945-1965) and the Black Power movement (1966-1975), the growth and strengthening of Black pride in African Americans had a major influence on how Blacks defined themselves (Ellis, 1997).

Black feminist thought (BFT)- is the belief that Black women's experiences with both racial and gender oppression that result in needs and problems distinct from White women and Black men and that Black women must struggle for equality both as women and as African Americans (Hill-Collins, (2000).

Cohort. A group of graduate students admitted into a program and expected to proceed as a group through completion (Culpepper, 2004).

Nontraditional student. A student who is enrolled part-time or who delays entry into college after high school, is married with children or who is a single parent and

working full-time, is considered a non-traditional student because these factors that put the student at a higher risk of not completing his or her degree (NCES, 2008).

Persister. A person who is persistent and who does not give up (Costa and Kallick 1992).

Women of African descent. Black women born in the diaspora (Europe, Caribbean, North and South America) and living in the United States (Williams, et al; 2005). Although the term Black was a term made popular during the Civil Rights Movement, Women of African Descent who came to North America from other countries were consider Black regardless of their country of origin.

Organization of the Study

This study examined the educational persistence of WOAD in pursuit of a doctorate at universities in South Florida. The researcher used Ellis's (1997) three stages of graduate student development model as the conceptual framework. In this chapter, the background of the problem, purpose of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, conceptual framework, and the significance of the study, delimitations, definition of terms and organization of the study were introduced. Chapter 2 presents a review of literature on minorities in higher education, persistence, and a discussion related to women undertaking graduate studies. The research design is presented in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

A review of the literature pertinent to this study is presented in this chapter. The review encompasses a presentation of the empirical and theoretical literature regarding the academic and social experiences of underrepresented women WOAD who have completed their doctorates. The review consists of three themes. The first theme explores adult learners as nontraditional graduate students. The theme discusses the barriers and institutional deterrents in graduate education. The second theme presents a discussion on minorities in higher education. This theme examines the specific experiences of WOAD and their pursuit of education. The final theme reviews the history and theories of persistence. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Adult Education

Adult learners as nontraditional graduate students are different from nontraditional undergraduate college students and traditional graduate students. An adult learner who is a nontraditional graduate student is classified as one who is 40 years of age or older, who is an ethnic minority or is a woman who has been in the workforce for many years, commutes to campus and has a higher income than the average graduate student (Redd, 2007 p. 3). *Nontraditional students* have been defined as adult learners who return to school full or part-time (Cross, 1980; Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). The nontraditional graduate student usually has the responsibilities of family, career, and community involvement and is achievement-oriented, motivated, and relatively

independent, with the need for a flexible course schedule and instruction appropriate for their developmental level (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992 p.47)

When adult learners return to graduate school in a nontraditional capacity, research (Benshoff & Lewis) has found that their needs are distinct by gender. Women tend to return to graduate school to advance within their career fields, whereas men tend to return to graduate school in hopes of making a career change (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992) or as Redd (2007) noted many of the nontraditional graduate students in his study felt that an advanced degree would enhance their lifestyles. Women particularly viewed an advanced degree as a means to a promotion or an increase in income. Returning to school is a large challenge for most adult learners, partly because they are older, are working professionals, and are accustomed to applying concepts and experiences to real-life situations as oppose to book knowledge.

According to Bowden and Merritt (1995), adult learners present a challenge in the classroom; however, the challenge can be eased if the instructor understands that these learners are professionals and that the curriculum should be structured so that the concepts address real-life issues that adult learners could apply to their workplace. To meet the needs of these adult learners, Bowden and Merritt (1995) suggested that the instructor consider the four points of age, needs, desires, and goals. These points can be accomplished if the instructor is not intimidated and comes to class prepared to demonstrate how a concept or a theory can be applied to the students' daily lives and world. The authors also suggested that an instructor needs to respect adult learners' previous knowledge and to offer the students something of value in their demonstrated

knowledge of the subject they are teaching. As these adult learners progress through their graduate programs, they are often confronted with barriers and deterrents that they may not have expected upon enrollment.

Barriers and Institutional Deterrents to Persistence

Lewis, Ginsburg, Davies and Smith (2004), found that the doctorate experiences of African American students were marked by "intense periods of feeling terribly isolated; to the point of considering leaving the academic program entirely…. they reported feeling invisible, lack of university support and felt that they had to essentially depend on themselves to ultimately be successful" (p. 231). Many of these African American doctorate students experienced feelings of isolation, a need for peer relationships, and found it stressful to negotiate the university system. They were led to believe that the university had support systems in place to help them negotiate the system; however, their perception was that those systems were not in place.

The majority of the students in the previously discussed study were older, had families, and children of their own. These were factors that made many of them conclude that they "stood out" and were different from the typical graduate student on campus. They created their own informal peer networks within their programs of study and found them to be important to their success in academia. These peer relationships provided personal, emotional, and academic support. Lewis et al. (2004) described these peer relationships as "self-created minority cohorts" These self-created minority cohorts" (p.241) sought out support from faculty, staff, and peers from the first day of their

program(s). This support can be described as mentoring and intellectual reassurance. The cohorts tutored each other and served as readers and an editor for each other's writing. This helped the cohorts to negotiate the university culture and to find available support and advisement.

Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Label & Abel (2006) also found that nontraditional students faced several barriers to persistence to the doctorate degree. The organizational barriers of a poorly organized program or a nonsupportive advisor can lead to frustration for the students. Such circumstances could cause the students to feel helpless and disconnected from the program. The advisor upon whom the students rely for guidance should become the initiator of encouragement and support. If the advisor fails to do so, the students usually will leave the program. The Smith et al. study also recognized the barriers of program inflexibility as a deterrent to persistence. This inflexibility could be identified as limited graduate course offerings, conflicts in course scheduling, lack of access to faculty, difficulties with research topics and research paradigms, and lack of access to campus resources (library and computer labs) (Lipschutz, 1993; Smith et al., 2006).

Other factors that have been deemed as barriers to doctoral persistence are overwhelming family responsibilities. Many doctoral students have multiple roles as spouse, parent, and caretaker for older parents and financial support for the household (Saunders & Balinky, (1993); Smith et. al, (2006). Such responsibilities could cause conflicts in time management and guilt for the doctoral student. Being able to balance time between their studies and family often leaves the student feeling neglectful of one or

the other. “Guilt, worry, anxiety, and anger are symptoms as students try to balance the limited amount of time for family and school (Boes, Ullery, Millner, & Cobia., 1999; Lipschutz, 1993; Lovitts, 2001, Smith et al., 2006). These factors combined with the pressures of graduate school, become major stressors for doctoral students and often send the student into overload (Nelson, Dell, Koch & Buckler, 2001; Smith et al., 2006).

Although many researchers have cited student and faculty or student and peer mentoring as a contributing component to persistence to completion, Mullen (2007) found that mentoring can also be an institutional and individual barrier in the doctoral process. Mullen contended that institutionally (a) universities often fail to clarify what the expectations are for graduate students; (b) faculty and student overload exists due to the increased number of graduate students who seek advisement during the dissertation stage; and (c) many universities fail to develop lifelong learners. Because of the pressure to get the students through the programs in a timely manner the faculty “dumb down the curriculum and offer fewer program hours” (Mullen, 2007, p. 310)

Mullen (2007) attributed the aforementioned factors as institutional barriers which, coupled with the following individual barriers, can collectively prove disastrous for a mentor and mentee relationship in doctoral students’ quests to persist. Those individual barriers include (a) not enough or inaccessible advisors; (b) students who commit to self-imposed social isolation; and (c) the lack of knowledge on how to choose a supportive and knowledgeable mentor.

Often the adult learners, as graduate students, find the barriers they encounter to be overwhelmingly stressful. According to Gary, Kling, and Dodd (2004), unsuccessful resolution of these multiple stressors may lead to premature withdrawal from school and may inadvertently become unnecessary barriers in persistence to graduation. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2008), determined that at least 16% of nontraditional graduate students leave their studies due to dissatisfaction with their programs, and another 17% leave due to conflicts with their jobs, and 14% leave because of their need to work and earn an income.

Minorities in Higher Education

The U.S. Department of Education did not begin reporting data on graduate education of underrepresented minorities until 1976. The first report showed that African Americans and Latinos represented 16% of the American population, yet only 6% to 7% of the graduate enrollment and 5% of doctorates were awarded each year (National Board of Graduate Education, 1976; Nettles & Millet, 2006). The committee's first report concluded that it was important for minorities to participate in graduate education and obtain graduate degrees. The committee recommended that increasing minority participation in this endeavor should be a national goal for the benefit of social, economic, intellectual and cultural well-being. Furthermore, education benefits society overall, educational institutions should seek to make the opportunities available based on an individual's motivation and intellectual potential.

Years after the first report on minorities in graduate education was issued, the number of graduates with doctorates is still dismal compared with the dominant culture group [Whites]. Between 1977 and 2000, recipients of doctorates by race ranged from African Americans, 3.8% to 4.8%; Hispanics and Latin, 1.6% to 3.1%; and Asians, 2.0% to 5.1%. The largest gain was made by international students, 11.3% to 24.2% (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006). According to Nunez (2003), the low numbers of minorities persisting through the educational pipeline to the doctorate is of particular concern as these rates guarantee that underrepresented groups will continue to be underrepresented in significant professional arenas. This contributes to the disparities between the racial composition of research and policy-generating institutions and the populations which they served.

In his article, Rowland (2000) discussed how the basic models of learning, development, and program planning in adult education have often been developed with little concern for the unique needs of African Americans. Rowland found that most of the adult learning theories lacked the cultural understanding of the roles of race, economies and gender in the transaction of learning. Flannery (1995) discussed how traditional theories in adult education andragogy, self-directed learning, and perspective transformation focused on individual values as opposed to the communal values of most racial and ethnic groups. Rowland, (2000) echoed that African American “communal values included knowledge which is valued, how learning occurs, [and] communication patterns of working together for the good of the community” (pp.153-154).

Rowland (2000) discussed a need to develop learning theories that would include what Guy (1996) defined as the *Africentric perspective*. Africentricism is based on a grounded philosophical perspective which reflects the intellectual traditions of both African and African American cultures. It is a way to assist individuals in reclaiming their identity, community, and power in a Eurocentric cultural hegemony (Guy, 1996, p.21; Rowland, 2000). The Africentric perspective also stresses the importance of "interdependency, interconnectedness, spirituality, holism, human centeredness and harmony" (Hunn, 2004 p.66). The commonality among people of African descent and their sense of spirituality can be contributed to their connectedness through church, community, and common realities. In Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Africentrism is presented and practiced as a reflection of the ethnic makeup of the student body and the majority of faculty and staff. In keeping with the goal to educate the "whole person," using an africentric approach should be expected. Hunn, (2004) further stated that research has shown that learners learn better when they can make a connection between their own culture and the larger environment.

White and Other Minority Women in Higher Education

The Condition of Education 2006, report published by the US Department of Education (2006) women at the graduate level had outpaced men in raw numbers; however, their efforts to empower themselves within the walls of academia has been met with resistance. The values, goals, and ever-evolving mission statements of academia are adapting to the external forces of the technological world in delivering higher education,

yet are slow to change within to meet the needs of women students, faculty and administrators.

According to DiGeorgio-Lutz (2002), efforts in advancing gender-equity in the number of graduate degrees conferred seem to be gaining ground; never the less those statistics do not translate into gender-equity within the walls of the academy. Sagaria (1988) in an article on empowering women wrote:

> Understanding the struggle that women have had over the years in their attempts to gain an education, the struggle for women from underrepresented minority groups are even more dismal. Those women considered members of underrepresented minority groups are women of African descent, American Indian, Asian Pacific Island, and Hispanic heritage. Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American women are not only invisible in the higher education profession but are also invisible in the related literature. (p 37).

Minorities are often grouped together based on race, not gender, thus the research on minorities as a group is treated like a "catchall" methodology. The reality is that race and gender are key factors in determining the mobility of women in the field of higher education.

The research shows that women of other minority groups have their own set of issues and perceptions; For instance, the underrepresentation of Asian Pacific American women stems from their small numbers, social-cultural barriers, race, and sex discrimination, lack of role models, and lack of access to the "good ol' boy" network (Mau, 1990). Asian women are encouraged to earn an education and achieve success so as not to shame their families; however, their culture dictates that women focus their needs on their significant others first. Asian women recognize that they are a group of

people with different nationalities, languages, religions, ethnicities, classes, and immigration status (Mau, 1990).

The issue of race and sex discrimination is a significant barrier for Hispanic women's advancement into the academy. In her study Gorena (1996) found that many Hispanic female scholars felt that the traditions of their Hispanic cultural values and ethnicity were direct hindrances to their advancement. Like their Asian Pacific counterparts, Hispanic women also cited their responsibilities toward family and household often meant putting their own educational or career goals second. They also saw barriers in some of the internal processes at their respective universities through lack of support by administration or by other faculty members. The literature showed that women of underrepresented groups faced many of the same hindrances as race and gender in their efforts to gain acceptance into the academy.

Women of African Descent.

To understand the struggle of women of African descent in their pursuit of education, one must first understand their struggle to find their own voices within the social, economic and political arena of the dominant American culture. In the late 19th century and the early years of the 20th century, women of African descent began to pave the way for generations to come by creating various women's clubs, organizations, and sororities. While addressing a special session of the 1893 Women's Congress on "The Intellectual Progress of Colored Women of the United States since Emancipation," Cooper, a renowned educator and Oberlin graduate, spoke about the needs and the status

of women of African descent. She emphasized the “need for these women to be educated as a key component in uplifting the Black race” (National Council of Negro Women, 1996 (p.15).

Cooper later became one of two women of African descent who served on a committee that drafted a statement to Queen Victoria regarding the apartheid system in South Africa. Cooper had many contemporaries who, in their own right, were moving the educational destiny of women of African descent forward. Those women included such dignitaries as Nannie Helen Burroughs who, at the age of 21, founded the Women’s Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, then the largest Black organization in the United States; Mary Church Terrell, a graduate of Oberlin College and an educator and activist who founded the National Association of Colored Women which, in turn, established kindergartens, daycares, and Mothers Clubs to assist women of color in child care while they worked and addressed their socioeconomic concerns. Madame C.J. Walker, the first Black female millionaire and hair care product manufacturer created employment opportunities for WOAD in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and South America. Walker, in turn, became a benefactor to many institutions of higher learning that educated children of African descent. and Mary Mcleod Bethune was so committed to the education of women of African descent that she founded Daytona Educational and Industrial Institute which later became Bethune Cookman University. More important, Ms. Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women as an umbrella organization that would unite the many “Negro” women

clubs, organizations and sororities in a spirit of cooperation that could speak as one voice. (Giddings, 2006)

The Black women's club movement was begun by WOAD, and these women were among the first generation beyond slavery to graduate from college. These were women who felt a commitment to "uplift the race." This commitment to be a part of the "talented tenth" that, upon graduation, would go back into the community and help educate the masses (Giddings, 2006). In fact, by 1910, there were 4,238 Blacks with bachelor's degrees, 79 with master's degrees, and 11 with doctorates. The percentage of these graduates was not distinguished by gender, but research shows that by 1910, Howard University along with Oberlin College was in the forefront in educating WOAD. Many of the HBCUs at the time were training WOAD to be teachers. Howard University had one of the largest populations of students who were WOAD and was one of the first universities to offer them a liberal arts degree (Giddings, 2006).

It was at Howard University, that two of the largest sororities were founded. Alpha Kappa Alpha-1908 and Delta Sigma Theta-1913 became the forerunners of sisterhood that would impact the education of WOAD for more than a century. The members of these respective organizations were committed to scholarship and mentoring each member and potential members to continue the commitment to "uplift the race." In fact, members in their subsequent chapters across the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa are responsible for literacy programs, libraries, teen mentoring and professional mentoring programs for women of African descent. (Giddings, 2006).

Members of Delta Sigma Theta were among several groups of organized WOAD who marched in the 1920 Women's Suffrage March. Delta was also the first sorority of African descent to join the United Nations as a non-governmental organization (NGO) because of Delta's interest in the education, health, and well-being of women and girls of African descent worldwide. These sororities, along with Zeta Phi Beta and Sigma Gamma Rho (two sororities later founded in the 1920s), provide scholarships for WOAD for undergraduate and graduate studies and professional development. These organizations provide support, mentoring, and leadership skills that might not be readily available in the workplace or in the circles of academia. (Giddings, 2006).

WOAD differ in their experiences, backgrounds, appearances, educational levels, demographics, occupations, and beliefs. What connects them all is their struggle to be accepted and respected members of society and their desire to have a voice that can be heard in a world with many views (Carter, Pearson, & Shavlik, 1988; Collins, 2001). One cannot discuss issues or experiences pertaining to Black women in the academy without examining how the past continues to inform and to influence their experiences in today's academy (Collins, 2001).

First generation college graduates

For WOAD who were first generation college graduates in their own families, the road to college was not easy. Many of them had to overcome the struggles of sexism within their own families in order to attend college. O'Connor (2002), points out in her study that during segregation, many WOAD were discouraged from attending college by

school personnel and others were discouraged by parents using "religious dogma." One of her study participants reported her father thought "college life would make [her] worldly and would cultivate rather than suppress the "evil power" of women" (p. 880). In this loose reference to Eve in the Garden of Eden, many of these women's parents preferred that their male children seek an education and their daughters seek a husband and have babies.

O'Connor goes on further to explain that many of the first generation college graduates nor their parents had any idea how to maneuver the college admissions and financial aid processes, so many of them sought the advice of a trusted community leader (i.e. Urban League, Preachers and some Teachers). She states:

> Their families could not readily provide them with the knowledge necessary for navigating college costs and admissions. Forced to rely on information sources outside the home, the women found that the most logical place to provide them with such information, their high schools, were not organized to ensure their receipt of such information (p.895).

In the early 1960s, the Middle Income Assistance Act, which provided federal grants to assist students in pursuing a college education, switched its emphasis from grants to student loans. This switch greatly affected the "college-going rates of poor Americans particularly poor students of color" (O'Connor, p.858). The grants initially provided poor Americans an opportunity to pursue an education that would hopefully lift them out of the clutches of poverty, however, the switch from grants to loans actually reduced the number of poor who would go to college or seek any type of post-secondary education (O'Connor, 2002). O'Connor also found other factors which contributed to the

educational barriers of WOAD. In addition to college admission procedures (quotas, lack of guidance and information), she found:

> The women reported that their matriculation to college was threatened by racist and sexist presumptions on the part of others regarding the appropriate roles of women who were also Black. On gaining access to college the women's chances for completion were threatened first by the ways in which racial isolation, marginalization, and hostility operated on the college campus to jeopardize their psychological well-being and to constrain their learning opportunities (p.878-879).

Despite the barriers that these first generation graduates encountered during their pursuit of a college education, they all showed a resilience that resonates still.

Women of African Descent live with the double jeopardy of racial and gender oppression. The double jeopardy that WOAD encounter in terms of race and sex is viewed by some Black feminists as a reason for conducting research specifically on Black women and their role contributions to American society (Brown, 2001). In her article Howard-Hamilton (2003) referred to the aforementioned "double jeopardy" as "double oppression (p. 19)." Howard-Hamilton maintained that this double oppression of racism and sexism is a result of the African American woman's subordinate status that "was assumed and enforced by white and black men as well as white women" (p. 19)" The author further believed that this subordinate status was "molded and understood within the framework of perceptions and agendas of members of the dominant society" (p. 19).Black women in higher education now face greater risks and problems because they are more visible [on campus] and are in the place(s) once occupied by members of the dominant groups (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Black feminist thought (BFT) is the belief that Black women's experiences with both racial and gender oppression that result in needs and problems distinct from White women and Black men and that Black women must struggle for equality both as women and as African Americans (Hill-Collins, 2000). It extends from Black feminism, a movement that addresses issues of race, gender, class, and color as they pertain to Black women. It is maintained that Black women's lives are negatively impacted by racism and sexism. As a result of this constant awareness of difference, the theoretical writings of Black feminist thought posit that Black women conceptualize their existence as unique and their place as tenuous and uncertain. Therefore, they maintain an oppositional worldview (Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

Theories of Persistence

There has been much research around the topic of persistence in higher education; however, that substantial body of literature is centered on undergraduate student persistence and very little theorizing of doctoral student persistence (Golde, 2005). Those undergraduate studies tend to measure the persistence of students who enter college right after high school. Some of those studies are generic, and others look specifically at race, gender, and environment (Tinto, 1993). The research about student persistence cited in this literature review seems dated; nevertheless, it is included because of its relevance to this study. Therefore, in that context, persistence is viewed as the state of being in which students complete assignments and make consistent progress toward their degrees, despite setbacks (Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1995; Brein; 1992).

In 1975, Tinto became the forerunner of theorists by presenting a longitudinal model advocating two aspects of student persistence. Tinto contended that those students' personal characteristics, educational goals, and commitment to an educational institution, and their interaction with that institution, are key in determining whether or not a student drops out of or persists in to completing a degree. Tinto indicated that earlier models that attempted to explain student departure had relied on psychological models of educational persistence. These models emphasized the "impact of individual abilities and dispositions upon student departure" (p. 84).

Tinto revised his model in 1987 and 1993 to explain all the aspects and processes that influenced an individual's decision to leave a college or a university. Tinto (1993) theorized that "to persist, students need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems" (p. 205). Tinto further stated that "central to this model was the concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college and the stages of transition that marked that year" (p. 205).

In the 30-plus years since Tinto presented his model, other theorists have attempted to explain student persistence in higher education (Clewell, 1999, Ashar & Skenes, 1993, Metzner & Bean, 1987; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986) however, the focus of their studies, like Tinto's, primarily has been at the undergraduate level. Undergraduate studies do not meet the criteria needed to measure the persistence of

nontraditional graduate students. They often look at students who matriculate to graduate school immediately following graduation.

For example, Pascarella et al, (1985) proposed a model for assessing the effects of differential college environments on student learning and cognitive development that incorporated the institutional environment. Pascarella et al suggested that growth is a function of the direct and indirect effects of five major sets of variables: structural; organizational characteristics of institutions; interactions with agents of socialization, learning and cognitive development; quality of student effort; institutional environment; and student background and precollege traits. Pascarella et al determined that, together the variables, "student background/precollege traits" and "structural/organizational characteristics of institutions" shape the "institutional environment." According to Pascarella et al, these variables influence the frequency and content of students "interactions with agents of socialization." The "quality of student effort" is shaped by the students' background traits, institutional environment and influences of family and peers.

Erickson (as cited in Nettles, 1993), expanded upon Tinto's (1993) theory by including the factors of culture as an influence on the students' persistence in college. Erickson (as cited in Nettles, 1993), reviewed the student relationship with self -a student's perception of themselves and how they fit into the college setting academically and culturally. Looking at the traditional factors of academic aptitude, family background, aspirations and work habits of minority students. Erickson (as cited in Nettles, 1993), found that evaluative measures of minority students' persistence should

include college grades, financial aid, environment, and the level of the students' involvement in campus activities and interactions with their peers and faculty (Nettles, 1993).

Doctoral Persistence

There have been several studies of persistence in undergraduate education; however, very little research has been conducted on graduate education, and even less on the educational persistence of minorities in graduate education. Students who earn doctorates represent 5% of all graduate students. In a NCES (2008) study on the factors surrounding persistence in graduate education from the research, it was determined that persistence in completing a master's degree depended upon the student's age and race. Students older than 30 took longer to persist in earning a master's, whereas Hispanic students took longer than Asian, Black, or White students to finish. There was no significant gender difference in persistence to completion. In doctoral studies, the research available that measures the factors of persistence to completion currently only looks at time to completion as oppose to factors of race and gender (NCES, 2008).

Tinto (1993) contended that the students' interactions with the institution are key in determining whether or not students drop out or persist to complete a degree. Tinto's efforts to develop and contribute to a theory of graduate persistence led to his discovery that theories on graduate persistence "have not been guided by a comprehensive model or theory" (p. 231) Tinto feels that graduate persistence depended largely upon the personal and intellectual interactions between students and faculty. These interactions help to build the academic and social communities at educational institutions. Tinto also found that

there were no methodological strategies to guiding graduate persistence. Therefore, his efforts in developing a graduate theory of persistence consisted of three stages. Table 2 lays out the specifics of Tinto's 3 Stages of Graduate Persistence.

Table 2. Tinto's 3 Stages of Graduate Persistence, 1993

Stage 1- Transition	Stage 2- Candidacy	Stage 3- Completion of the doctoral dissertation
During the first year of study when the student seeks to establish membership in the academic and social communities of the university.	The time of acquisition of knowledge and the development of competencies deemed necessary for doctoral research.	The final stage of the doctoral process when the student moves from candidacy to completing the research proposal to completing the dissertation.

Tinto (1993).

Tintos' final stage was where the student developed a specific relationship with a faculty member who served as the primary advisor/mentor. This faculty member became the one who assisted the student through the various steps that were necessary to finish the writing of the proposal and the dissertation (Tinto 1993).

In his research on graduate student adjustment, Beeler (1991) developed the four-stages of graduate study framework, which is based on the seven tenets of his consciousness-competency dimensions to academic adjustment paradigm. Table 3 exhibits Beeler's seven tenets.

Table 3. Beeler's Design of the Academic Adjustment Paradigm - 7 Tenets:

1. Each stage is applicable to full-time, first year graduate students.
2. Each stage is affected by a variety of internal and external influences and factors.
3. Each stage can differ in depth and intensity.
4. Each stage may be present for a compressed or elongated calendar period.
5. Each stage can involve a range of successful academic adjustments.
6. Each stage must be satisfactorily negotiated to ensure a positive start in the next level.
7. Each stage must be satisfactorily negotiated to ensure a positive start in the next level.

Beeler (1991).

The drawback of Beeler's(1991) framework was that it was centered on 1st year, full-time graduate students only, and the only key dimensions in his paradigm was their consciousness and competency not their race or gender. From these seven tenets, Beeler (1991) created his four Stages of Graduate Academic Adjustment. Table 4 exhibits Beelers' Four Stages of Graduate Academic Adjustment.

Stage 1 is what Beeler (1991) refers to as *unconscious incompetence.* In this stage, the 1st year graduate students arrive and have very little idea about what the graduate experience is all about. Stage 2, *conscious incompetence,* graduate students may begin to feel as if they do not have the necessary academic background for graduate study. They may consider their performance marginal and their decision to pursue graduate studies questionable. Stage 3, *unconscious competence,* is noticed and appreciated by the students' professors, but the students continue to experience self-doubt in spite of surviving the first semester. Finally, Stage 4, conscious *competence,* is the

stage in which graduate students begin to openly display confidence in their graduate studies.

Table 4: Beeler's Four Stage Academic Adjustment Paradigm.

1. Unconscious Incompetence	Many of these individuals hold an inward, but subconscious, feeling of being academically underprepared to successfully handle advanced-level work. This period last from the beginning of the semester until near its midpoint.
2. Conscious Incompetence	They may consider their performance marginal and their decision to pursue graduate studies questionable. These feelings usually surface midway to the end of the semester.
3. Unconscious Competence	Emerging academic competence, but are largely unaware of it. This stage occurs from the beginning of the second semester to midpoint, but they continue to experience self-doubt, in spite of surviving the first semester.
4. Conscious Competence	Establish scholarly credibility and want to share their academic assets. This stage occurs at the end of the first academic year.

They have become comfortable with their abilities and have potential for success beyond their graduate studies. Beeler's (1991) study was centered around 1st year, full-time graduate students, whereas many nontraditional graduate students attend graduate school on a part-time basis over several years. According to an NCES (2006) study on postsecondary enrollment, 6.4% of graduate students were classified as part-time students.

In a more recent study conducted by Smith et al. (2006), both organizational and personal factors that might impact doctoral students were examined. The organizational factors included the student selection process, program structure, ineffective advisers, ineffective mentors, program flexibility, and the community of the program. The personal factors examined were relationships with significant others, family responsibilities, support systems, employment responsibilities, financial strains, time constraints, and overload. (p.17) Smith et al.'s study expanded upon an earlier study conducted by Lovitts (2001) in which the author analyzed factors such as "accessibility to faculty, acceptable research topics, the ability of the dissertation committee chair to secure grants, relationships with significant others, employment demands, time constraints, and family issues that affect a doctoral student's decision to complete the doctorate" (Lovitts, Smith et. al., (2006, p.17).

Lovitts (2001) contention was that it was not the students' background characteristics that the student brought with them to the university that determined their outcome, but rather what happened to them when they arrived. Lovitts believed that the cause of the students' lack of persistence was "embedded in the organizational culture of the graduate school and the graduate education process."(p.17) Lovitts found that this lack of community was a determining factor in many doctoral students leaving their programs. (Lovitts, 2001; Wasburn, 2002). Smith et al. (2002) determined that graduate programs could foster doctoral persistence among their students by implementing a stress management program in the graduate education process which supported the students as they encountered the aforementioned organizational and personal factors.

Best Practices in Doctoral Persistence

Having a support system provides the doctoral student with the confidence and understanding he or she needs to be successful in a doctoral program. The support system serves as a buffer against student stressors (Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001; Malaney, 1987; Smith et al., 2006).

In the Dorn et al. (1995) study, the researchers found that motivators to persist included social interaction peer mentoring, or group cohesiveness. Dorn et al.'s study looked specifically at educators who worked as a team as they pursued doctorate degrees. The basis of their cohesiveness was the fact that they all were older and had multiple outside commitments, such as family, career, and community. These factors helped to alleviate some of the isolation usually encountered at the doctoral level of study. Dorn et al, (1995) concurred with earlier studies by Brien (1992) and Fairfield (1977) that many students persisted in doctoral programs when they had the support and encouragement of cohort members.

Western Michigan University developed a doctoral education model to promote persistence through its Center for Research, Writing and Proposal Development. The Center offers programs and support structures that educate students regarding the technical elements of proposal development, professional publication, and strategies for writing the dissertation. The center makes every effort to develop and train the doctoral advising faculty for the faculty-student mentorship it offers throughout the doctoral

process. This approach has increased the persistence level of the doctoral students to completion (DiPierro, 2007).

Summary

Chapter 2 presented an in-depth review of minorities in higher education and the history and theories of graduate persistence. The chapter also presented an in-depth review of the doctoral persistence theories established by Beeler (1991) and Tinto (1993). These two theories are the basis in which Ellis (1997) designed her graduate student development model. The chapter ends with a brief overview of some of the best practices for graduate education attrition established by many graduate schools across the country. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology the researcher used for this study on persistence of WOAD in South Florida. This methodology contains the research design that was used to complete the study.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This chapter explores the qualitative methods that were undertaken in the study of the experiences of educational persistence of women of African descent (WOAD) in a doctorate program. The purpose of this study was to examine the educational persistence of women of African descent (WOAD) in pursuit of the doctorate at universities in the southeastern United States. This study identifies those strategies which propelled them to persist and graduate.

Research Questions

The overarching question explored was, “How do women of African descent persist in their pursuit to earn a doctorate degree? Three secondary questions were explored:

1. What were the beliefs of women of African descent regarding persistence?
2. How do women of African descent perceive the role of race and ethnicity in their academic persistence?
3. How do women of African descent perceive the role of gender in their academic persistence?
4. What support systems and coping mechanisms do women of African descent attribute to their success, while pursuing their doctorate?

Case Study Design

Case study is the preferred research strategy used for this study. Yin states that when the researcher has little or no control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context a case study is used (Yin, p.7). The contemporary phenomenon of this study is the increased number of women of African descent who are or have entered the academy to pursue and complete a doctorate degree. By using the case study method, the researcher hoped to find out why these participants chose to make the decision to enter the academy and what decisions they made throughout the course of their studies that prompted them to endure to the completion of their degree. According to Schramm (1954), a case study is a way to "illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why were they taken, and how they were implemented, and with what result." Schramm believed that the communication systems of one's culture had a great impact on how one might make a decision. He believed that each culture had its own rules and expectations that influenced when one made a decision. This study sought to find out what factors cultural or other helped the study participants make the decisions they did about their studies.

The unique strength of a case study is the "full variety of evidence-documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations-beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study" (Yin, p. 7, 2003). For this study, the unique strength was the availability of ten women of African descent who had completed their doctorate in the past five years who were willing to participate and discuss their experiences as individuals within the same program and or university. Thurston (2002) indicated that the case study method is

based upon individuals interacting with their world. For many of the women in this study, their interactions with their jobs, families and communities had a large impact on their decisions about and for their education. Those decisions centered on how to pay for their studies; what schools to attend or transfer to; and how to complete their studies. Culpepper (2004) echoed the same thought by suggesting that the case study method in qualitative research is a way to better understand human behavior and experience (Bogdan&Bicklen, 1998, p.38; Culpepper, 2004).

Case study has a distinctive place in research (Cronbach et al., 1980; Guba& Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1990; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1990; Yin, 2003), and is often used to contribute to our knowledge of individuals, groups, organizational, social, political, or related phenomena. Case study allows researchers to explore the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies. The causal links for this studys' participants included making decisions on how to finance their education, rather it was making a loan or squeezing their own budgets to make sure their classes were paid for. Sometimes this meant bartering for services within their families and communities for time and services such as babysitters to watch their children while they attended class or agreeing to work different schedules and hours in order to leave work early enough to attend class on time. In an exploratory case study, "the goal is to develop pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry" (Yin, 2003). Therefore, the focus of the research questions in this multiple case study is on the "how" question.

The researcher's autobiography, assumptions and journal are discussed below. A discussion of the population, and sample, sampling procedure, and instrument used in the study follows.

Researcher: Autobiography

Autobiography

I am an African American female and a native Floridian for whom seeking a college education was not an option but an expectation. I come from a family of educators, and many of them have graduate degrees. I would be classified as a nontraditional graduate student because I am over 35 years in age, work full-time, and have a family. My undergraduate experience at Lincoln University, HBCU, was a positive experience; I found it to be an academically challenging, socially accepting, and mentally, spiritually, and physically nurturing environment. I completed a year of graduate school at The New School for Social Research where I found intellectual stimulation among my cohort colleagues. When I entered graduate school for my Master's degree at Nova Southeastern University, I did so as a full-time working adult, and I completed my studies in 18 months. As I began to explore the possibility of completing a doctorate, I consulted with several family members and friends who had already completed that task and decided to seek out a program that met my needs.

After taking graduate courses at a few universities in the South Florida area, I settled on Florida International University (FIU). FIU had implemented a doctorate program that was geared toward working professionals. This cohort program was a

welcoming and nurturing endeavor for the first 2 years of my course study. The program changed direction and returned to a traditional doctoral program around the third year of my studies. I found the initial cohort program to be nurturing; however, the shift in the university's focus for the program and its disregard for the students enrolled in it left many of the students feeling discontent.

Throughout my doctorate experience, I observed the increasing number of WOAD who entered the doctorate program as nontraditional students but became caught in the "all but dissertation (ABD)" stage or transferred to other universities in the South Florida community. The increasing number of ABDs among my female colleagues of African descent prompted me to focus my study on persistence and the doctorate experience. I entered graduate school with the same expectation of being academically challenged and socially accepted. Yet, what I experienced was social alienation, isolation, racial stress, and disrespect, which took its toll on my peace of mind and my physical health.

I chose to conduct a study that identifies the strategies for persistence to completion used by those WOAD who completed their doctorate successfully. It has been my motivation to complete my degree and to hopefully help other women, particularly those of African descent who are ABD and those beginning their studies to find a road map to completion. My own experiences in seeking and giving support to other women of color throughout the doctoral journey has become the basis of many of the assumptions and biases that I perceived while functioning as a graduate student and seeking validity for the substance of this study. I know that WOAD experiences might

seem similar from an outside viewpoint, but I was aware of the experiences and the observations that brought me to consider this study and I was open to discovering the true motivations of those WOAD who had completed their degrees.

Assumptions

I approached this study with the following assumptions; (1) Entering graduate school as a nontraditional student was academically challenging. (2) The graduate experiences of nontraditional female students of African descent were vastly different from those of nontraditional female students of other ethnic groups. (3) Approaching graduate studies in a cohort setting fosters success among all involved. (4) The university's first priority is to support student success. (5) The university wants to know how best to serve all students and, particularly, the needs of nontraditional graduate students.

Journal

I kept a journal of my notes, experiences, reactions, and conversations to reveal my biases, note emergent themes, and to capture thoughts and new ideas related to this study. Brief notes on key points were taken during the interviews and used as a quick reference guide both during and after the interviews (Patton, 2002). After each interview, I reflected upon my thoughts and feelings and made note of them. Journaling is a popular data collection process in case studies and especially was appropriate for use in this study (Creswell, 1998). I found keeping a journal during this study to be helpful. After reading studies by other researchers I began to compile a list of key terms and ideas that had been

discovered by others. In conducting my own interviews and reflecting upon my interactions with the study participants, I discovered that I had some of the same experiences or could collaborate my study participants' experiences with those in the previously read studies. This was key in my synthesizing the information as I transcribed it and gleaned the key themes to be discussed in this dissertation.

Population and Sample

A description of the population for this study is presented. It is followed by a discussion of purposeful sampling, criteria sampling and the procedures implemented for data collection, instrument selection and administration. It concludes with a discussion of the data analysis and management.

Population

The participants of this study were 10 WOAD who had matriculated and graduated from doctorate programs at universities in the same South Florida region. The participants were all women who self -identified as being of African descent, which included African American, Black Caribbean, and Black Canadian. All of the participants had been enrolled part-time in a cohort-oriented doctorate program set at a satellite center of a large metropolitan *Research 1* university in South Florida. Some of them completed their degrees through FIU's cohort program, and others chose to complete their studies at other universities in the South Florida area.

Purposeful Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. This method was driven by the belief and logic that derive from an emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Cases refer to "people, organizations, communities, cultures, events, [or] critical incidences" (p. 40) that offer useful insight about the phenomenon being studied. Such sampling allows for the researcher to learn a "great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 40). In this study, cases refer to the doctoral graduates interviewed. The purpose of the interview was to explore each woman's strategies of persistence in completing her graduate studies. Criteria sampling was used in this study (Patton, 2002). The 10 participants for this study were chosen from an initial sampling of 15 possible participants who were recommended by university officials, professors and information the researcher gathered through university records. The 10 chosen participants were selected because of their willingness to participate in the study after initial contact by the researcher.

Criteria Sampling

Criteria sampling refers to the selection of participants who meet important predetermined criteria for the study (Patton, 2002). The criteria for this study were participants who (a) had completed a doctorate degree, (b) had self-identified as a woman of African descent, and (c) who fit the definition of a nontraditional student while completing her doctorate. This criterion was determined based on the researcher's

perceptions, observations, and assumptions that these criteria made a difference in the success of the doctorate degree completion.

Instrument

Interviews

The researcher chose to use interviews as a basis for this study. The researcher developed an instrument of 12 questions to ask each study participant as a basis for gathering information for this study. Interviews allow researchers to gain understanding about the thought processes and motivational factors of the participants as they gather their stories (Patton, 2002). Interviews ensure a face-to-face encounter with research participants and allow the researcher an opportunity to elicit additional information (Merriam & Simpson, 2003). Interviews are useful in gathering data when the topic to be explored is complex and emotionally sensitive, provide historical information, and allow researchers to have control over the questions asked. As with any research method there are disadvantages to semi-structured interviews; for example, the researcher's presence as the researcher may cause the participants to present biased responses by those participants who knew the interviewer personally. Those participants initially would hesitate to share some of their negative experiences because they did not want to seem discouraging. To reduce the participants' biased responses, researchers develop conversations with the interviewees to gather information about their experiences (Patton, 2002). The participants may not all have the same level of perception and may not be able to articulate their responses to interview questions (Creswell, 2003). Based on the

research questions, the researcher developed a Semi-Structured Interview Guide (see Appendix A). The semi-structured interview guide included a set of questions which were asked of all participants and which allowed for impromptu questions to follow up on leads that emerged during the interviews.

Procedures

The procedures of data collection, data analysis, data management, integrity measures, and limitations of the study are discussed in this section.

Data Collection

The researcher constructed an interview guide and conducted the interviews with the 10 participants; reviewed the historical data, and kept a journal of the data collection process. An interview guide was used to structure the interviews so that the lines of inquiry were consistent. The structure allowed for exploration and probing of the research topic and for a more systematic and comprehensive interview (Patton, 2002). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the "main questions" should be organized in advance and be used to guide the interview to insure that the research problem is covered. Rubin and Rubin also believed that probing questions should follow the main questions in order to keep on topic and to clarify the depth of information. Follow-up questions are then used to explain themes, concepts, or events.

Rubin and Rubin's (2005) responsive interviewing model was used to interview participants for this study. The responsive interviewing model "links the research problem to the questions to be asked, and the choice of people with whom to talk" (p.

37). It involves finding people with particular or specific experiences or groups whose rules, traditions, and values are of interest (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 37). Some participants were selected from the FIU Doctoral Program Directory from the former cohort program. Others were referred to the researcher by those selected from the directory. The participants had remained in communication over the years, sometimes sharing tutors, books, and maintaining a "sisterhood of support" for each other throughout the doctoral process.

Each participant was contacted via email requesting her participation in this study. The emails were be followed up with a Letter to Participants (see Appendix B) sent via U. S. Postal Services; Upon acceptance, the participants were asked to sign a Participant Informed Consent (Appendix C). The interviews took place at the participants' convenience and at a location of their choice (home, workplace, campus, and the like). Most interviews took place at the participants' work site(s). These locations were always private offices located at hospitals or educational administration buildings. One of the interviews took place via telephone and another via computer technology. This was necessary because the researcher no longer lives in the South Florida area and the interviewees could not meet with her during her trip to interview the others. Interviewing via telephone or computer lessened the researcher's bias of possible conveyance of personal biases through body language or facial expression and presented a more objective means of interviewing. The interviewer utilized an audio-recording device to record the interviews, as well as hand-written notes. Individual narratives and biographical details were important to this study because the information could be

separated from the cultural context and societal background which lie beneath. The recorded interviews were professionally transcribed, and the interviewees received a copy to review for accuracy and clarification. Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants and protect their privacy. The researcher kept a journal of the data collection process. The researcher also recorded notes, experiences, and reactions of the interviewees to the interview questions as well as the researcher's own reflections of the process.

Data Analysis and Coding

In this study, the researcher utilized cross-case analysis to examine the emerging themes and patterns from the data of the semi-structured interviews of each of the 10 participants. Each of the cases were read and coded to highlight common themes and experiences. It was important for the researcher to allow these themes and patterns to emerge without any presumed assumptions of what to expect. A comparative analysis of the researcher's findings and the findings in historical data were reviewed and checked for consistency of emerging patterns and themes that provided answers to the research questions. This was done by reviewing the themes found in the historical data and comparing those themes to the themes found in this study. I also compared the demographics of the study participants in the historical data and the demographics of the participants of in my study.

The researcher established a set of coding procedures (Appendix D) which described how the transcribed interviews were handled. The researcher printed out and

read all transcripts; circled words and phrases indicating internal factors and marked in the left margins. The coding procedures also described how the researcher underlined external factors and wrote them in the right margins. The researcher then circled words and ideas that appeared repeatedly. The transcripts were reread and the identified themes were transferred to colored post-it note sheets. The list of themes were reviewed and revised until all transcribed content had been categorized. Finally, colored highlighters were used to identify and separate primary themes, secondary themes and sub-themes.

All interviews were transcribed and categorized by the emerging themes. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), this is done in a two-step process that requires the interviewer to refine and elaborate concepts, themes, and events. The interviews were then coded in a way that would make them easily retrievable. The second phase involved comparing and combining the themes to formulate a description that would allow the researcher to uncover broader theoretical conclusions (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 201). Rubin and Rubin (2005) further indicated that the guiding characteristics of data analysis in responsive interviewing involved the following: (a) analysis throughout the research; (b) qualitative data analysis is not about counting, intuition and memory do not substitute for systematic examination and (c) data units are combined in district ways depending on the research purpose.

Data Management

Data were managed according to guidelines set by the University Graduate School at Florida International University. Each interview was tape recorded at the

participants' work site, except for the two that had to be gathered via telephone and via the internet. Each participant was asked to submit consent form prior to the initiation of the interview. All completed interview recordings and transcripts were secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office. All study data will be kept for 3 years after completion of the study (University Graduate School, 2007).

The doctorate degrees of the participants in this study were conferred within the past 10 years (2000-2010). Research articles, books, and notes were organized through a variation of methods. Articles were broken into the following categories and filed in color-coded folders: (a) Yellow folders: articles on persistence; (b) Blue folders: articles on African American women in higher education; (c) Red folders: articles on women in higher education; and (d) Green folders: articles on nontraditional graduate students. Common themes, key points, and the like, were coded with different color highlighter markers and Post-it notes. The research notes were organized according to the chapter for which they were best suited. These notes were kept in three separate notebooks. The books addressing the topics of this research included several books on women in higher education: Blacks in higher education; African or Black women in higher education, persistence, qualitative research, adult education, and doctoral studies which were separated by category.

Because the focus of this study was on the graduates of doctorate programs in South Florida, a filing system was set up for the hard copy backup and the electronic copies of information about the initial doctorate programs in which some of the participants met. The hard copy folders included files about the mission statement and

early courses, meetings, and framework of the cohort doctorate programs. There were also files containing cassette interviews with some of the original staff and faculty of the doctorate program. This information was invaluable to understanding the purpose of the cohort doctorate program from the mission statement of its inception to its current status of operation. It is anticipated that this information would shed light on the success strategies of those African American women who completed their programs of study and received their degrees.

Integrity Measures

To enhance credibility and integrity, the researcher used the following criteria to establish trustworthiness: (a) member checks, (b) data triangulation, and (c) a reflexive journal to create an audit trail in estimating the validity of the study. Member checks were the process in which the transcripts of the interviews were shared with the participants to establish accuracy. Newman and Ridenour (2008) referred to this as a means of "getting it right." It helped estimate validity because it allowed for more complete and accurate information.

Data triangulation encompassed the use of multiple sources of data available to the researcher (Creswell, 2003). The triangulation included the interviews, observations, and review of historical data. The researcher kept a reflexive journal of notes, personal reflections, and observations during the interview process that should allow others who audit the study to attest to its coherence. The field notes taken during the interviews consisted of the physical reactions and dispositions of the interviewees during the

interview. Many of the interviewees expressed some deep emotions while recanting incidents of racism and sexism.

Limitations of the Study

It was obvious that the researcher's familiarity with the data, closeness to the subjects, subject matter, and appreciation for WOAD were strong and genuine advantages for the strength of the research and the project. Unfortunately, at the same time, this made the researcher too close to the subject matter. The participants could assume that the researcher may have the same sentiments just because the researcher was also a female doctoral student of African descent at a university in South Florida. The researcher would reflect on the thoughts and memories that she shared with the interviewees in her journal. This helped her to separate her experiences from the experiences of the participants. There was the possibility that recollection of the doctoral experiences between enrollment and graduation could be blurred with time past.

Summary

Chapter 3 presented the research methods used to complete the study on the persistence of WOAD in doctorate programs. The chapter introduced the researcher's plan of action used to execute the study. The researchers' qualifications, population and sample, instrument; procedures of data collection, data analysis, data management, integrity measures, and limitations, were presented. Chapter 4 presents the themes that emerged after the implementation of the research design.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The goal of this chapter is to present the findings that should help faculty; administration; graduate support personnel, and fellow doctoral students understand the strategies of persistence used by 10 women of African descent (WOAD) to successfully complete a doctorate degree.

Participants

The women of the study were all nontraditional students as determined by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008) Students who are enrolled part-time or who delay entry into college after high school; married with children or who are single parents and working full-time are considered nontraditional students because these factors put them at a higher risk of not completing their degrees. The study participants were women who started and completed their doctorate degrees between the ages of 35 to 60. They earned their degrees at both public and private universities in South Florida. They all held master's degrees and professional managerial and executive positions while attending graduate school and relied heavily on their faith, family, and community to sustain them throughout the process. During the course of the interviews, the researcher found that the participants defined family and community as those persons who supported them in some way throughout the process. This does not mean that those persons were blood relatives. Pseudonyms were selected to protect their anonymity. Table 5 provides an in-depth description of each participant's personal and professional demographics.

Table 5. Participants' Demographics

Participants' Demographics									
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
Participants									
Kathy	X	X				X	X	X	
Anna	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
Rachel	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Jan	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
Tracey	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
Pam	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Robyn	X	X		X		X	X		X
Maggie	X	X	X			X		X	
Laura	X	X	X		X	X			X
Vivian	X	X	X	X	X	X			X

1. Self- identified as a Woman of African Descent; 2.Nontraditional Criteria, over 35 years of age; 3. Dissertation on topic concern with Adult Career and Educational Development; 4. Had a mentor; 5. Changed dissertation chair more than once; 6. Worked full-time while studying; 7. Had children under 18 during educational process; 8. Financed education through loans; 9. Financed education through personal funds and tuition reimbursement.

The data were collected via 45- to 90 minute individual interviews. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. To maintain integrity, each study participant was provided with a copy of his or her individual transcript to review and verify the information that was recorded during their individual interviews. Once transcripts were verified via e-mail from the study participant to the researcher, the researcher read and annotated the transcripts to determine what primary and secondary themes were present.

Those primary and secondary themes numbered 26 topics. The interviewer counted how many times certain topics occurred in each interview and developed a list of those topics.

Table 6. Data Analysis Code Rubric

Data Analysis Code Rubric		
Code	Beliefs about Persistence	Color code-dark yellow
RS	Resilience	
PSY	Psychological	
PSY1	ABD Thoughts	
PH	Physical Health	
MO	Motivation	
MO1	God/Faith	
SS	Support Systems	Pink
IN	Institutional	
IN1	Faculty	
IN2	Program of study	
PR	Peers	
PR1	Cohorts/Study Groups	
FM	Family	
FM1	Obligations	
CM	Community	
CM1	Networking	
CM2	Caretakers	
RAP	Role of Race in Academic Persistence	Green
DS	Discrimination	
DS1	Perceptions/Reality	
DS2	Control Issues	
DS3	Education/work conflicts	
IS	Isolation	

Those topics were then grouped into themes and narrowed down to 3 primary themes Those 3 themes were a constant in all the interviews. There were 8 secondary themes; those were themes that recurred in at least 8 of the 10 interviews. The 13 subthemes were calculated as such because each appeared at least 6 times throughout the 10 interviews. The primary and secondary themes were color-coded to identify them from one another. The subthemes within the primary and secondary themes were circled because many of them cross-referenced several themes. After the themes were color-coded, the researcher created the following data analysis code rubric for each primary and secondary theme. (see Table 6).

Cross-Case Analysis

This chapter presents the findings from the study through cross-case analysis and is divided into three sections: (a) the participants' beliefs about persistence, (b) the participants' persistence, and support systems and (c) the role of race in academic persistence. Table 7 provides a detailed description of the 3 major themes, 8 secondary themes, and 13 subthemes. This chapter is set up to reflect how the information from the study participants fits into the structure of the research questions. When quotes are used to support the findings, the participants' pseudonym and line numbers from her transcript are cited (e.g., Vivian, lines 2-9).

Table 7. Summary of Themes

Summary of Themes	*SecondaryThemes*	*Subthemes*
1. Participants Beliefs about Persistence.		
goals, determination, “never give up” attitude		
finish what started, pinnacle of career success	Motivation	
role model for other women of African descent;		Psychological
taking care of self-mentally and physically;		ABD Thoughts
spiritual relationship w/ God; finding a relief for		Physical Health
stress; staying power vs. ABD (all but dissertation).	Resilience	
		God/Faith
2. Persistence and Support Systems.		
racism-overt and covert, racism in the classroom;		
racism in the institution, discrimination at work	Discrimination	
for pursuit of doctorate; paying for education;		Perceptions/Reality
career success vs. academic pursuit;		Control Issues
feelings of vulnerability and loss of control.		Education/Work Conflicts
	Isolation	
3. The Role of Race in Academic Persistence.		
mentoring and guidance; study teams and	Institutional	
networking; family obligations, support or lack		Faculty
of support; structured programs vs. lack of structure;		Programs of Study
faculty/committee issues; church, sisterhoods and caretakers	Cohorts/Peers	
		Cohorts/Study Groups
	Family	
		Obligations
	Community	
		Networking
		Caretakers

We begin the exploration of the participants' beliefs about persistence focusing on their motivation and resilience. The discussion then turned to the role of support systems in their persistence to complete their doctorate focusing on faculty/institution and family; finally, the participants discussed the role of race in their individual pursuits of academic persistence looking at the issues of discrimination and isolation.

Beliefs about Persistence

Motivation to Earn a Doctorate.

In approaching the doctorate process, many of the study participants relied on self-motivation and resilience to focus on their studies. In their own words, many of the participants described persistence as a "never-give-up" attitude that bound them to a "commitment" to complete the degree. Most of them kept the idea of earning a doctorate degree as a lifetime goal foremost in their minds; however, two of the participants allowed the desire of such educational attainment to develop later after completing a master's degree.

Vivian commented that her motivation for a doctorate degree was by chance.

> When I got finished with my Masters' in Nursing as a Nurse Practitioner, I did a thesis, and I was so tired of getting feedback on my thesis. I said I would never do a doctorate degree, nor would I put myself through writing and staying up all night and the stress. I'm not doing that. So, I finished my Masters' in 1997. By about 2000, honestly, I was missing school. I was missing the interaction with my colleagues and the learning and the challenges of being in school. I was not interested then in doing a doctorate degree in nursing. One of the main reasons for that is, even if I thought about doing it in nursing, only the private schools had that program, and I could not afford it (Vivian, lines 10-15, 21-23).

After hearing about an Adult Education and Human Resource Development (AE/HRD) doctoral program at a local public university, Vivian decided to investigate just to see if it piqued her interest.

> I actually spoke with one of the nursing faculty [members] who had gotten her doctorate at this public university in AE/HRD. I talked to her about it, and she was kind of like a mentor to me. She said, "Oh yes. I think you would be good at it. We need to recruit you as faculty when you're done." So, I said that I would go in 2001 as a non-degree-seeking student. I said at that time, "Well, let me see if I'm up to the challenge, and probably, I may not make it". I went in, kind of… well if I make it, its' okay and if I don't its okay (Vivian, lines 25-31).

Laura found herself in a doctorate program as a way to work out the stress of going through a divorce. She stated:

> I was going through a divorce and I just said: "Well, let me do something to take my mind off what was going on." I remembered I had attended a presentation at a local public university on the doctoral program. But I said, "You know what, this is a good way to get my mind off of what was going on in my personal life." So I started pursuing graduate courses. When I got to about 12 credits, the director said to me, "Well you know, that's the amount that you can do in non-degree-seeking, you might as well apply to the program." And I just said, "Okay." I applied to the program. I went through the interview process. Then, they said, "welcome to the university." Then I thought, "Oh my god, what I have gotten myself into" (Laura, lines 4-6, 10-13).

The other study participants expressed their pursuit of a doctorate degree as a lifelong goal.

> Robyn stated. It has always been a dream of mine. Not for the work, but for personal growth, and I've always wanted to have a doctorate. I wanted to retire with a doctorate degree. That is the extent through my whole education career. He [Dad] always instilled in us to get the highest education that you can. And that was what my dream was, and I was going to fulfill that dream for me and for him. (Robyn, lines 5-7, 30-32).

> Pam said; Well, I had completed my Master's. I just thought that the ultimate test of any educator is to get a Ph.D. in their field. That is the highest grade that

> you can get in education. So, that's what I wanted. I wanted to reach to the highest in the field in which I was representing (Pam, lines 7-10).
>
> Tracey states: I had a Masters already and I knew I wanted to pursue my education because I had gotten my Masters in 1977. So that is one of the reasons. And the other reason is that I had planned that when I retire from this position, I would teach at a college or a school or at a university, so I knew I needed the degree (Tracey, lines 5-9).
>
> Rachel added: I wanted to also see what clinical changes I could make based on scientific evidence. How could I make a difference in the community in which I resided? I felt that I would be more useful in my profession as a registered nurse. I obtained my doctorate based on being able to represent as a scholar the profession in which I was employed (Rachel, lines 11-13, 19-21).
>
> Anna stated: During my early years, while living in my little hometown, I had never been exposed to Blacks with post undergraduate education, yet I still had that innate desire to excel. I had a thirst to be the best I could be. When I moved to Miami and was exposed to people who held doctorate degrees, I felt I could (Anna, lines 4-7).
>
> Maggie proclaimed: I am a very disciplined person. I think that my effort to pursue it [doctorate] was because none of my family members had graduated from college. In speaking with them, I told them that I would do it for them and I did. At the day of graduation, I presented my diploma to my mother (Maggie, lines 21-24).
>
> Kathy stated: I have always wanted a Ph.D. It was a matter of timing and what area to pursue for me. And after teaching 12 years, I wanted to keeping working with teens, but in a different capacity. (Kathy, lines 2-4).

The other two participants reported that they were encouraged and motivated to pursue a doctorate degree from fellow coworkers who, themselves, had embarked and completed doctorate degrees. As the participants began their doctoral studies, their diverse approaches to setting study schedules, selecting classes, and balancing work and family varied and truly expressed their respective resilience in handling the psychological and

physical aspects of pursuing their education. In discussing the atmosphere of the actual classroom compared to their expectations, the participants responded:

> Jan: My reality was totally different than what I expected. I am a "checklist" type person, very structured. You look at the curriculum and you look online and say, "Okay, I can do these classes." Oh, after that, then I'm supposed to complete comps. Oh, I can do that. Then after that, I'm supposed to do my dissertation. … But, the reality was so different. The biggest differences were the things that are not in your control… That was stress too, because the courses were not ideal for someone who is a professional, who does not leave at 3:30 from a job to get to campus at 4:00 p.m. So, that was a little upsetting, and I was a little annoyed by that, but it wasn't really disclosed until you are already signed up, and you're in it (Jan, lines 15-18, 23, 31-35).

> Vivian: I honestly thought that pursuing a doctoral degree had to be very difficult, very challenging. You've got to be the smartest of the smartest to succeed. All of the classes would be rigorous. What I discovered was it's not that you don't have to be smart, the reality was that many of us who succeed in the program…. and I may be totally wrong, is because we go through so much during this period of time. And because of our resilience, our perseverance and the mentors around us and, people who by this time, have already earned our degree for us, so they keep encouraging us to pursue it… The reality was that, it wasn't always as organized as I thought it would be and sometimes students found themselves in a maze trying to figure out what the next step should be (Vivian, lines 47-58).

> Tracey- Some of my basic expectations were….The positive side is when I was in school we didn't have electronic databases. So this was a plus, that I could actually get Proquest articles online without even having to go the library. I saw the electronic library was a good thing. I think one of my disappointments was having to learn a lot through other students and not necessarily your advisor. A lot of the day-to-day details I learned from other students. As an older student, I was maybe a little more obsessive-compulsive at some of the younger students. So that was one thing. But other than that, it was pretty much of what I expected (Tracey, lines 14-20).

> Maggie: I expected that it was going to be overwhelming. Once I began, it was overwhelming. However, I had to make some adjustments in my personal activities in order to meet the demands of graduate school (Maggie, lines 10-12).

> Robyn: I expected it to be very difficult. I just didn't expect the racial difficulties that I encountered at the [university]. And it wasn't [the university], it was the cohort. I expected [difficulties] when I ran into as far as the workload and working while I was studying, but not the racial issues (Robyn, lines 11-14).

> Rachel: I expected graduate school to be more structured, similar to undergraduate. The doctorate level was totally different. It was a brutal awakening. It was like moving from one galaxy to another galaxy. And there were terminologies and words that were used that I was not quite familiar with. So I saw myself in an environment of a new world that I was not quite prepared for as I thought I was. And I had to really do more studying because it wasn't structured as my mindset was. It was more free-for-alls, meaning, that you had to get out there and do the work (Rachel, lines 24-34).

> Pam: Well, I expected to probably be more nurturing than it was because in all of my education, it had been almost like a traditional kind of classroom, including professors and lectures and all of the things that goes into education. I found that the Ph.D. program was totally and completely different (Pam, lines 12-15).

Anna: "I expected graduate school to be challenging. The reality is that not only was it challenging, it was all consuming-life, time, energy, and sanity" (Anna, lines 11-12).

Only one of the participants (Kathy) found the doctoral experience to be just what she expected.

Resilience

In finding a balance, too, between attending school, maintaining employment and managing a household, many of the study participants stressed the need to "take care of self." Some of them experienced physical ailments, family illnesses, divorces, psychological doubt, and serious consideration that the "process" might not be worth the toil it was taking on their lives. They spoke candidly about how their sheer determination, faith, and commitment sustained them through the tough times of family issues, thoughts of going ABD (all but dissertation), and dealing with physical illness brought on by stress.

Many of the study participants experienced some type of life-altering episode during the course of their studies. Anna went through a legal separation from her husband and soon after found herself assuming the care of her spouse after he experienced a debilitating accident.

> Pam's husband died unexpectedly soon after she began her doctorate studies. She speaks affirmatively about how she turned that tragedy into a motivational force to help her succeed in her studies. She said: after going through the grieving and going through that whole period, it was really my peers and the professors who encouraged me at that time that I really needed to come back. And, I think that that was probably one of the best things that I could have done during that time. Because there was so much work to do; so much research to do, the meetings and all of the other things that you have to do when you're going through it. And that emptiness that I had, I really filled it up with seeking that degree. Knowing that he too had already okayed it during our time together. And so, that was a driving force for me (Pam, lines 32-39).

Rachel began her doctoral studies at a university that had a cohort program. Although she found the program nurturing, she decided to switch to another university to focus on a program of study that was more in-line to what her ultimate professional goals and needs were. While in her 2nd year of study, Rachel also went through a divorce and lost both of her parents. [The late Cynthia Peacock was a friend, doctoral cohort and motivator extra-ordinaire for many women of African Descent.]

> Rachel: Well, the death of my parents had really been effective in terms of me taking some time off. As a matter of fact, it made me drive even deeper because when I walked across the stage it was for my parents as well as for Cynthia, because she was there. I personally believed that an individual should have balance in their lives. So, there should be spiritual, physically, moral, and emotional support. So for my spiritual [support] I had Dr. S., who is a Jewish lady who is very, very good. who kept telling me who I was and that I needed to walk into who I was regardless of what I was experiencing. So I appreciate her. I had S.S., who is the VP at the hospital, who would motivate me and tell me that basically I can manage this. That all the obstacles will crumble; that this was only a stepping stone for me to get where I was. And then there was G. M., who was

> emotionally there when I had to cry. I could be naked in front of her and just cry. And then the last person, because I don't have parents because they died in the pursuit of this degree, was my oldest sister. She was really the support of all three of them. But I really call her my spiritual light and my emotional healer, because she just drew me together; and, my church. Had it not been for those, maybe I don't think I'd be where I am today (Rachel, lines 205-207, 102-114,).

Robyn was the youngest in a close family of educators. Upon starting her doctorate studies, her sister was diagnosed with breast cancer. Robyn as a single mother of two (one in high school and one college-aged), made her sister a promise that she would be with her throughout the process.

> Robyn: I made a promise with her to be there, no matter when she called me. So that was a huge, huge sacrifice. Then having the new job, and knowing that I had to take on these additional responsibilities and, at the time, there were only two Black regional superintendents. I was sent to a region where there had never been a Black regional superintendent before. So, it was just a lot of sacrifice. But it was worth it (Robyn, lines 88-92).

Vivian reflects on the difficult times of her doctorate studies.

> I think professionally, I had no life. I had to work during the program. I didn't do as many of the things that I wanted to do because, then, school consumed me. I was working full-time at the hospital. Many times I was doing some adjunct teaching, and I had schoolwork. Personally, I ended up with a divorce during this process. Whether a doctorate contributed to it, I don't know. But, I'm sure, not being around and being in school and, for some people, being a career person, probably it had an impact. So I think of anything that has happened that was the saddest part and the hardest part, the most difficult part of this process (Vivian, lines 183-190).

Jan, a focused-and-checklist-type of individual spoke of her resilient spirit during the process:

> The fact that I don't rest unless I have closure, and once I start something; I have to finish it. So, it was always the pressure of the "monkey on my back:" No matter how many years, and I didn't take any semesters off, I was consistent in signing up and working and trying to get it done. First of all, it was expensive to stay in school just to do nothing. So, it was always the pressure of the "monkey on my back," and I have to get through this process because I started it (Jan, lines 47-52).
> I did not have the luxury of being able to quit my job and take time off and take weeks at a time off. I would try to take my vacation and write and over the Christmas break, when we get that off, I try and write. But, the biggest struggle for me was finding my groove. What's working for me? Weekends would come and go and I find that, okay, that's not working. So, what I had to end up doing, and tell people this all the time, is I would go home from work after 8 hours a day. I'd go home, prepare dinner for my family, and get the kids settled with their homework. Pass out and go to sleep. But I would wake up in the middle of the night, and I would stay up while everyone else was sleeping. That was the only way I was able to persist (Jan, lines 56-64).

Laura, a devout Christian, relied heavily on her faith and prayer to get her through the tough times of pursuing the doctorate degree. She stated:

> Laura: I think that my personality is of such that whenever I start something, I need to finish it. I think that, for me, it was my perseverance. And also, I know that I am a Christian and I feel very much that whatever it is that happens in my life it is ordained by God. So, I feel that He also gave me the strength, the energy, everything that it took to endure. But, I know me and I know that whenever I start something, I must finish it (Laura, lines 40-44).

> Pam: I would say that if there is anyone that you have that you may have to reach out to, and as African Americans, period, you cannot do this alone and know that. You cannot do it alone. I also knew that, and I'll say this, I knew that I was on a spiritual journey as well. I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and I knew that he had a mission for my life and this was one part of it. I will say to a lot of audiences as I speak to them. The Lord put me in a program to get a Ph.D., that I could tell the other Ph.Ds. about a G-O-D. Like I said, even with this, it was all in a divine way. When you know what your purpose is, and I think that we as African American women and women of all colors, we have to know what our purpose is. When you know your purpose and you're walking in your purpose at all times, you are

not going to the east or the west; you are going to stay focused on the goal (Pam, lines 158-169).

Tracey, an older student who partook in many continuing education endeavors and was a published author in her profession, the stress of becoming a serious degree-seeking student brought about a level of stress she had not known before. She contended that:

> Because of my need to achieve to get perfect scores and all that, created a lot of stress for me. So the biggest advice I would give to future students is, "Don't get so hung up in having to get an A in everything." That's where I got the medical condition (Shingles) as a result of the stress, just freaking out over trying to get an A in statistics (Tracey, lines 46-50).

The impact of pursuing a doctorate degree for Laura (a devout Christian) really affected the time she spent at her church.

> Laura: Pursuing the doctorate degree impacted my personal life to the extent that I had to drop everything. Okay, let me start over by saying that during the coursework, yes I was very involved in my church, so I was not able to attend the events or services or depending on when the classes were scheduled. So, it impacted in that way. But when I got to the dissertation process, I recognized more and more that I had to cut out everything from my personal life. So basically, all I did was I worked and I went straight on from there. I just had to make that decision because I found out when I came to grips with that, you know, because it was hard for me. I'm thinking, "gee". And I felt guilty at some point, especially church that I was not able to be there. But when I came to the understanding that, "Look, this is not forever. You just need to just focus right now and getting this done." When I did that, the process became easier for me. It was still challenging because you wanted to be involved in other things. But, my entire life was just focused on getting through, working on my dissertation and coming to work. So, this was sort of things that you have to do. You know, you eat, sleep, and get yourself ready. So, that was my personal life (Laura, lines 130-144).

Kathy seemed to be so focused on completing her degree in 3 years, in spite of working full-time, being married, and raising a family. She added that she set a timetable for herself and stuck to it to ensure that she did not go past the 3 years.

All But Dissertation (ABD) Thoughts

The participants of this study were all accomplished women on so many levels, professionally, socially, and financially. As they each approached their doctorate studies, each encountered life challenges that would have deterred many of a weaker stance, but they were determined and embodied with an innate spirit to succeed in spite of obstacles. At times, when faced with traces of doubt in the process, some participants looked within and entertained thoughts of ABD, while others chose to change institutions as a means to forge ahead.

> Vivian: I never thought about finishing it at another institution, but when I enrolled in the program initially, I had just gotten separated; I considered not finishing the degree. The only reason why I went to class is because Dr. S. would come and pick me up. She would take me. I don't need this. I am doing all of this for what? You know, you're going through this negative stuff. Why am I'm doing all of this? Now, I'm getting a divorce and separated. It is not worth anything. And she was like, "Yes, you'll finish I mean, my head wasn't anywhere near there" (Vivian, lines 193-194, 198-202).

Anna considered not completing her degree, but she conceded that she had never been a quitter. She said:

> Anna: Although I was tempted to quit many times, I was propelled to continue by the tenets by which I lived my life, "Do not give up." If I had quit, I would not have respect for myself, and I would not be a positive example for others, especially my daughter, to follow (Anna, lines 18-20).

Jan, however, gave serious consideration to walking away from her educational pursuits. She lamented:

> Jan: So, I had to put on this façade of everything is fine. Mom is handling this; then there were days when you wanted to die and just wanted to quit. The juggling; that's a really big part of it. I used to tell my husband, and said, if I

> jumped off this "merry-go-round" because that's what it felt like, then I'm done. If I quit, that's it. If I make that decision that I'm done, I'm done. He would just listen. He wouldn't say one word. He would just listen, because he knew I was serious. I'm telling you, it takes a part of you. It takes a real part of you. So yes, there were times when I was real close. I was right there. I was right there. I was done (Jan, lines 127-129, 159-164).

Jan confessed to living with a haunting fear that gripped her constantly. She said

> What if you get sick? So I would never take a semester off. It was always like, "the race to the finish line." because anything could go wrong. So many people start and stop and start and stop and they run out of time. So I would always, "No, I have to finish." Pressure I was putting on myself too, because I'm trying to control life's happenings when I know I can't. Realistically, I know I can't. But, it's like, "You never know, you might end up in the hospital." And if I get sick, I would say, "I can't go to a hospital, I have classes." That sounds so ridiculous, but it's true. That would be a setback. No, I had to stay on track. So it was always a race against the clock; stay on track. So, it was always the fear of something happening and nothing ever did. Nothing ever happened to the point financially or jobwise or health wise, or something with the kids, or with parents, or anything that impacted me continuing (Jan, lines 175-186).

Tracey summed up the feelings of many when she stated:

> You can deal with even the difficult courses like the statistics because it's predictable and you know what you have to do and you do it. When you get to the dissertation phase, and now I know why they have the acronym ABD, it's because when you get to that phase, then things are less structured; you're working more independently. You don't have the support of all your team as you did before your cohorts. And it can get a little frustrating with the fact. The most frustrating thing throughout the entire process of writing that dissertation is the back and forth. You correct something. You submit it. Correct it again. Look something up. Go back to the literature. Check it out some more. Come back. You know, now I know how postal workers feel. As if your job is never complete, and so you're feeling very, very frustrated (Tracey, lines 79-89).

Persistence and Support Systems

All the participants agreed that having a support system while pursuing a doctorate degree is a key to maintaining your sanity through the process. They relied upon their close and extended families, friends, coworkers, sorority and church members, children and God to help them through the process. This section covers support in (a)

institution and faculty (b) cohorts and peers in program, and (c) peers at work and community (d) family and community and (e) nonsupport and barriers.

Institution and Faculty

Vivian discussed how her support system at her institution began immediately.

> Vivian: I met Dr. S. as a student and colleague and a whole bunch of people in the classroom. I met a whole bunch of people who really, in essence, became part of the mentoring team for me. It wasn't a specific mentor. It became a group of people who mentored, supported me, encouraged me, and advised me towards the program. In meeting with them, we would hang out; we would start standing up at break, and the next thing you know, we'd have discussions. Everybody was really excited. People were, you know, "I'm going back to school now." "We're going to graduate." People who were ahead started talking about their programs of studies and all kinds of fascinating things, it seems like to me. I really became motivated and excited about doing it. So, by the time I was done with my 12 credits as a non-degree-seeking student, I was ready to enroll and had my interview, and here I am (Vivian, lines 31-41).

Tracey counted herself lucky because although she had two different advisors throughout her studies, she found them both to be student advocates and really supportive. She said of the latter:

> Tracey: She listened to students, whereas many of the other professors didn't necessarily give you all that time. She was very patient with me. We met at her house. She would call me and encourage me. She was really a good source of encouragement there, especially in the dissertation phase (Tracey, lines 55-58).

Kathy was also very pleased with the support she received from her committee chairperson, although she did not consider her a mentor. Maggie concurred that her program coordinator provided much-needed guidance and support for her during her doctoral process. When Robyn completed her coursework and was studying for her comprehensive exams, she got a huge promotion at work. One of the directors who

worked under her had just completed her doctorate at a state university, and she rallied around Robyn to become her mentor and confidant as she finished her comps and wrote her dissertation. Robyn considered her a mentor and guiding light through the process. Jan started her doctoral process at a time when her university program was going through reorganization. Faculty were retiring, leaving for other jobs, and she found herself without a committee chairperson and feeling very lost. Eventually, new faculty was hired, and she was introduced to a professor whom she found to be a good fit. She said:

> Jan: She was very supportive. She lived not too far from where I lived, so every other Saturday I would meet with her. She was very dedicated. She was supportive. She would counsel and say, "You're going to do this." She understood, whereas, lots a people did not understand what I was going through. I considered her the main mentor. (Jan, lines 97-101).

For Pam, she felt that her mentor and number one supporter was God sent. Her core professor, like Pam, was a widow and she understood what Pam was going through from a perspective that someone who had not had that experience could not. Her core professor helped Pam get through the doctoral process by setting deadlines and holding her to them. For instance:

> Pam: If I had a goal and I know when I'm going to reach it, I can always place those little points that I'm going to reach at. So she was a goal setter and a time manager. So, when she gave me those, I did everything I possibly could to reach it. Whether I had completed everything to my satisfaction or for her to look over it, those deadlines was what made me reach that goal. I think that was the greatest gift that she could have given me in terms of setting those goals (Pam, lines 77-82).

As Laura began her doctoral process, her marriage was falling apart. A religious woman, she is very thankful for the understanding and patience that her professors took with her.

> Laura: I started the program before the divorce actually happened. And when I was in the actual semester, I remembered very clearly that I was just tired. I was under so much stress that I could not concentrate. I was in the non-degree courses at the time. But my professors were really very understanding. And I appreciate them; because, if they had not worked with me, I would not have been able to even complete the program (Laura, lines 65-70).

Cohorts and Peers

Vivian knew and understood the true meaning of cohort; she spoke with admiration for her fellow doctoral colleagues and cohort members.

> Vivian: I don't think I would have made it through this program, -and I said this to many people, without the support of my family and the peers that I connected with in the doctoral students in the program. When your butt gets kicked down, it is nothing like having somebody calling and saying, "Well, what's going on?" and "You can't quit" and "Yes you're coming to class" and "Yes, you're going to turn in your work." People just kind of looked out for you. I had a work schedule many days when I was the director, in which I would be in the office at 7:00 in the morning and 9:00 and 10 o'clock at night. I'm still at work. I would drag myself into class whatever day of the week that is. Sometimes I wouldn't be finished with my work, so I have to go and ask the professor if I could submit it late and was getting a lower grade. You got people who you don't realize, but they're looking out for you when they're saying, "I didn't see you submit your paper." "What happened?" "You better go home and do it." That was the kind of overall support and encouragement you got throughout this program, which is so keen in my view to get into (Vivian, lines 77-90).

Dr. S., a new friend and fellow doctoral student, became a major source of moral support for Vivian when she was in the midst of a separation and then a divorce. She said:

> Vivian: Dr. S. would tell me, "Yes, you'll finish" and "You work too hard," "You won't let that happened to you." She was a very religious person and she would pray with me and she would say, "Okay now, I'm going to get you to school." From there, She would pull up here or I would meet her wherever; but you better come pick me up. We'd go down to campus, and I'd listened. Pretty much for a year, until the end of 2005; and then she would take me to class and I'd write a couple of things. But my head wasn't there. One of my professors would say, "I want you to keep coming to class for your participation." And then by 2006, in January, it looked like something just clicked and said you got to graduate (Vivian, 198-210).

Robyn found much mutual respect with her cohort at her private university. She said:

> Robyn: We had a really wonderful cohort. When I first started, I didn't know but only one. I really knew one because I was a director at the time and she was a principal. But, as we started, I became very close with about 15 of the others who were all principals in the Miami-Dade County Public School System. Some were working at the District and you could see in the cohort that there was a big divide between the principals at the school site and the District people. But we established a very strong cohort (Robyn, lines 117-122).

Anna reflects on the positive experience she had with her peers, she said:

> Anna: My interaction with peers [other doctoral students] was very positive. My fellow doctoral students were very accepting of me. They seem to respect me as a viable student with potential to make valuable contributions to the field of adult education (Anna, lines 14-16).

Tracey found that her interaction with her peers helped her to focus in on a research topic.

> Tracey: Actually, a student in the class one night asked me a critical question that brought on that "aha" moment of what my research question should be. Once I decided what my research question was going to be, the method of getting there was very clear. But I think I stalled myself a little bit by trying to find tools, and trying to find quantitative measures about organizational support for cultural competence, which was my topic, without really honing in my question first (Tracey, lines 99-105).

Pam thinks that her group experience was positive because they started their studies together, she said:

> Pam: We had a close knit group. All of us started off together. Of course, it was different subject areas and different disciplines. But, we had a really close relationship. We did work together. There were times that we had committee meetings together. There was a system. That was probably one of the greatest features that I felt very close to any of my peers that were working with me and that I could pick up the phone and call to ask questions. If they were more astute in an area in which I needed some assistance, they would do the same thing for me (Pam, lines 21-27).

> Maggie: The other students that were in my particular program of higher ed., we formed our own study groups. We studied on weekends. We met on weekday

> nights. We just basically sort of formed a bond together. We studied together, and we helped each other out. Of the five of us that did that, three of us graduated with our doctorate degree (Maggie, lines 15-18).

> Laura: I think that my personality is of such that whenever I start something, I need to finish it. I think that for me, it was my perseverance. And also, I know that I am a Christian and I feel very much that whatever it is that happens in my life, it is ordained by God. So, I feel that He also gave me the strength, the energy, everything that it took to endure. But, I know me, and I know that whenever I start something, I must finish it (Laura, lines 40-44).

Work and Community.

Laura cited her immediate supervisor; administrator at a local public university as a major source of support.

> I think my boss here at the university, Dr. J.S., considering the fact that I had started a new position, she had told me when I started that the major thing is if I started that I needed to finish. And that to me was very supportive because if I had not had that in addition to all the other difficulties that I had experienced, it would have been more stressful for me. She gave me the time off that I needed in order to complete. And even though I had started the new position, it was not an issue. So, she was very supportive also. I was able to speak to her on occasions with the challenges that I was having (Laura, lines 112-119).

As Laura matriculated through the program, she was sidelined by her mother's diagnosis with cancer and needed to go and be with her mother in Jamaica for a couple of weeks. She used this incident to prove the point as to why students need to get to know their professors. After conferring with her major professor to alert her to what was going on in her life, Laura was granted the time off. She said that the professor knew and understood her work ethics as a student and knew she was committed to the program. She further stated:

> Laura: I say that because it is important to get to know your professors. Especially, in a program where you don't have many professors; it is important to get to know them. Don't keep yourself away and think that you know. And if you

> find at any time that you do not understand, ask questions. I believe in that. Ask, ask, and ask. It doesn't matter if you think it may be embarrassing; swallow your pride, because that is the only way that you can really, really get an understanding. You know, it's funny, because people will have expectations but they don't let people know of what they are thinking. Which can be a conflict in itself; so, you really do need to ask. And you can find a mentor; it's helpful. I don't think it is necessary, but I am sure it's helpful if you can find someone who has gone through the process before and is able to work with you and give you guidance then that is also beneficial (Laura, lines 293-303).

Kathy shared her experience as she grew nearer her graduation date. She said:

> Kathy: My committee chair was my strongest supporter. I had no mentor from my program, but I did receive support and help from a friend who had her Ed.D. (Kathy, lines 21-23).

Family and Community.

Tracey, who had been married for over 30 years, counted her husband as her largest supporter. She said he understood when she had to isolate herself in order to write, especially on the weekends. She was so thankful to God that her husband stood by her through the doctoral process. She went on to discuss how pursuing a doctoral degree could be difficult for a Woman of African Descent because we often don't have the role models within our own families who have had the experience of post graduate education. Without that experience, our families sometimes don't understand our needs as graduate students. She said:

> Tracey: I think for African women, or Black women in general, we have additional challenges, because, number one, we might not have a lot of other people in our family with a doctoral degree. So we don't' have the role models to guide us. We might have families who might not be encouraging because they don't see the need for it (Tracey, lines 121-126).

Jan, like Tracey, said that her husband was her biggest supporter. She stated:

> Jan: I'd say, absolutely 100%, my husband because if one day he had said, "You know, this is a little drawn out here. Those books are getting." He has never made those comments at all. He has never once complained. I received my bachelor's, master's, and doctorate all while married with children. So, I think, and it could have something to do with the lack of a father figure in my life, that I had to make sure that this part of my life was solid before I could persist and pursue and stick with it because that had to be tight. Because if that wasn't tight, I don't think I would have had that drive to keep it going to hang in there. He was a good ear. He was my number one fan (Jan, lines 104-112).

Laura found support in her church and in her mother. She said:

> Laura: My mother was very instrumental in my completing the program, mainly because she was just there for me. She lives in Jamaica, but she was always there for me to talk to. You know, I could really talk to her about anything that was happening. Additionally, I had a group of individuals that I called my triangular friends. They would feed me. They would transport me. They would come over to my house when I was writing, just there to lend support, even if it meant just sitting while I was working. It really helped me in accomplishing my goal. It really did (Laura, lines 106-112).

Although supportive, Kathy's husband did not always understand the stress she was under. She said:

> Kathy: Personally, it got tense with my husband. He was very supportive, but he was not able to relate to the stressors I was experiencing. I spent a lot of time away from home and my kids. Professionally, I missed a lot of days from work, and I was "physically" there but very disconnected (Kathy, lines 25-28).

Anna found it difficult to balance home, family, work, and school. Her marriage was crumbling and she lived several states away from her immediate family. She had two adult children who were busy with families of their own in other states and she still had a teenage daughter living at home. She experienced feelings of guilt in neglecting her daughter to pursue her degree, so she adjusted by:

> Anna: I made time for my underage daughter by taking her to the library with me and letting her help me search for documents. I also would take her to class with me whenever I could (Anna, lines 22-24).

Nonsupport and Barriers.

The participants began their respective doctoral process with the goal of finishing the degree foremost in their minds. They expected there to be some obstacles along the way. Some of those obstacles were expected; others were surprising. In spite of the large amount of support that many of them received, there were instances of nonsupport that could have been seen as barriers to completion had not their minds been made up to succeed.

Kathy's potential nonsupport barriers were related to things outside of her control. She remembered:

> My committee members were my problem. They would not read and respond to things in a timely manner. The school I attended was going through accreditation and other structural changes. This meant that we were being asked to change certain things "midstream," and my graduation was almost delayed (Kathy, lines 16-18, 33-35).

Anna, who experienced a legal separation during her doctoral process, lamented about her spouse:

> Because of his inability to control and discourage me from completing my pursuit, my spouse focused his attention elsewhere. I relied heavily on my spirituality to get through the process my spouse was not supportive (Anna, lines 25-27).

Jan came to a point when she did not feel that she had any support from her university or committee. She remembered:

> Jan: Lots of rumors, lots of anxiety, lots of stress, lots of struggles to find committee members, to find chairs to keep committee members The program was going through changes so you have the anxiety of "Oh my god. I finished these courses, and now I feel like I'm just sort of hanging out here. "What am I supposed to do now?" You want to latch on to someone and "Oh, I can't take you because I have too many, that sort of thing." So you never really felt relaxed. You felt like, it's up to me. So the support could have been a lot better (Jan, lines 67-73).

After Laura had completed her coursework and began to prepare for comprehensive exams, she encountered the difficulty of putting together a committee due to several factors out of her control:

> Laura: I remember that was a challenge. I didn't mention it before, but remember that was a challenge because individuals had left the university. That was one of the difficulties that I had encountered in trying to find members for my committee. But I persevered and eventually did find the members. However, one left. Apart from the dissertation chair meeting, one the members of the committee left. So I had to find another member and that was challenging also because this was the individual that had to be outside of my major and outside of the department. That was the challenge. The other challenge that I had encountered was when they switched the program. Because, when I started, I started here at the Ft. Lauderdale location. And then they switched it to Pines and then to Tamiami. And that was a challenge because I thought that I was going to commute to complete my program in Broward. No. I live in Sunrise in Ft. Lauderdale and now I had to commute to the Tamiami Campus. So, that in itself was a challenge. But I had connected with friends so we would drive alternative weeks. That helped but it was a challenge (Laura, lines 190-197, 202-209).
>
> I think that when my college went through some changes with their administration, they went through administrative changes. Now I'm thinking about it, and I remembered how they changed their program structure for the Broward program. I remembered how they changed the different chairs during the program. I remembered the professors leaving. I remembered the deans changing (Laura, lines 230-234).

Role of Race in Academic Persistence

When questioned about the issue of race in their pursuit of the doctorate, the participants seemed to either face it head-on and deal with it or push it to the back of their minds and try to ignore it. They all commented that it was sometimes the elephant in the room; however, none of them allowed it to stop them from completing their degrees. Some of them encountered blatant instances which had to be addressed through administrative involvement, and others observed overt instances which they did not find the least bit surprising. The participants discussed openly their feelings of isolation in academia, encounters with their employers once it was learned that they were pursuing a doctorate and even slights from people and coworkers who had once seemed supportive in other endeavors.

Isolation and Discrimination

Rachel began her studies at a public university with a cohort group. She then transferred to a private university and found the atmosphere among her peers to be totally different. She indicated that she felt isolated and did not find the team support that she had at her former university. She said:

> I had a point to prove. I wanted to show those challenges that I experienced that you were not going to keep me from obtaining it. What I did do for my sanity, if I could somewhat take a background of everything, and because of my ethnic group, that even made it easier because they pushed me in the background. When that occurred to me, it allowed me to become stronger, to be more mindset, to be more focused, to use resources like Toastmasters to help me articulate and become more prevalent. It helped me to go to the library and use the literature review to become more knowledgeable so when I spoke I can come

from a scientific base. It allowed me the opportunity to check out organizations and to find persons that knew about publications and teach me how to publish, how to write complete abstracts for not only publications but for poster presentation, oral presentation. I just stood in the background, so when I came out to the forefront, I think people's perspective was that, "Okay, we didn't know that she was able to get it. But now that she has the doctorate and she articulates what she observes, like wow, she has the whole package." So I think that was more or less of what I wanted and that was one of the motivating factors for me. You've got your feet on my head, but you don't have your feet on my shoulders and I can still rise above (Rachel, lines 139-155).

Robyn, who also attended the same private university as Rachel (yet they were in different programs of study and never met) discussed how her cohort turned into a racial divide initiated by one of her professors. She said:

Robyn: I had my sister, [who is 1-year older,] she was diagnosed with cancer at the same week that I started the program. Then, I get to the university and we think that we're going to go in and pay this money, do our studies, and do our work and that was going to be it. That would all be after us. But it turned into such a racial issue wherein that some of the professors were helping the non-Blacks and not the Blacks. And it just got to be so difficult (Robyn, lines 39-44).

So, we were blessed to meet two sisters (Robyn's private university was associated with a religious order) who were Anglo, but who did not believe in discrimination because of your color or religion. So we went to them. And going to them, they went to the next level and even it got as far as the President Emeriti a, it had gotten that far. Somehow one of the professors was terminated and then they, the cohort was really broken into two parts. That professor actually, during our spring break sent them e-mails and said that "We're going to develop two groups because one group is too big." And when we get back to class, all of the Whites are in one group and then the Blacks. It may have been one Black in the other group. So, by going through the two professors who were awesome and outstanding. We cried. We didn't know if we were going to graduate. And that is what started the support, by going to them. Then, they started calling us in to meet with us to ask us what was really going on (Robyn, lines 47-59).

Anna and Vivian both experienced instances of discrimination in which they were reluctant to discuss their pursuit of their degrees outside of their peers at school. They both held supervisory positions on their respective jobs and feared retaliation if they disclosed this information. Anna stated that her coworkers seemed to resent her (for pursuing more education) and she felt guilty in discussing it with them. Vivian, however, decided to disclose her educational pursuits to her direct supervisors and when she came up for a promotion, the information was used unfavorably against her. She said:

> Vivian: My chief nursing officer (CNO) was leaving and, at the time, it was thought of that I may be eligible for the position. All of a sudden, I'm in a meeting and I'm hearing I have poor communication skills. I rarely read and all kinds of things that turned out to be very negative. I don't take feedback very well. I mean I was the one who was going off to conferences and speaking in different cities around the country. I was a behavioral problem? I was meeting with my CNO every month. I also saw that there are all these things around me, like I don't take feedback very well and I wear a wig to work and I dress unprofessionally. So, I said to my CNO, "How all of a sudden now, that you see me dress professionally." Who was the person? When did I dress unprofessional? She was like, "Well, somebody said that." But you have never seen me dressed unprofessionally. It was very, very negative. And at that point, I was also in the midst of a separation. These were the two things that really hit me hard, because here at my job, I was working so hard at that and my personal life was falling apart and I worked simultaneously, and I'm being told I wasn't doing good enough in my job. I took a hit on my self-esteem; I really did. So, I said, you know what, I'm over this. I can't deal with it. And that's what I did. I walked away from the director position. In hindsight, I shouldn't have. I think because of the things that were just happening simultaneously in my personal life, I didn't have the skills to deal with both of them. I didn't know who should be chosen to help me navigate that. So, I walked away. It was during that time, I was sharing the story of how we are perceived. Because, it seemed like I was trying to get ahead but as I got ahead, then all of a sudden, it was like a barrier where people started to put out these things about you. So, then in essence, you wouldn't become a candidate for the position (Vivian, lines 246-269).

The cross-case analysis was done for all 10 participants to determine patterns and themes in the data. The data were analyzed by examining every statement in each

participant's transcript. Three themes emerged from the cross-case analysis of the data: (a) the participants' beliefs about persistence, (b) the participants' support systems and persistence, and (c) the role of race in the participants' persistence. These themes captured the role of persistence in the pursuit of a doctorate degree as expressed by the participants of this study. The next section is a description of the findings based on the deductive analysis of the data.

Deductive Analysis

After completing the cross-case analysis, a deductive analysis was conducted to analyze the data using Ellis's (1997) framework of the three stages of graduate student development. Ellis identified the three stages of graduate student development as (a) individual isolation and transition, (b) new community association, and (c) academic and professional integration. This was done to determine the experience of each stage in the graduate student development of the study participants. The stages of graduate student development in the study participants' experiences are described below.

Stage 1

Stage 1 is individual isolation and transition. Individual isolation and transition can be due to a lack of socialization in the new academic environment, particularly if the graduate student is a member of a minority group (race or gender). Ellis (1997) pointed out the importance of socialization with peers, faculty, and administrators as a key to student success in graduate school. Ellis further pointed out that students who found themselves with little or nothing in common with the faculty and or doctoral peers often

found themselves at a disadvantage in their attempts to integrate into the departments. Several of the study participants in this study spoke candidly about their encounters with faculty or their doctoral peers that left them feeling like an outsider. Those who were in programs where there were other women of African descent found themselves gravitating to each other to formulate a support system within the graduate programs. They studied together, shared the expense of hired tutors for math and statistic courses, and even cried together when the going got rough. Rachel spoke of an incident in which she found herself fighting for her academic integrity. She stated:

> Rachel: I experienced discrimination twice where I had to actually fight to complete my education because one teacher wanted to give me an "F" from an "A" just because of a presentation I did and she felt she didn't like my voice. So, I had to go to the program's director to fight back. The second thing that I fought was that in the discrimination ring was that I was always the last to do everything. They would call other students before they would call on me being African American. Just to be honest with you, when graduation came was the first time I think that I saw that the school changed.

Rachel eventually had to file a petition with the provost of her school and in spite of all of her previous coursework, receiving the Grade of A, the university ruled in her favor, yet made her retake three more courses for which she had already transferred the grades from her previous graduate studies at another university. This delayed her graduation for three semesters. She described her feelings of isolation at her university as dark and dreary, particularly if you were from a different culture and ethnicity.

Stage 2

Stage 2 is new community association. During this critical stage, Ellis (1997) explained that out that the graduate student begins to formulate relationships with faculty

members and develop their own research agendas. This is critical because the study participants all talked about their isolation and reliance on peers that they shared both ethnic and age similarities and the struggles they encountered as they emerged into their new academic communities. Robyn lamented that she realized that to be accepted among her non-African descent peers, she had to work four times as hard and know that there was no fairness in the world, let alone at her university. So she learned early on that to integrate successfully into her new community, she had to seek out a faculty member who could serve as her mentor academically and socially in maneuvering the academic environment. Many of the participants of this study were either a part of a formal cohort group or they sought to form their own cohort and study groups based on research agendas or employment similarities.

As Ellis noted, this integration into the "new community is very critical. Vivian describes her new community experience as:

> Vivian: I met a whole bunch of people who really in essence became part of the mentoring team for me. It wasn't a specific mentor. It became a group of people who mentored, supported me, encouraged me, and advised me towards the program. In meeting with them, we would be hanging out. We would start standing up at break, and the next thing you know, we'd have discussions. Everybody was really excited. People were, you know, "I'm going back to school now." "We're going to graduate." People who were ahead, started talking about their programs of studies and all kinds of fascinating things, it seems like to me. I really became motivated and excited about doing it. So, by the time I was done with my 12 credits as a non-degree seeking student, I was ready to enroll and had my interview, and here I am (lines 32-41).

> Kathy saw her new community experience unfold as one in which "my program required us to interact with our peers through peer teaching each other. I served as a mentor to "new" learners behind me in the program. I shared resources and encouraged them (lines 9-12).

> Tracey adds: The peers, the other students in the program with me, in my same Cohort were my support system. You know, that's where I got a lot of advice from. One of the students' also worked in the university setting. They were my support system (lines 22-26)

Stage 3

Stage 3 is academic and professional integration. Ellis (1997) contended that this stage is where a graduate student has built strong relationships with graduate faculty and is now working closely with a mentor or advisor and peers with similar academic interests. Many of the study participants in this study developed those relationships by writing and publishing articles with their peers, faculty members, and by themselves. They participated in academic research conferences which gave them exposure to like-mind colleagues at their respective universities and across the country. Rachel and Pam were both considered leading experts in their respective fields of nursing because of their doctoral research, conference presentations, and respect of their professional peers across the country. All of the study participants were able to move up the ladder in their careers due to their doctoral research in their respective field of study. Tracey, Rachel and Vivian all became Directors of Nursing; Anna became a Director of Adult Education at her worksite; Laura was promoted to Assistant Vice- President at her university; and Jan became the Department Head at her college. Maggie became a Vice Principal of an Adult Education Center, Pam was promoted to District Supervisor of new teacher training and Kathy became an Assistant Principal. Robyn was promoted to Regional Superintendent prior to completing her degree. In spite of doubt and lack of support from some of their professional colleagues, they all conceded that the doctoral experience taught them many

lessons in how to handle differences in thought and action, academically, professionally and culturally.

Summary

This qualitative study allowed the researcher to present the collected data of the persistence of 10 women of African descent in doctorate programs. Through personal interviews, the study explored the doctoral experiences of these women through their own words and concluded that there were 3 primary themes, 8 secondary themes, and 13 sub themes. The 3 primary themes were (a) the participants beliefs about persistence; (b) the participants persistence support systems, and. (c) the role of race in academic persistence. There were also 8 secondary themes which figured prominently in the study participants' persistence. Those subthemes were motivation, resilience, discrimination, isolation, racism, peers, family, and community. Theories pertaining to the success of the participants' beliefs about persistence (Beeler, 1991) (Tinto, 1993), persistence and support systems (Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001; Malaney, 1987, Smith, et al., 2006) and the role of race in academic persistence (Ellis, 1997), were considered in determining the strategic motivations that helped the participants to persist in completing their doctorate degrees.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

In this chapter, an overview of purpose and methods utilized for this study are reviewed and are followed by discussion of the responses to the research questions. Implications that may provide guidance for enhancing dissertation completion rates of women of African descent and recommendations for future research and concluding remarks.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the educational persistence of women of African descent (WOAD) in pursuit of a doctorate at universities in the southeastern United States. This study contributes to understanding the obstacles encountered and the support needed by the WOAD during their doctorate studies. The study will help higher education professors and administrators to develop better strategies for recruitment and support for this group. As Culpepper (2004) believed, the goal is to help women now enrolled to survive and succeed. The women who were interviewed for this study all completed their doctorate degrees. Some of them started out together in a cohort doctorate program at a local public university and, over time, five of them elected to transfer to other programs at private universities whose programs were more conducive to their educational and life goals.

All the study participants were considered nontraditional students based on their age and minority status (over 35 and a member of an ethnic minority). They were all

professional working women holding supervisory or executive positions at their places of employment. They were chosen for this study based on recommendations and willingness to participate. As one of them stated, “I want to make it easier for the next generation coming up.” (Anna, lines 57-58). Five of the women finished at a public university and the other five finished at various private universities in the South Florida area. The diversity of their ages and educational experiences provided multiple perspectives for this ethnically homogeneous group.

Eight of the participants were interviewed face to face at their work sites and 1 participant’s interview took place over the telephone while another was conducted via the internet. All the interviews were tape recorded except for the one on the internet. The interviewee on the internet was provided with the list of questions ahead of time and she wrote her answers and provided additional information via the telephone. To help the researcher analyze what each participant said, each interview was transcribed. The data from the transcripts were organized into emergent themes. Three persistent themes emerged relating to (a) the participants’ beliefs about persistence, (b) role of race in academic persistence, (c) support systems during persistence. There were also 8 secondary themes which surfaced throughout the data analysis of the 3 emergent themes. Those 8 secondary themes were motivation; resilience, discrimination, isolation, institutional, peers, family and community (see Summary of Themes).

Responses to the Research Questions

Responses to the research questions are provided in this section. The primary research question was: How did women of African descent persist in their pursuit to earn a doctorate degree?

After interviewing the study participants, the researcher concluded that they all had a strong sense of faith and resilience. These two characteristics served them well in their respective pursuits of their doctorate degrees. They all began their studies determined to finish "no matter what." In spite of deaths, illnesses, single parenthood, divorces, full-time work schedules, uncooperative supervisors and racism, these women were determined to get a degree and set an example for generations to come. They talked openly about having to secure tutors for courses like statistics and to form study groups among each other across departments, universities, and age differences in order to support each other in this endeavor.

> Rachel stated: Put your feet into the ground. Put your roots in them and don't you go nowhere. I don't care what wind or storm come your way, you pray your way through. And even if you are supposed to finish in 4 years, and you'll have to go an additional 4 years to make it 8, when you get that doctorate, nobody cares how many years. All they want to see is the degree. We will have to have sustainability and stick ability (Rachel, lines 249-254).

> Jan stated: Know that you're in control of your destiny. And know that there are some things that are outside of your control and you shouldn't beat yourself up about them. Just know that it's not going to be that way. If you know that going in. See, I didn't know this going in, and no one told me this going in. All you would hear is "Oh, it's a lot of work. Just make sure that you find time to write." No one talked about the process. So, every chance I get, I talk about the process to people who are thinking about starting the doctorate, or people who are still in the coursework, so that they're not surprised. So, I tell anybody, African American women especially, because sometimes we have a little bit more on our plate and

> you're going to want to give up. You are dealing with that in addition to everything else (Jan, lines 190-206).
>
> Vivian stated: I've learned from this journey that the challenges we face, because for most of us, we are all working, we all have families and we all have a life outside of school. But, I think for those challenges that we end up facing while we're going through this doctoral program for Black women, is surrounding ourselves with our faith. This is key for us. That you have to have your faith in your God and make sure it is prominent in your life. That you have to have the support and I call it the triangle, of your family, of your friends, of your peers. But, if you can have those three and you're in the sense of trying to accomplish your goal as a Black woman, alongside your faith and your God, you can achieve anything. It's a lot of strength. It's definitely a marathon and it's got its hills and its crossroads (Vivian, lines 329-335, 339-342).
>
> Pam summed it up best in saying: When you know what your purpose is, and I think that we as African American women and women of all colors, we have to know what our purpose is. When you know your purpose and you're walking in your purpose at all times, you are not going to the east or the west; you are going to stay focused on the goal. So, I say to anyone who is getting a Ph.D., now, what is it going to do in order to enhance your purpose in life? (Pam, lines 165-170).

Secondary research questions included the following:

1. What are the beliefs of women of African descent regarding persistence?
2. How do women of African descent perceive the role of race and ethnicity in their academic persistence?
3. What support systems do women of African descent attribute to their success, while pursuing their doctorate?
4. What support systems did women of African descent attribute to their success while pursuing their doctorate?

By beginning the discussion with what beliefs WOAD have regarding persistence, followed with how these same women perceive the role of race and ethnicity in their

academic persistence, along with what support systems they attribute to their completion success, helps one to understand how these women of African descent persisted to the completion of a doctorate degree.

The study participants' view of persistence through the lens of (a) their beliefs about persistence, (b) support systems needed, (c) the role of race and ethnicity in their persistence. As the participants pursued their respective degrees, race and ethnicity sometimes became the elephant in the room that no one wanted to discuss. The participants all reported that often they felt isolated in their classrooms due to the lack of interaction with their professors or their classmates who were of a different ethnic makeup. They reported being ignored when attempting to contribute to class discussions. They were suspiously questioned when they did well in written assignments. Additionally, they had to repeat courses when filing grievances against professors in order to prove that they honestly earned their grades and did not plagiarize. All the participants had successfully completed master's degrees, successfully climbed the career ladder in their respective professions, yet had been brought to tears at the sheer and blatant racism that emerged when they decided to pursue a doctorate degree.

All of the study participants indicated how important it was to have support systems while pursuing a doctorate. Many of them had multiply family responsibilities. Those who were parents discussed the need for balance between their studies and spending time with their children doing homework, extracurricular activities, and letting the children know that they were there. They developed ways to parent and to support their children by enlisting the assistance of family and friends. When their respective

universities seemed neither to support them emotionally nor academically, they often turned to their community organizations, such as churches and sororities. They built networks among themselves at their respective universities and hired tutors and conducted research together. These women were determined to survive and to succeed by relying on their respective support systems for moral, emotional, and sometimes physical and financial support.

Findings related to literature

The theoretical framework used for this study was Ellis's Three Stages of Graduate Student Development (see Table 8).

Table 8. *Ellis's 3 stages for Graduate Student Development*

1. Individual isolation and transition- Individual isolation and transition can be due to lack of socialization in the new academic environment; particularly if the graduate student is a member of a minority group (race or gender).
2. New community association- During this critical stage, Ellis points out that the graduate student begins to formulate relationships with faculty members and develop their own research agendas.
3. Academic and professional integration- Ellis contends that this stage is where a graduate student has built strong relationships with graduate faculty and is now working closely with a mentor or advisor and peers with similar academic interests.

The correlation of Ellis's (1997) framework and this study are discussed in detail in chapter IV. This framework provided a basis in which to examine and to categorize the

study participants' experiences as doctoral graduate students. Unlike Ellis's study, which examined the experiences of Black and White men and women, this study focused solely on 10 WOAD who were considered nontraditional students and who were also working professionals. The framework assisted in helping the researcher to articulate the strategies the study participants employed to survive and to thrive in their studies and graduate with their doctorate degrees.

Other findings in this study that correlated with previous research include study participants feelings of isolation and neglect when entering their respective doctoral programs. Previous research by Johnson-Bailey (2001) and Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies and Smith (2004), reported numerous instances when nontraditional minority female students felt overwhelmingly invisible, isolated and ignored. The study participants were often juggling full-time careers, family and community obligations, they all had to build or rely upon their support systems to successfully manage this aspect of their lives. Saunders and Balinky (1993) and Smith et al. (2006), found that doctoral students often had multiple responsibilities, which included responsibility for aging parents, children, spouses and careers. For this study, two of the participants spoke often about how the support of their spouses was pertinent to their completing their studies and one participant spoke eloquently about how her husband's sudden death and the support of her family and friends during the grieving process became a motivator for her to complete her studies.

Tinto (1993) cited in his research, the need for students to be integrated into both the formal and informal academic social systems; he touched upon a problem that is still in existence today. The participants in this study cited incidents in which they were often

excluded from the inner circle of peer groups and mentoring relationships with professors. Tinto felt that this integration would significantly improve the students' transition into their graduate studies. Culpepper (2004) also believe in the significance of this integration as significant to the success of women graduate students.

Mentoring

A constant theme throughout this study was mentoring. The study participants spoke about mentoring each other; and the need to be mentored by university personnel (professors and administrators). They often talked about the lack of faculty mentoring and they spoke of entering programs and not really having anyone to direct them from coursework to comprehensive exams to choosing a topic to writing the dissertation. The need for a guide through the doctoral process was also the subject in research conducted by Tinto (1993), who expressed the need for more faculty mentoring of graduate students. Ellis (1997) found these mentoring relationships among graduate students and faculty to be significant to their success as well.

The participants were specific about their needs in the area of mentoring. Seven of the ten did not find a mentor on their campus or in their respective programs. Those seven women sought the mentorship of persons who could address their specific needs and often those mentors were found in the communities or their places of employment. Robyn spoke of finding a wonderful mentor in her new director who was a woman who had completed a doctoral degree years earlier. Robyn says "she was outstanding with helping me with the work, showing me how to read and analyze articles; helping me

study and doing editing at the time of my proposal. She offered me support when I would get depressed and down and that type of thing (Robyn, lines 69-73)." Others sought out women in their church, sororities, and jobs who had completed a doctoral degree and asked them for advice on everything from how to select a committee to designing and collecting research data. One participant hired a life coach; someone whom she could call upon to discuss the non-academic issues of working on a doctoral degree and is open up and is vulnerable in front of. Being older nontraditional students, they often had to reach across generations and get a younger classmate to assist them in conducting online research (a new concept to most of them since most were only familiar with the old card catalog system).

A couple of them found solace in a faculty mentor. Tracey and Jan both identified faculty members whom they felt secure enough with to ask for guidance in deciding research topics, or just talking through the process with. Jan found her faculty mentor in a new faculty member who was supportive and encouraging. They lived near each other and Jan felt free to drop in every Saturday to vent about what she was going through or listen to her encouraging words as she worked on her dissertation. Tracey reported that her faculty mentor was definitely a student advocate. She says her mentor truly listened to her; this was not the case with her other professors who often did not show interest or give you time to just talk. She would call me and encourage me. She was really a good source of encouragement there, especially in the dissertation phase (Tracey, lines 53-57).

Benshoff & Lewis's (1992) research showed that nontraditional women returned to graduate school believing that a graduate degree would advance their careers. This

study supports that theory. Eight of the 10 study participants were promoted at least twice since completing their doctorate degree; and two of them were promoted during the course of their studying for their degrees.

Table 9. Six Characteristics of a Good Mentor

1.	Someone who can guide you through the doctoral process (What courses to take, advice on preparing for you comprehensive exams and how to select topics for Dissertation research).
2.	Someone to be your sounding board-so that you can talk to them about the stress and pressure of pursuing a doctorate. Someone who has experienced the process and can empathize.
3.	Someone who will read your material and give you honest feedback and criticism
4.	Someone who will hold you accountable to deadlines
5.	Someone who will assist you in setting realistic goals and guide you through the tough times
6.	Someone who has integrity and will have your back if you need assistance maneuvering the academy and departmental politics.

The participants were very candid about what they thought to be 'red flags' when seeking a mentor. They spoke unapologetically about faculty members who were aloof, unavailable or just lazy. They all thought that if one should come across a faculty person who seemed to treat your work with disinterest or discourage you from following your passion in a particular area of research, you should avoid them at all cost. Another signal of avoidance was a faculty member who was constantly unavailable to you via e-mail, conference call or a face-to-face meeting; they are obviously too busy to mentor you. If you have a faculty member who has more than their share of doctoral students to service-they obviously have no time for new students. If your department is short-staffed and you have to go outside to form a committee, then you should re-think your major field of study. They suggested that you interview your potential committee members about their

areas of expertise, whether or not they are qualitative or quantitative researchers and ask if they are planning to remain at the university for at least the next 3-5 years. Many of the participants experienced repeated committee re-organizations when their committee members moved on to other universities, retired or died.

Table 10. Six Warning Signs to Change Your Mentor

1. They seem aloof and too busy to be bothered.
2. They do not return your calls, e-mails nor read your proposed ideas
3. They try to discourage your research interest
4. They want you to work on their research interest more than your own.
5. They seem to have more than their share of doctoral students to advise.
6. They treat you with disrespect.

Recommendations

As more women of African descent and other women of color enter into graduate study, it is imperative that changes should occur. Some of the recommendations the researcher would like to suggest impacts the university policymakers (administrators), faculty recruitment and academic support staff.

Women of African descent continue to struggle with racism in the classrooms when being ignored by faculty and non-minority classmates, when shut out of or not informed of research opportunities, and experiencing overall feelings of isolation and alienation in academia. This issue can be addressed by university policymakers by

requiring all graduate faculty to participate in diversity training that would assist them in understanding the diversities of WOAD in the student population they serve. Sometimes people have to face "isms," before appreciating diversity and understanding the differences. This diversity training should also address the issues of ageism, because of the large population of nontraditional age students who are returning to the classroom for advanced degrees. Sometimes those students are the same age or older than the faculty themselves and working in a variety of professions which are far removed from the culture of academe. Those students need to be able to talk to someone about the process as they are going through it. Thus, university programs might consider alternate means of addressing these needs. Once a month seminars that address simple issues like how to choose a committee, how to write a proposal, how to conduct an electronic research, who to call when you are feeling lost in the program. These are real life issues for many older students who find themselves back at the academy in the 21st century. The suggested seminars are useful to both cohort and non-cohort type of doctoral programs because they can be held on the weekend when most nontraditional students can find more time to attend.

Along with diversity training should come a conscious effort for the university to recruit culturally and ethnically diverse faculty and staff. This could help WOAD, members of other minority groups and nontraditional students find mentors among the faculty to discuss issues, serve on their committees, and to help the graduate student maneuver the doctoral process successfully. There is also a great need for many universities to become more gender diverse in the upper echelons of university

administration. More and more women of all races are enrolling, attending, and graduating with doctorates, yet the female gender is not as visible among the policymaking committees of most universities.

The women in this study were all highly educated working professionals who took most of their courses either in the evenings or on the weekend. Research has shown that the needs of an older, wiser learner is vastly different, thus universities should implement through their academic support services a platform for working professionals to gather, get counseling, tutoring, and the like, and build a graduate community that allows them to interact with essential staff and services in the evening and to congregate with their peers. Women in general and WOAD in particular, will have to continue informally grouping themselves together to form alliances of support in their academic and endeavors and careers. This study looked at a select group of 10 WOAD in South Florida who successfully completed doctoral degrees. Future research should continue to build upon the limited current research on doctoral persistence and particularly the doctoral persistence of WOAD.

Implications

The research on the doctoral persistence of women of African descent is very limited and thus signals the need for more research to be undertaken. The researcher suggests that future research examine the way WOAD develop or seek out mentors and the impact of mentorship on their success as students and future faculty and higher

education administrators. It would also be interesting to see if the mentoring of women regardless of ethnicity will increase the retention rates of women in doctoral programs.

Six Strategies for Success

The findings from this study suggest six identifiable strategies (see Table 9) used by the study participants to successfully persist to complete their doctorate degrees.

Table 11.Six Strategies for Doctoral Completion Success

Strategy 1	Keep the goal of earning a doctorate and graduating foremost on your mind**.**
Strategy 2	Set a class and study schedule that allows you to balance family, work and study.
Strategy 3	Take care of yourself, physically, mentally and emotionally.
Strategy 4	Keep a goal chart to track your strides toward completion/graduation.
Strategy 5	Establish a strong support system among your family, friends, colleagues and community.
Strategy 6	Do not let the “isms” (racism, sexism, and ageism) deter you.

In Strategy 1, many of the participants kept their goal in mind by simply making themselves a poster or sign with their proposed graduation date and degree and name on it and placed it somewhere that they could see it constantly. Strategy 2 required the participants to be in constant contact with their respective departments at their universities to find out what courses were going to be offered the following semesters and to set their work and life schedules around those courses. This often meant re-negotiating their hours of work with their respective supervisors, arranging transportation and babysitting for their children and preparing meals and doing laundry for the family; all before creating study periods for themselves. In taking care of work, family and school,

the participants suggest that one must remember to take care of themselves (Strategy 3). They suggested finding a friend who would just allow you to talk, cry or sleep or take a long drive once a week just to be alone with your thoughts and breathe. Some of them suggested formal counseling once a month, just to have an objective listener. Eating properly and getting exercise was highly recommended for diffusing stress and stress-related diseases.

They all agreed that Strategy 4- Keeping a goal chart to track your strides toward completion is very important. Writing down goals of how many courses to take in a semester, how many hours spent in the library for research and what time and dates these things should be accomplished should not be underestimated. Many of them credit this habit as a means of keeping them on track throughout the dissertation process. Vivian likens it as her "key to survive the process." In Strategy 5, it was very important for all the participants to have a strong support system at home, on the job and in the community. Few of them had the needed support in all three places, but at least one of those support entities were in place at all times. Finally, all of my participants tried to avoid the "isms" (sexism, racism, and ageism). Most of them had faced the isms in their career paths and learned strategies of how to deal with them, so they were determined not to allow the isms to deter them from their path to completion.

Closing Remarks

Many of the participants entered their respective programs with the goal of finishing foremost in their minds. As they matriculated through classes, they developed

coping mechanisms which assisted them in maneuvering through the trials and tribulations of graduate study in general and those other factors which are compounded by race, age, and gender. They formed sisterhoods among each other that will last a lifetime because of their success. They all walked away better people for the experience and determined to assist the next woman of African descent to successfully accomplish the goal of earning a doctoral degree.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Questions for Qualitative Interview

1. How did you arrive at the decision to pursue a doctorate degree?
2. What did you expect graduate school to be like? How was the reality different from what you expected?
3. Tell me about your interactions with your peers, other doctoral students?
4. What inspired you, and what factors enabled you to persist in your efforts?
5. What difficulties did you encounter, and how did you handle them?
6. What was the classroom climate like in your department?
7. Who provided you with needed support? Mentoring?
8. How did your decision to pursue a doctorate degree impact your personal life? Your professional life?
9. Did you ever consider not completing your degree or finishing at another institution?
10. What would you do differently?
11. What, if any, unusual event or experience occurred during your doctoral study that affected your time to completion-positively and negatively?
12. What advice would you give women of African descent about completing the doctoral degree?

APPENDIX B

Sample Letter to Participant

November 6, 2008

Name

Address

City, State, Zip code

Dear

Your name was suggested as a potential participant in a research study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral dissertation. The purpose of the study is to examine the strategies of persistence of women of African descent who completed a doctorate degree. Your participation in this study is requested because you have received your doctorate.

Participation in this study will require approximately one to two hours of your time for an in-depth interview, which (with your permission) will be audio taped and transcribed. To maintain confidentiality, you will not be identified by name on the tape. I will transcribe the tapes and keep them locked in a cabinet in my residence. Each participant will be offered a copy of her tape and transcription. Only the participants, the members of the dissertation committee and me will have access to the tapes. The results of the research may be presented at a professional conference.

In the next week I will contact you to answer any questions that you may have concerning your participation in this study. At that time we can arrange the details of the interview if you agree to participate.

I congratulate you on your successful completion of the doctoral degree, and I look forward to your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Vannetta Bailey Iddrisu

APPENDIX C

Participant Informed Consent Form

Ed.D candidate Vannetta Bailey Iddrisu, under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Reio in the College of Education –from Florida International University is conducting research examining the persistence of women of African descent who complete doctorate degrees. Ten women will be interviewed at a time and location (at their convenience) in sessions lasting for at least one hour on audio tape which will be transcribed and analyzed later. During the interviews, the women will tell their personal stories as they studied for their doctoral degree. Participants may receive copies of the tapes and transcriptions if they wish.

The risks involved as a participant are minimal; they are no greater than participation in a normal conversation. Benefits of participation include assisting the researcher in gathering knowledge in this area of study as well as providing suggestions for other students to be successful Ed.D. recipients. No cost is involved for the participants of this study nor is any compensation given to the participants in return for their interviews.

Participants may withdraw their consent and discontinue participation in this research project at any time with no negative consequences. All information pertaining to this study including tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home. The interviews are confidential; files will only be identifiable by subject number. The content of the tapes is only available to the researcher, the three members of the dissertation team and for possible presentation at a professional conference. The research will be presented with pseudonyms; no real names will be disclosed unless required by law.

Participants may ask questions concerning the interviews, and if any new findings are developed during the time of this study which may affect a willingness to continue to be in the study, participants will be informed as soon as possible. For any questions concerning the rights of human subjects that may have incurred related to this study, participants may contact Institutional Review Board Chairperson Dr. Patricia Price at 305-348-2618 or 305-348-2494.

For more information about the study, contact the principal investigator Vannetta Bailey Iddrisu at 786-897-9701 or viddrisu@bellsouth.net . Your signature below indicates that all questions have been answered to your liking. You are aware of your rights and you would like to be in the study.

_____ _____ _____

Signature of Participant Printed Name Date

I have explained the research procedure, subject rights, and answered questions asked by the participant. I have offered him/her a copy of this informed consent form.

_____ _____

Signature of Witness Date

APPENDIX D

Summary of Coding Procedures

Method used for coding

- Print out all transcripts
- Read transcripts and circle words and phrases indicating internal factors and mark in the left margin, underline external and write in the right margin
- Circle words and ideas that begin to appear in a regular fashion
- Reread transcripts and identify the themes with colored post it notes
- Review and revise list of themes until it captures the transcript content
- Use colored highlighter to identify sub themes with each primary theme

VITA

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Bailey-Iddrisu, V. (2003*). Cracking the Glass Ceiling in Corporate America.* In D. Addy (Ed.) Many Voices: One Community-A Look at Race and Work in South Florida.

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