Women in Online Doctoral Programs: An Inductive Exploration of Academic and Non-Academic Factors Influencing College Choice

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Abstract

The purpose of this inductive study was to understand how academic and non-academic factors influence the college choice decision-making process of women enrolled in online doctoral programs. The study was based on two critical premises: (1) the factors and characteristics found in present literature concerning graduate student college choice are relevant, and (2) that some of these factors vary in importance and significance due to participants’ individual experiences and the nature of the environment (physical/geographical vs. virtual/online). This study asked: How do academic and non-academic factors influence the college choice decision of women who enroll in online doctoral programs? Data was collected from 15 semi-structured, laddered interviews designed to uncover how institutional characteristics, perceived benefits (or consequences), and personal values influenced participants’ decision to enroll in an online doctoral program. Participants represented women of variable race/ethnicity, who identified as female both in gender identity and biology, were over the age of 30 years, resided in the U.S., and were enrolled in or graduated from a regionally accredited online doctoral program within the last five years (from 2011 to 2016). Findings show six major influencing factors impacted the decision-making process and college choice decision for participants: flexibility, access, cost, value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations. Each factor identified was either directly or indirectly present within participant narratives, reflective of the influences that occurred with the most frequency. Conclusions reached include that flexibility, access, and cost were central influencing factors across the narrative. Factors such as value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations acted as supporting influences within the decision-making process. Additionally, factors identified by participants as influential within the decision-making process did not always directly contribute to their college choice decision due to external
pressures, but these same factors did affect participants’ satisfaction and success within their selected program of choice.

*Keywords*: college choice, online doctoral program, women, higher education, enrollment management, marketing
Dedication

To Christ, my Lord and Savior, who makes all things possible (Philippians 4:13),

my husband Mark, who supports me in everything with unconditional love,

to my boys Connor and Cameron who have given me more than I could ever imagine – I

love you both to the ends of the earth and back again.
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Chapter I: Introduction

The college choice decision is complex and subject to a range of academic and non-academic influences which impact students’ lives (Kallio, 1995; Olsen & King, 1985; Paulsen, 1992; Perna, 2006; Poock & Love, 2001). Prospective graduate students weigh numerous factors when selecting their doctoral program of choice (Bersola, Stolzenberg, Fosnacht, & Love, 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Golde, 1998) Yet, there remains a paucity of research about graduate college choice and even less about college choice among doctoral students (Bersola, et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016). Limited research exists despite tremendous growth in the number of students seeking online doctoral degrees and the number of institutions offering online programs (Gardener, 2010; Offerman, 2011).

By examining students’ college choice processes, this study explored how the academic and non-academic experiences of woman influenced their decision to enroll in an online doctoral program. The number of women enrolled in doctoral programs surpassed men in 2007. Women comprise more than half of the doctoral student population (Gardner, 2009; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014), a significant shift in the overall doctoral student population (Gardner, 2009; 2010; NCES, 2014). An additional shift towards online doctoral education followed within five years. By 2012 approximately 18% of the overall doctoral student population sought their degree from a program conducted online, an increase of about 33% (NCES, 2014). Many of these online doctoral learners were women (Gardener, 2009; NCES, 2014; Offerman, 2011).

This study explored which factors most influenced the college choice decision of women in online doctoral programs to provide insights for institutions as to how to enroll students who will persist and successfully complete their doctoral programs. Of the larger overall doctoral
student population, approximately 50% complete their degrees (Gardener, 2009; NCES, 2014; Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Non-completion, referred to as attrition, is problematic due the overall cost to students and institutions. Institutions report wasted resources (fiscal and otherwise), as well as programmatic disruptions when students do not finish their program. Costs to students include issues such as wasted time, wasted personal and fiscal resources, and psycho-social disruptions (Gardner, 2009, Golde, 2005, Lovitts, 2001, Wills & Carmichael, 2011). Therefore, in an effort to foster online doctoral student success, it is critical to understand the college choice decision of doctoral students and the influencing factors.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the research related to the college choice processes of graduate students to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study are discussed, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. The theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained along with a brief overview of proposed methodology. Finally, a short summary concludes the chapter.

**Context and Background**

As student debt reaches new heights and reductions in state and federal funding continue, the college choice decision has become increasingly important to both institutions and students (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). For institutions, enrollment is important to both short-term and long-term institutional viability, as it is the ‘lifeblood’ of most colleges and universities (Goldman, et al., 2004; Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, & Cummings, 2004). Institutions need students to fulfill their roll within the higher education system and remain in operation. Students pursue higher education for wide range of reasons, including socio-economic factors,
social factors, and professional or personal goals. Seeking ‘optimal attainment,’ students combine educational goals and their reason for pursuing enrollment with other academic and non-academic factors to make their college choice decision. This idea of optimal attainment is best described as when students find balance between what they perceive they will receive and what they are willing to pay; however, they consider other mitigating factors that ultimately impact the decision to enroll (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013).

As doctoral level attrition hovers right over 50%, the issue of enrolling students who will persist and successfully complete a program remains an important topic within higher education (NCES, 2013; Sowell, et al., 2008). Extant research on college choice focuses on who enrolls, whether or not they persist after enrollment, and how to prevent attrition via enrollment management techniques or strategies (Cooke, Sim, & Peyrefitte, 1995; Willging & Johnson, 2009; Sowell, et al., 2008). Admissions staff, faculty, and administrative personnel use enrollment management practices to make informed admissions decisions based on institutional capacity and student characteristics (Astin, 1993; Black, 2004; Paulsen, 1990; Yadav & Pal, 2012). They try to predict student success beginning with the admissions process itself in the hope that once admitted students decide to enroll, they will remain enrolled and successfully complete their program (Astin, 1993). Enrollment management systems generally observe two key areas of student behavior to predict student success before admission: college choice decision-making behaviors and overall educational goals or objectives of the student (Astin, 1993; Bailey, Leinbach, & Jenkins, 2006; Hossler & Hossee, 2001).

The decision-making process undertaken by prospective students when selecting a college or university to attend is typically referred to in the existing literature as a ‘college choice’ decision (Bersola, et al., 2014; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chuang, 2010; Paulson, 1990; Olsen,
Students select institutions based on a myriad of academic and non-academic factors including institutional prestige, faculty, programs, financial considerations, personal factors, and campus atmosphere (Bersola et al., 2014; Kallio, 1995; Olsen, 1985; Paulson, 1990). These factors are uniquely categorized and prioritized by individual students as they move through each phase of the selection process until the student reaches their enrollment decision (Kallio, 1995; Gardner, 2009).

It is important to note that in this process, enrollment in and of itself is not a final goal, but rather a part of a larger goal-oriented process. This may include fulfillment of a particular university education and degree-attainment (Gardner, 2009; Iyanna, 2015; Lovitts, 2001). The college choice decision in and of itself inherently leads to further goal formation and prospective students undertake the decision-making process within this contextualized framework. This co-created goal formation is reflected in the notion that a good match, or ‘right fit,’ (which is gaining increasing importance in the discourse surrounding doctoral programs) is the central goal (Allum et al., 2014; Bersola et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Poock & Love, 2001; Saeed et al., 2008; Wergin and Alexandre, 2012).

The institutional choice process for doctoral student has received attention in several recent studies (Bersola et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Wergin & Alexandre, 2012). These studies examined student experiences via large, sweeping surveys as a data-mining effort to develop or explore data sets to fill the void in literature (Bersola et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016). This type of study, designed to generate data sets which are collected via survey, typically focuses on individual institutions to gain a perspective of the complex factors in a large, yet controlled, collective student population. In contrast, this study provides a more in-depth exploration of the individual students’ experiences and perspective about how academic
and non-academic factors influenced their decision-making processes and resulted in their choice to enroll in their choice of doctoral program.

Graduate students are a separate population with many differences from their undergraduate peers. This is particularly true when it comes to college choice. Ruth Kallio (1995) described a set of defined characteristics that directly influence college choice decisions among graduate students: residency status, academic environment, work concerns, spousal considerations, financial aid, and social environment on campus. She found it critical to consider the “life-stage related differences” among graduate student applicants to adequately weigh additional decision factors (Kallio, 1995, p. 121). Lei and Chuang’s (2010) research supported Kallio’s (1995) findings and added additional recommendations for programmatic implementation that targeted the larger and more diverse graduate student population’s needs. Bersola, et al. (2014) and English and Umbach (2016) expanded to focus on doctoral students and included additional recommendations important for programmatic improvements including increased diversity, improved quality of student-faculty interactions, and cost of living disclosures.

From the institutional perspective, Paulsen (1990) noted in his seminal study that it was critical to understand individual student enrollment behaviors and that college choice studies “provide the fundamental knowledge bases” for institutional planning (p. 6). This foundational assertion was reinforced by Bersola, et al. (2014) who indicated that knowledge of the key factors influencing enrolled doctoral students’ college choice decision effectively enhanced programmatic development. Their work supports the notion that understanding how academic and non-academic factors inform and influence students’ college choice may help to develop models that better align students and institutions to potentially reduce doctoral attrition. This is a
key function of enrollment management practice overall: to inform the admissions process so that students who are admitted possess characteristics that indicate the potential for success within their given institution and program of choice (Astin, 1993; Bailey, et al., 2006; Paulsen, 1990).

While data drawn from recent studies remains key to understanding doctoral students at research institutions and in traditional doctoral programs (Bersola, et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Offerman, 2011), the additional exploration provided in this study furthers our knowledge regarding doctoral students in non-traditional, online programs. The literature establishes that graduate programs, particularly online programs that seek to enroll non-traditional adult learners, often represent a way for colleges to increase overall enrollment both in masters and doctoral programs (Betts, Hartman, & Oxholm, 2009; Offerman, 2011). Doctoral students make up approximately one quarter (27.2%) of the total graduate student population (Allum et al., 2014, p. 12). Of the doctoral students, 51% are women (Allum, et al., 2014, p.viii). Women represent, among graduate student populations, a demographic with higher rates of attrition, often due to multiple-role strain and other variable non-academic influences in their lives (Heinrich, 2000; Perna, 2004; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). In light of these factors, this study was developed to help institutions understand enrollment to successfully enroll and retain women.

Most extant studies focused on gathering large amounts of data, utilizing either specific programs at a single institution or survey all graduate students without distinguishing between masters and doctoral students (Bersola, et al, 2014; Poock & Love, 2001). These sweeping surveys were designed to determine how influential factors such as age, gender, and race were in the selection process, rather than focusing on a specific population subset. While surveys may
tacitly incorporate student experiences, there is little qualitative research that brings students’ voices to explain how their experiences contribute to their decision-making processes. Consequently, this exploration of how women select and enroll in the online doctoral programs of their choice is timely and relevant. As such, this study evaluated and explored the factors that influenced the college choice decisions of women who enrolled in online doctoral programs. The results of this study add to the body of literature and serve to inform practice in admissions/enrollment, as well as faculty and administration within online doctoral programs.

**Problem of Practice**

In the current shifting higher educational climate, it is imperative to develop a more detailed picture of student behavior during the doctoral admissions process (Bersola, et al., 2014; Golde, 2005; English & Umbach, 2016; Perna, 2004). Individual non-academic variables are of increasing importance, especially for women, and the research has begun to show how these variables often supersede institutional factors and background characteristics (Dua, 2007; Gardner, 2009; English and Umbach; 2016; Offerman, 2011). The growing prevalence of women in online programs, the high attrition rates of women in doctoral programs, and the paucity of research on college choice as it pertains to women in online doctoral programs (Bersola, et.al, 2014; Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005; English & Umbach, 2016; Perna, 2004) converge to form a significant problem of practice that required further exploration.

With its qualitative approach, this study explored what factors students felt most influenced their college choice decision and examined each participants’ steps during the college choice process. Understanding the process and how different influences impact students informs the admissions process and supports the enrollment of students who should persist and successfully complete their programs. The focus on women in online doctoral programs pulls
together two of the rapidly growing segments of the doctoral student population in an effort to explore factors specifically influencing this population.

**Significance**

The significance of the study revolves around the particular student population observed: women in online doctoral programs. The non-traditional online student population is the fastest growing segment of the overall higher educational population and many of these students are women in online doctoral programs (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Gardener, 2009; Offerman, 2011; Wendler, et.al, 2010). Additionally, the growth in number and size of online graduate programs correlates with overall growth observed in the non-traditional demographic category among online graduate learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In 2003, just 6% over the overall doctoral student population completed their entire degree program via distance education (NCES, 2014). By 2012, that statistic had grown to 18% (Allen & Seaman, 2013; NCES, 2014). The National Center for Educational Statics (2014) reported that 59% of all students enrolled in post-baccalaureate programs were female and at least 31% of the overall post-baccalaureate student population had engaged in distance learning during their course of study. The NCES (2014) reported that 25% of distance learners conducted their entire degree program via distance education. Women were more likely to enroll in online courses than men (NCES, 2014; NMC Horizon Report, 2015).

Colleges and universities offer online programs to remain flexible and meet the needs of non-traditional students returning to the classroom (Bell, 2009). Yet, there is a dearth of research focused on the college choice process for students who choose online graduate programs. This study focused on a subset of this student population in higher education as it is quickly growing—women in graduate distance (online) education (Gardener, 2009; 2010; NCES, 2014).
Unlike previous studies which focused on particular institutions, this study examined women across public, private non-profit, and private for-profit (proprietary) institutions. By exploring how the decision-making process regarding college choice was influenced by various academic and non-academic influences present in the experiences of women, this qualitative study adds another layer to our understanding by listening to the voices of women. The idea of college choice was explored from the student perspective and assessed how the myriad of factors present in students’ lives influenced their decision-making processes.

**Rationale**

According to the National Research Council (NRC), doctoral students are resources essential for securing a sound future for society (Wendler, et. al, 2010). Although they comprise over half of the existing doctoral student population, women are still considered an underrepresented group within graduate student populations (Allum, et.al, 2014). Women experience higher attrition rates than men, often take longer to complete their doctoral programs than their male counterparts, and face gender-based career and salary differentials once they enter the workforce (Allum, et al., 2014; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke ,1998). Among the factors women list as barriers to doctoral completion and career advancement are pregnancy, marriage and family, as well as time constraints. Although these factors may impact men as well, they are typically engendered as women’s issues and can add pressure to the decision process for women (Gardner, 2009).

Women’s attrition from doctoral programs is symptomatic of the larger and more complex societal issues surrounding women and education and career trajectory. Doctoral attrition is costly for the student and the institution and carries ramifications for student self-esteem and overall career path (Golde & Dore, 2001). Moreover, delayed completion and non-
completion both carry repercussions including student debt burden, psycho-social effects, family problems, and career limitations (Golde & Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001). In many ways, the issue of doctoral attrition among the female population exceeds the realm of problem of practice and enters into the larger societal arena as a complex piece of a much larger societal puzzle.

**Purpose Statement and Research Question**

The purpose of this inductive study was to understand how academic and non-academic factors influenced the college choice decision-making processes of women enrolled in online doctoral programs. In accord with the existing literature, college choice was defined as the decision made by students to enroll in and attend a particular institution of their choice. Using extended means-end value framework theory, the study examined how academic and non-academic life experiences influenced the college choice decision-making process. The method of inquiry was inductive analysis which allowed the research findings to emerge naturally from data collected.

The study was based on two critical premises: (1) that the factors and characteristics found in the literature concerning graduate student college choice are relevant, and (2) that some of these factors have varied importance or significance based upon the participants’ individual experiences, as well as the nature of the environment (physical/geographical vs. virtual/online). As this study utilized an inductive approach, these premises are not hypotheses, but served as the first step in the data collection designed to find patterns for analysis to produce meaningful implications for practice (Goddard & Melville, 2004; Thomas, 2006).

The study utilized a central research question to explore the decision-making process of women enrolled in or recently graduated from online doctoral programs. The following central research question guided the study: How do academic and non-academic factors influence the
college choice decision of women who enroll in online doctoral programs? The college choice decision for prospective doctoral students is influenced by factors within each student's personal, academic, and professional life experiences (Kallio, 1995; Olsen & King, 1985; Paulsen, 1992; Perna, 2006; Poock & Love, 2001). The research question was designed to assess and observe participants’ attitudes, behaviors, personal beliefs, and values.

Participants were interviewed and asked scaffolded (laddered) questions to uncover how institutional characteristics, perceived benefits (or consequences), and personal values influenced their decision to enroll in an online doctoral program. Participants were also asked to reflect on the decision-making process that lead to their enrollment in their specific program of choice. Key terminology is provided below for clarity and consistency within the study parameters.

**Definition of Key Terminology**

**College choice.** The term ‘college choice’ refers to the decision made by students to enroll in and attend a particular institution of choice.

**Women.** For the purposes of this study, women are defined as female both in identity and biology. Those over the age of 30 years were included.

**Online education.** For the purposes of this study, online education is defined as systems and processes used over the Internet to connect students, faculty, and instructional resources that are not in the same geographical location (Kramarae, 2011). Internet-based delivery may vary and is referred to in the literature using terms such as ‘distance education,’ ‘e-learning,’ ‘web-based learning,’ etc.

**Online program.** Within this study, an online program is a regionally-accredited degree program that can be earned entirely or mostly through an Internet-based learning platform. Some traditional campus-based classes may be part of the program; however, the majority of classes
must be taken in an online (Internet-based) setting. Classes can be either synchronous or asynchronous and are not limited to or in exclusion of accelerated formats.

**Doctoral program.** A doctoral program is a Ph.D. or other degree program such as Ed.D., D.M.A., D.B.A., D.Sc., D.A., or D.M, D.L.P, etc., “that requires advanced work beyond the master’s level, including the preparation and defense of a dissertation based on original research, or the planning and execution of an original project demonstrating substantial artistic or scholarly achievement” (IPEDS Glossary, 2015).

**Non-traditional learner.** There is great variability among definitions of non-traditional (adult) learners. In alignment with the work of Knowles (1984), Long (2004), Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2006), and Ross-Gordon (2011), non-traditional learners are best described by sets of factors including, but not limited to: mature learner over the age of 25, responsible for their own day to day life decisions, oriented towards self-directed learning, and often enrolled only part time in degree programs. Gardner (2009) and Offerman (2011) offer additional parameters particular to doctoral students including (but not limited to): over the age of 30, married with children/dependent parents, professionally driven, enrolled part-time, and self-funded. While there is no set archetype for the adult learner, nor the non-traditional doctoral student, this study recognizes the key factors identified in the literature and therefore delimits its own scope to female doctoral students who are over 30 years of age, are enrolled at least half time, and have at least 1-3 years of full-time employment and career experience.

The terms and definitions provide context and focus the parameters of the research. They serve as a guide for terms that could otherwise hold variable meaning and facilitate a uniform reading of the information presented in the study.
Theoretical Framework: Extended Means-Ends Value Framework

This study utilized extended means-end value framework (EMEVF) (Iyanna, 2015). Extending from a traditional means-end theoretical framework, EMEVF develops a model that allows researchers to measure co-created values and extends the goal development process, thus allowing for dynamic goal formation. Co-created values develop based on the personal and unique experiences of the consumer and assist in the development of consumer goals (Reynolds & Olsen, 2001). In the case of college choice among women seeking to enroll in online doctoral programs, consumer (student) behavior is purposeful and goal-directed, informed by the unique experiences and influencing factors of each individual students’ life (Huffman, et.al, 2000; Iyanna, 2015). To appropriately frame the discussion of EMEVF theory, it is necessary to discuss means-end theory and its critics first, then describe EMEVF, its rationale. This section closes with detail of its application within this study.

Background and context. Developed by Gutman (1982), means-end theory typically explores how consumer behavior is structured and then aggregates that information into decision chains in order to categorize behaviors and analyze how personal values and perceptions of the product or service impact the decision-making process. The model presumes that consumers have a cognitive connection that allows them to associate means (decision-making) and end results (consumption) (Nielsen, Sørensen, & Grunert, 1997; Grunert & Grunert, 1995; Brunsø & Grunert, 1995; 1998). Typically used in marketing analysis, means-end theory helps researchers examine how consumers identify self-relevant potential outcomes in relation to the purchase of a product or service (Bagozzi, Gürhan-Canli, & Priester, 2002; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Figure 1 illustrates these concepts.
Means-end theory is generally firm-centric. It attempts to make sense of personal customer experiences as they pertain to brands of products or services. The theory implies that when customer and firms (in this case, students and institutions) work together they create success and loyalty. However, not all purchases include this implied relationship. For example, consider a vending machine purchase. The consumer may have bought a Coke despite otherwise being a loyal consumer of Pepsi simply because no other option was available and they were thirsty. In the case of educational services, the underlying assumption of a developed relationship holds true and emphasizes the need for a research investment before partaking in services.

Expressed as an equation in a college choice context, it can be thought of as:

Prospective student + institutional /educational services + established co-value attributes

= long term retention and student success
Critics of Means-End Theory. One of the fundamental criticisms of means-end theory is that underlying assumptions such as static goal creation and the use of product attributes to construct goal hierarchies create knowledge gaps in the research process. Means-end theory is systematic and hierarchical, which Brunso et al. (2004) noted can be potentially problematic in cases where the link between product/service perceptions and consumer values is unclear. These concerns have been addressed by a number of scholars who suggested strategies to avoid potential research pitfalls, including structural concerns and lack of consideration for situational factors (Brunso & Grunert, 1998; Brunso et al., 2004; Grunert, 1993; Huffman et al., 2000; Iyanna, 2015 Nielsen, Sørensen, & Grunert, 1997).

Static goal structure. The central critique of means-end theory is its static goal structure, as it implies that consumers’ goals do not change or evolve (Huffman et al., 2000). While the college choice decision is a concrete goal (the prospective student seeks entry into an institution and program of choice), it is not a static goal. The student adapts and extends the goal formation process to include the use of the services rendered by the institution. Enrollment is not the final goal. Progress through a course or program, degree completion and conferral, etc., are goals that build from the college choice process. Huffman, Ratneshwar, and Glen Mick (2000) stressed that the application of means-end theory requires attention to “contextual factors” (p. 12). Brunso et al. (2004) suggested a “lifestyle model” that adapts to situation specific perceptions and goal variations (p. 665).

Associative assumption. Another assumption of means-end theory is the ability of the consumer to recognize associative links between means (products/service attributes) and ends (goal/results) (Nielsen, Sørensen, & Grunert, 1997). Means-end theory was designed for situation-specific decision-making processes and provides context for behavioral intentions and
routines. However, it does not always account for situational constraints and lifestyle choices (Grunert, 1993; Brunso & Grunert, 1998; Brunso et al., 2004). Means-end theory typically assumes that consumers have an organized understanding of the connections between the product or service and their own goals. However, as Bruso et.al (2004) noted, “empirical relation between personal values and behavior is generally low” (p.667). As such, it becomes necessary to take into consideration these factors in an application of theory.

Extended Mean-End Value Framework. As a response to criticisms of means-end theory, Shilpa Iyanna (2015) developed an extended version of the theoretical framework she titled “extended means-end value framework” (p.130). Iyanna’s (2015) study adapted means-end theory framework and assessed consumer behavior as it pertained to the undergraduate college experience. The model established the appropriateness of the application of extended means-end value framework (EMEVF) theory to higher education. This study utilized Iyanna’s theoretical adaptation to examine how women utilized their resources, including (but not limited to) their own lived experiences, finances, and personal values, to develop a goal directed action: enrollment into an online doctoral program. It further examined the relationships between these elements.

Iyanna’s (2015) extension of means-end theory underscores the foundational premise of this study: enrollment in a doctoral program of choice is not the final goal, but rather a means to an end in and of itself. Figure 2 illustrates the theoretical process using EMEVF in goal development.
Building from Woodward’s (1997) model, EMEVF demonstrates a value hierarchy within the process of goal formation and suggests that the goal formation process occurs, and can continue, as the consumer integrates their resources. In the case of this study, the model allowed for an analysis of consequences/benefits and the ability of the consumer to assess risks/rewards as part of the decision-making process, even after the initial decision to enroll was made.

*Figure 2. The Extended Means-End Value Framework. Adapted from Iyanna (2015).*
Iyanna’s (2015) study adapted EMEVF theory to research the undergraduate college choice process. She effectively demonstrated how students’ perceptions of value (socio-economic, social, etc.) and other factors influenced the decision-making process. Iyanna (2015) examined students’ goals, examined students’ resources used in formulation of those goals, and examined students’ “value perceptions” of resources that helped them meet their goals (p. 134). Iyanna (2015) demonstrated how students’ creation of their concept of “value is uniquely derived at a given place and time and that place is phenomenologically determined, based on the existing resources” (pp. 141-142.)

While Iyanna (2015) focused on undergraduate students, this study demonstrated that doctoral students have an additional extended goal formation process. Enrollment is a means to an end. Iyanna’s (2015) theory extended traditional mean-end theory beyond a static goal assumption and moved beyond associative assumptions. EMEDVF allows for co-creation of values and additional goals that reach beyond the initial decision (results), an important consideration in the college choice process. As successful completion of the doctoral process is the final goal. It is important to recognize that the college choice decision is a foundational step in that final goal formation process. Although the college choice decision is a goal (result) of a specific process, it is also part of a much larger process.

EMEVF allowed for the examination of the college choice process by focusing on the co-created values expressed within the narratives of women in online doctoral programs. The graduate college choice process is complex, with layers of both means and results. EMEVF aided to make sense of data collected. EMEVF provided a deeper and richer understanding of the underlying factors within this study. As such, the adaptation of theory provided an appropriate lens for the general inductive analysis used in this study and allowed for a less-prescriptive
interpretation of results than traditional means-end theory would have allowed. Additionally, the extended theory addresses shortcomings that critics of means-end theory have raised as potential detriments to the theoretical framework.

**Framework rationale.** In this study, EMEVF theory provided a lens to examine the relationship between prospective students and graduate institutions. Using EMEVF theory allowed the study to focus on the decision-making process leading up to college choice and examine what led students to seek the service exchange. Iyanna’s (2015) extension of means-end theory mitigates associative assumptions. By using phenomenological techniques (Vargo & Laush, 2004) to link means, consequences/benefits, and goals (results), EMEVF scaffolds participants, helping them to draw out connections by asking them to reflect on the process and then describe the experience. This adaptation makes EMEVF theory most appropriate for qualitative research as it incorporates aspects of phenomenology to explore descriptive data for emergent themes. EMEVF allowed for the contextualization of the question of how the lived experiences of women in online doctoral programs contributed to their college or program selection processes. In the ever-evolving field of higher education, this work is important as it examines both motivational and goal setting behaviors as well as student expectations of the educational services exchange.

**Applying theory to the study.** EMEVF was designed to make sense of personal customer (student) experiences as they pertain to products or services in higher education. In this study, it was applied to examine how students make decisions regarding enrollment in online doctoral programs. The theory provided a strategic framework to review critical academic and non-academic factors that contributed to the decision-making process. EMEVF was used to make sense of how and why participants were motivated to act in certain ways while allowing
for a specific analysis and organization of the factors used in the decision-making process. Furthermore, EMEVF theory provided a systematic, yet flexible, way to distinguish between individual differences that were tangential and directly attributed to lifestyle or lived experiences from those that were situation-specific and accounted for through the examination of the collective relationship between goals and behaviors of the participants overall (Brunso, et.al, 2004; Grunert & Grunert, 1995; Iyanna, 2015).

Vargo and Laush (2004; 2008) indicated that focusing on the service exchange, along with an examination of both long- and short-term goals, allows for critical observation and reflection on the decision-making process that lead to the choice. EMEVF pushes the theory to examine the decision-making processes of students and can potentially reframe the discussion about college choice, drawing it out of isolation and into a context informed by the lived experiences of the participants. In this study, EMEVF extends means-end theory to reconstruct the processing route, or decision-making process, of female doctoral students in online programs in order to assess both goal-directed actions of the participants as well as the categorization process used by institutions to admit students. This is demonstrated by way of participant’s individual decision chains.

This study examined student motivations, beliefs about institutional attributes, personal values, and other decision-making factors in a way not typical of studies in higher education. Traditionally in higher education, an educational psychology approach is used to explore motivations. However, in this case motivations for college choice exist within a distinct consumer context. Although not always noted in such overt terms, the decision-making process as it pertains to institutional choice reflects a process rife with consumerist behavior.
This consumer behavior is described in the literature (Olsen & King, 1985; Paulsen, 1990; Saeed, et al., 2008). Students weigh factors critical for consideration and engage in opportunity cost decision-making patterns. Opportunity cost is an economic decision where the person making the decision must give up a preferred or valued alternative to select another option based on return (Payne, Bettman, & Luce, 1996). This means students choose the college that is the right fit based on the information at hand, often despite other potentially beneficial or preferred alternatives. They may look at their own resources (time, money, location, etc.) and information gathered about the institutions or programs considered in the selection process to make the best enrollment decision given the resources at hand. In this way, EMEVF theory can also be used to predict future consumer behaviors, both for that specific consumer and for other consumers who are similar in demographics (Grunert & Grunert, 1995; Iyanna, 2015). Developing this predictive ability holds the possibility to create an enrollment model that assesses “right fit” and projects future success of like students.

**Methodology and EMEVF.** Iyanna’s (2015) extension of the theory blends theoretical practices to refine means-end theory in a manner that distinctly improves the framework. In the context of this study, the qualitative inductive analysis allowed themes and data to emerged in a nontechnical form with a structure that was not rigidly formatted (Merriam, 2009; Thomas, 2006). Unlike phenomenology used by Iyanna (2015), an inductive approach affords increased flexibility and simplicity. An inductive approach allowed for observations from the literature to serve as underlying premises, while detailed readings of the data facilitated a “goal-free” evaluation process (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). This straightforward methodology allowed for a level transparency not afforded by other more complex methods and retained the thick and rich descriptions vital to qualitative data analysis.
A key component of the study was the development of meaningful associations between product/service (institutional) attributes, student perceptions, students’ values, and other factors that contributed to the college choice decision of the participants. For the purposes of this study, a laddering technique allowed room for participant narration along with participant surveys to support research depth. Laddering refers to the practice of using an “in-depth, one-on-one interviewing technique” to effectively “develop an understanding of how consumers translate the attributes of products into meaningful associations with respect to self, following means-end theory” (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988, p. 12).

Within qualitative studies, it is critical to apply soft laddering: allowing for “twists and bends” in the data collection (Grunert & Grunert, 1995). Personal narrative and reflection from participants was important to examine how behaviors and underlying value constructs informed their decision-making process (Brunso & Grunert, 1998; Iyanna, 2015). Methodological considerations included Veludo-de-Oliveira, Ikeda, and Campomar’s (2006) discussion of structuring interviews in a way that links values to behaviors while leaving room in the laddered hierarchy for the complexities of the higher educational system. In the case of this study, the data was mapped (Veludo-de-Oliveira, et al., 2006) and then organized into decision-making chains (Iyanna, 2015), as noted in Figure 2.

Perhaps most importantly, the inductive methodological approach coupled with EMEVF facilitated a direct focus on the lived experience of the women participants as they contributed to building resources and values that were then directly applied to a situational context: the college choice decision resulting in their enrollment in an online doctoral program. Following the structures and practices established both in the theoretical framework and in methodological
approach guided and mitigated the research as it developed. Chapter III provides further
discussion on methodological approach.

Summary

This study focused on the various academic and non-academic influences present in the
experiences of women in online doctoral programs to understand how those influences and
subsequent experiences contributed to their decision-making process regarding college choice.
An examination of key factors central to the issues that directly impact this student population
such as shifting enrollment trends, attrition and retention, and right fit provided context for the
results of this study. The goal was to provide institutions with practical recommendations that
support the enrollment of students who can successfully complete their program of choice.
Instead of focusing in exclusively on students’ final college choice decision, this study
examined both the decision and the process to harmonize theory and practice regarding college
choice. Instead of a passive focus on the students’ decision to enroll, this study actively
contributes to the body of knowledge regarding academic and non-academic variables’
influences present in students’ lives and how they shaped their college choice decision.

The literature review in Chapter II presents the extant scholarship on college choice and
graduate student populations with an emphasis on the core elements pertinent to women in online
doctoral programs. Chapter III then describes the methodology and research design. Chapter IV
presents the findings and Chapter V offers conclusions and recommendations based on the
findings.
Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review provides the basis for this study by analyzing the current available body of literature in relation to factors that influence the college choice decisions of women in online doctoral programs. The goal of this chapter is to present an overview of previous essential research regarding college choice as it pertains to graduate college choice, women in graduate education, and online doctoral programs. Following a section that provides background and context for the college choice process in general, this chapter provides an examination of graduate student college choice, an exploration of women in graduate education, and discusses literature pertaining to online doctoral programs. Each stream provides foundational and contextual elements that help explain the college choice decision-making process for the population subset of study. This chapter then concludes with an overall summary of the key components that converge into the specific problem of practice evaluated in this study.

College Choice: Background and Context

The term ‘college choice’ is a central focal point for this literature review. The term is defined in existing literature as a prospective student’s decision to enroll in and attend their preferred institution and program of choice (Bersola, et al., 2014; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chuang, 2010; Paulson, 1990; Perna, 2006; Olsen, 1985; 1992). Best described as “lengthy and complex,” this process is subject to the relative influence of a myriad of academic and non-academic factors (Bersola, et al., 2014, p. 516). These influences are typically grouped into categories such as student characteristics, internal and external student variables, and institutional characteristics (Kallio, 1995; Olsen & King, 1985; Paulsen, 1992; Perna, 2006; Poock & Love, 2001). This literature review establishes how understanding students’ college choice process is key to
developing informed enrollment and admissions practices that take into account the wide range of influencing factors that impacts students’ decision.

The literature presented here establishes the importance of scholars and practitioners examining and evaluating students’ college choice decisions. First, it remains important to continue research on students’ college choice due to gaps in existing research, policy, and practice both at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Bersola et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995, Perna, 2004; 2006). Second, enrollment is considered the “lifeblood” of most higher education institutions and describes enrollment as being exceedingly important to institutional viability (Goldman et.al 2004; Kinzie, 2004). Graduate enrollment, although understudied, also is important to the overall enrollment equation (Besola et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995). Finally, and most specific to this study, is the fact that doctoral students make up approximately one quarter of the total graduate student population and half of that population are women, yet this population as a whole remains understudied (Allum, 2014; Dua, 2007; Gardener, 2009; Perna, 2004).

While extensive research on undergraduate college choice exists, there is still relatively little research on graduate student college choice (Bersola et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Perna, 2006; Saeed, Jimenez, Howell, Karimbux, & Sukotjo, 2008). The studies that do exist often focus in on very narrow and specific population subsets, or specific academic fields, or remain limited to populations such as students who did not matriculate (Kallio, 1995; Malaney, 1987; Olsen, 1992; Poock & Love, 2001; Saeed, et.al, 2008; Webb et al., 1996). However, despite the constraints of extant literature, the available studies do provide foundation for understanding factors that influence graduate student college choice. Therefore, in order to establish a foundation for understanding the college choice decision-making process for women
in online doctoral programs, it is critical to first examine relevant factors pertaining to graduate student college choice.

**Graduate College Choice**

The decision to enroll in a graduate program is a life changing choice for prospective students’ that is impacted by multiple influences (Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010; Olsen & King, 1985; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001). As noted by Lei and Chaung (2010) it is potentially one of the most important decisions that prospective students make in their lives and involves consideration of both academic and non-academic factors. Although some similar factors are shared with the undergraduate college choice process, the graduate college choice process is distinct (Kallio, 1995; Malaney, 1987; Perna, 2004; Zhang, 2005). Prospective graduate students have different needs and expectations than their undergraduate counterparts, and often also have different goals (Kallio, 1995; Perna, 2004; Talbot, 1996; Zhang, 2005). Some of the specific factors impacting graduate students include variables such as gender, age, geographic location, residency status, work concerns, family considerations, socio-economic status, and financial aid (Bersola et al., 2014; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010). Before students make their final college choice decision, they must weigh out these critical factors and decide which institution/ program will provide them with the best opportunity for developing the skill set needed for their prospective career (Poock & Love, 2001; Zhang, 2005).

**College Choice Process for Graduate Students: Conceptual Models**

The overall complexity of the college choice decision for graduate students, particularly for prospective doctoral students, results in what Kallio (1995) defines as a “multistage decision process” (p.110). Lei and Chaung (2010), Zhang (2005), and Poock and Love (2001) supported Kallio’s (1995) assertions and reinforced the proposed key components of the process: student
characteristics and informational gathering, institutional actions, and institutional/programmatic characteristics. To make sense of how different factors and variables influence the college choice process for graduate students, it is critical to examine existing conceptual models which illustrate this process. The first several models presented are the most widely referenced models in the discussion on graduate college choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Olsen & King, 1985; Perna; 2006). The last model presented in the most recent and more narrowly focused as it examines doctoral students college choice process directly (English & Umbach; 2016).

In 1985, Olsen and King adapted an existing model developed by Kotler (1976) that illustrated undergraduate college choice to demonstrate the process for graduate students. Kotler (1976) identified the six steps that most prospective undergraduate students generally follow while making their college choice decision: decision to attend, information gathering, inquiries into specific institutions, application process, admission, choice of institution, and then enrollment as demonstrated below by Figure 3 (Olsen & King, 1985).

![Figure 3. Kotler’s (1976) Six Steps of College Choice.](image)

Olsen and King (1985) emphasized how this general progression holds true at the graduate level, but noted that where the key differentiation exists is in student characteristics. Factors affecting the decision-making of prospective graduate students, particularly student
characteristics, create an important pivot point that potentially alters process for prospective students (English & Umbach, 2016; Kalio, 1995; Kinzie et al., 2005; Lei & Chaung, 2010; Olsen & King, 1985).

Although not developed for graduate students, two widely referenced models are often used in conjunction with discussions on graduate college choice: Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three stage process and Perna’s (2006) proposed conceptual model of access and choice. Both include multiphasic, layered, interactive stages that students move through to reach a college choice decision. Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model has three distinct multi-processed phases, as Figure 4 shows. Perna’s (2006) has four layers with interconnecting factors that create context, as shown in Figure 5.

![Figure 4. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model](image-url)
These two models demonstrate the different dimensions and stratifications of the overall phenomenon as described across the literature (Bersola, et.al, 2014; Eckman, & Strayhorn, 2012; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010; Poock & Love, 2001; Perna, 2006; Zhang, 2005). Earlier literature relied on and cited Hossler and Gallagher (1987) with frequency. Once Perna’s (2006) model emerged, there was a shift in the literature away from the application of the earlier research and model. They are distinct. Perna (2006) did not build on the earlier work, but did draw on it in the review of prior research. This is an important shift in the literature and one demonstrated in the subsequent example below.

The most recent conceptual model emerged as a result of English and Umbach’s (2016) study. The pair indicated that individual variables were perhaps of increasing importance and often superseded institutional factors and background characteristics. Perhaps most importantly, English and Umbach (2016) stressed further study of graduate populations and why they enroll...
in graduate education programs as imperative, calling for a qualitative study to help mitigate the conflicting quantitative studies presently within the body of existing literature.

English and Umbach (2016) narrowed the process for graduate students to three phases as illustrated in Figure 6: aspiration of graduate education, submission of application, enrollment in graduate program.

![Image of Figure 6](image-url)

*Figure 6. English and Umbach's (2016) Three Phases of Graduate College Choice.*

Perna’s (2006) conceptual model is clearly the basis for English and Umbach’s research and subsequent model development. English and Umbach (2016) posited that instead of four phases, graduate students move through three phases as they are less influenced by community than undergraduates. Drawing from elements within existing studies in college choice, this model emphasizes that application for graduate student populations needs a stronger theoretical base (Kallio, 1995; Mullen, Goyette, & Soares 2003; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001; Zhang, 2005.)

In some ways, English and Umbach’s (2016) model seems like an over simplification of a complex process with abundant variables for consideration. Poock and Love (2001), Perna (2004), Hertlin and Schute (2007), and Bersola et al. (2014) all explicitly asserted the importance of understanding the college choice process at the graduate level as multiphasic, layered, and
complex. However, in other ways, English and Umbach’s model is reflective of the earlier model proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and aligns with that earlier theoretical framework.

While research demonstrates that students do indeed move through a multistage process while deciding on what institution and program to enroll in for their graduate studies, there is not clear understanding or agreement on what exactly that process is overall (Bersola et. al, 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010; Malaney, 1987; Perna 2004; Zhang, 2005). Bersola et al. (2014) noted that in the current shifting higher educational climate, it has become imperative to develop a more detailed picture of student behavior during the doctoral admissions process. As such, further research that uses a qualitative approach to examine the college choice process for graduate students at a more in depth and individual level is needed to engender consistency.

**Academic and non-academic factors.** A critical consideration when examining graduate college choice is the uniqueness of the overall process for each individual. Academic and non-academic factors influence graduate college choice on an intensely individual level (Hertlin & Schute, 2007; Kallio, 1995; Poock & Love, 2001; Lei & Chaung, 2010; English & Umbach, 2016). Despite knowing these factors, the factors in and of themselves provide limited information about the process students actually move through (Hertlin & Schute, 2007; Mertz et al., 2012).

Students often consider factors such as academic reputation (branding) of the institution along with program size and quality, while institutions assess the overall academic achievement and ability of students (Kalio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010). Saeed et al. (2008) found that some institutions have narrow requirements for prospective students concerning undergraduate GPA or standardized testing results in particular specializations or fields such as medicine and dentistry.
In these cases, institutions also look at the likelihood of students being well matched to residency programs (Zhang, 2005; Saeed, et al., 2008). There are certain parallels that can be drawn to predict the likeliness of successful completion of a student entering a graduate program (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Mullen, et al., 2003).

Prospective student give substantial time and attention to weighing out non-academic factors such as family considerations, personal reasons for institutional preference, financial concerns, and institutional culture (Hertlein & Lambert-Schute; 2007; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010; Olsen & King, 1985; Paulsen, 1990; Poock & Love, 2001; Stanton et al., 1996). As Lei & Chaung (2010) noted, the decision to pursue graduate education is a personal one. Consideration of non-academic factors is vital to the decision-making process regarding college choice. Non-academic factors such as location, availability of evening classes, the ability to continue working, previous experiences, ability to attend part time and flexibility of program requirements as some of the highest rated factors considered among prospective students (Hearn, 1987; Poock & Love, 2001; Schapiro, O’Malley, & Litten, 1991).

Context is important to consider with regard to students’ decision to enroll in their graduate program of choice at the institution they select (Betts, et al., 2009; Columbaro, 2008; English & Umbach, 2016; Mertz, et al., 2012; Perna, 2004). Both academic and non-academic factors, as well as individual and institutional factors, weigh heavily in the decision-making process concerning college choice (Bersola, et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010; Zhang, 2005). Due to the complexity of the overall decision process regarding graduate college choice, there is need for students to weigh out their own factors and institutional preferences. This is an important step in determining what institution and program best match the individual students’ resources, individual preferences, and potential career needs.
Graduate College Choice and Doctoral Students: Right Fit

An issue embedded within the discussion on graduate college choice that specifically pertains to doctoral students is that of ‘right fit.’ Over the last two decades there have been increasing calls for information on doctoral program selection and the notion of right fit (Allum, et.al., 2014; Bersola et.al, 2014; Poock & Love, 2001; Saeed et al., 2008; English & Umbach, 2016). The idea of ‘right fit’ in the context of college choice can be described as suitably matching candidates to programs (Saeed, 2008). While there is no singular existing data set or methodologic process that assures right fit, especially at the doctoral level, there are ways to identify programs that are right for individual students based on student demographics and institutional factors (Allum, et al., 2014; Lei & Chaung, 2010). The present literature has sought to establish what Saeed et al. (2008) describe as a “baseline of factors” that affect students’ enrollment into their program of choice to help both institutions and students find the best possible placements.

Wergin and Alexandre (2012) found that as a result of shifting factors within doctoral programs, traditional program models are often in conflict with new styles of university administration. The result is a paradox within doctoral education that leads to “negative impacts on student completion, faculty engagement, and needs of the larger society” (Wergin & Alexandre, 2012, p.225). As the overall doctoral experience also serves as academic socialization and the pathway to an academic career for many students, the experience itself is preparatory (Austin, 2002; Luzzo, 1993; Shapiro, et al., 1990). This is part of the reason that career pathway is critical to the issue of right fit.

Career pathways. One method of assessing right fit is in regard to career pathway development and planning. In a report issued by the Council of Graduate Schools, Allum et al
(2014) call for “comprehensive, systematic, standardized method of understanding” doctoral careers to strengthen graduate education programs and for students to gain a better understanding of potential fit before enrolling in their program of choice (p.7). Saeed et al. (2008) emphasized the critical nature of matching suitable candidates for appropriate programs to support both student and programmatic success. Reason for study is a key element in the college choice process (Bersola et. al, 2014; Denson & Bowman, 2015; English & Umbach, 2016; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2007). Walker et al. (2007) found that many doctoral programs need a reshaping to develop processes that provide a more formative educational experience for students which would work to reduce attrition and hone students’ understanding of practical elements within their field of study. This helps to ensure students’ success working in the context of their given field, or work environment, once conferred with their terminal degree (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Shaprio, O’Malley, & Litten; 1990).

Student placement and context. Part of the challenge regarding right fit involves the particulars of student placement (Luzzo, 1993; Clayson & Haley, 2003; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Denson & Bowman, 2015; English & Umbach, 2016). Student placement, also referred to in the literature as ‘match,’ involves factors such as selected field of study, given subset or specialty, and potential career pathway (Allum et al., 2014; Saeed et al., 2008). Institutional prestige and culture take a certain precedent regarding fit due to the nature of student satisfaction with invitational services and programming (Goldman et al., 2004; Denson & Bowman, 2015; English & Umbach, 2016). Students who are engaged academically and immersed in the institutional culture and connected to their peers are more likely to persist. However, this can be difficult to assess until during the first year of student placement as the essence of ‘fit’ emerges over that first year of study, resulting in some difficulty at times with recruitment of candidates
who have this right fit (Austin, 2002; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Talbot, Maier, & Rushlau; 1996).

As observed by Tinto (1993) institutional environment, or context, varies widely and for graduate students can be paramount to success in their programs. Although highly critiqued, Tinto’s (1975, 1993) work demonstrates that students who are in the right context, who are engaged and active, generally have higher achievement and better overall success. Likewise, doctoral students who are well matched, those considered to have right fit, are more likely to persist and successfully complete their programs (Bersola et al., 2014; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Saeed et al., 2008). Either the student integrates well into the institutional culture and meets programmatic requirements, or they do not and they withdraw both socially and academically (Austin, 2002; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Golde, 2000; 2006).

**Attrition and Persistence**

Attrition remains a significant problem of practice within higher education and in particular in doctoral programs that still requires additional attention from researchers (Denson & Bowman, 2015; English & Umbach, 2016; Golde, 1998; 2000; 2005; 2010; Offerman, 2011). The issue of persistence is also paramount to understanding attrition as there are key indicating factors that can indicate students’ likelihood of attrition or persistence within their given programs (Denson & Bowman, 2015; English & Umbach, 2016). While considerable time and effort has gone into examining undergraduate college choice and the impacts of attrition and persistence in undergraduate education, there is little research connecting graduate college choice and doctoral attrition and persistence despite known connections (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2011; Cooke, Sims, & Peyrefitte, 1995; English & Umbach, 2016; Gardener, 2010; Lovitts &
An examination of both attrition and persistence is necessary to understand the depth of this problem of practice and the college choice process.

**Paradox of attrition.** As Lovitts (2001) noted, due to the way the most doctoral programs are presently structured, doctoral attrition is largely invisible and still poorly understood overall (Golde, 2005; Bersola et al., 2014). As a result, doctoral attrition is discussed as a sort of hidden crisis in academia, one that occurs nearly in silence with students gradually slipping away rather than making an abrupt and well defined departure (Golde, 2005; Lovitts 2001). Occurring across all academic disciplines, doctoral attrition remains significant as rates hover at approximately 50% overall (NCES, 2013; Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). This is the paradox of doctoral attrition - that the most narrowly selected group of high achieving students, also are the most understudied and least likely to successfully complete their program (Golde, 1998; 2000; Golde & Dore, 2001; Wills & Carmichael, 2011).

Despite the scope and significance of the issue, attrition is less researched at the doctoral level as the doctoral student population is significantly smaller in size and scope than other graduate and undergraduate student populations and therefore often considered less strategic by many institutions (Willging & Johnson, 2009; Cooke, Sim, & Peyrefitte, 1995). However, doctoral attrition is no less problematic for both students and institution (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Bain et al., 2011; Golde, 2000). Attrition places strain on both the institution and the student, essentially causing a ripple effect that results in negative consequences such as wasted institutional resources, emotional distress for students, and financial issues for both institutions and students (Golde, 1998; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). The repercussions for doctoral students accompanying delayed completion or non-completion include student debt burden, psycho-social effects, family problems, and career limitations (Golde & Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001). In regards
to career and financial concerns with regard to attrition, many students are then left with heavy student loan debt and limited career possibilities due to non-completion which in turn adds to the stress overall of the situation (Golde, 2006; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

Doctoral attrition is closely tied to students’ perceptions and conceptualizations of success and failure (Golde, 2001; 2005; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth; 1999). One of the key reasons doctoral attrition is so emotionally disruptive is that high achieving, highly driven students perceive attrition as monumental failure and as a result try to downplay or conceal the true mitigating factors and impacts (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). Students face emotional difficulties such as bouts of depression, acts of violence, and even recorded attempts of suicide (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Wills & Carmichael, 2011). In this regard, students’ tie their success or failure within the program to their overall feeling of success or failure within a larger life context making attrition highly disruptive to students in both an academic and personal sense.

Factors impacting doctoral student attrition include university experiences, connectedness/isolation of students, personal factors, faculty influences and institutional changes (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004). Institutional influences such as program changes, faculty engagement, and adequate academic supports play a critical role in the persistence of doctoral students (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Golde, 2000; Walker, 2007). Additional factors influencing attrition specific to doctoral students online include technology anxiety, limited access university to resources, lack of social interaction, and overall motivational concerns (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Columbaro, 2008; Walker, 2007).

Bollinger and Halpua (2012) found lower rates of attrition among online doctoral students, as low as 18.4% overall in one particular program. This potentially suggests that
persistence in online doctoral programs is generally higher once additional factors concerning initial anxiety over technological and distance education are mitigated. This is perhaps another emerging paradox surrounding doctoral attrition as generally speaking campus based doctoral programs are still held in higher regard within the great academic community (Offerman, 2011). Offerman (2011) also notes that one of the keys to persistence among doctoral students both on campus and online is program delivery and flexibility. Furthermore, the existing research supports this notion that program delivery and flexibility of requirements are critical factors in the success of women in doctoral programs (Betts et al., 2009; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Gardener, 2009; Golde, 2006; Kramarae, 2001).

**Persistence.** Discussion of the literature on attrition almost necessitates a discussion on persistence. Persistence, also discussed in the literature as student retention, refers to students’ continual program attendance or pursuance of their degree until they reach educational goals (Bair, 1999; Tinto, 1975; 1993). Frequently the literature utilizes persistence and retention interchangeably, however it seems necessary for the context of this study to frame persistence in a manner that indicates not mere retention of the student, but successful conferral of degree. Many doctoral students complete course work successfully and remain technically matriculated for extensive periods of time yet fail to complete their dissertation (Golde, 2000, 2005).

Students often cite barriers to achievement that closely resemble factors which result in attrition such as: multiple role strain (particularly in women,) feeling overwhelmed, lack of connection to peers, and poor university experiences (Denson & Bowman, 2015; Muller, 2008; Perna, 2004; Shavers & Moore, 2014). As evidenced by attrition rates overall, pursuance of a doctoral degree is rigorous and requires high levels of commitment from enrolled students (Muller, 2008; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Despite high levels of achievement previous, which are
required for admissions into doctoral programs, many students find themselves struggling to keep pace with doctoral level coursework (Golde, 2000; 2005; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Most students who can complete the first year or two of study and coursework, persist with a good degree of success (Golde, 2005). Shavers & Moore (2014) suggest this is due to students’ ability to developing coping mechanisms and resiliency within that initial course of study. They also indicate that African American Women in particular have the greatest need for developing such strategies as they face additional barriers to persistence such as racism and feelings of isolation, a key notion supported by other existing literature (Bain, et al., 2011; Hertlin & Schute, 2007; Perna, 2004; Shavers & Moore, 2015).

Doctoral students often cite issues with faculty as either a factor in persistence or as a key barrier/factor in attrition (English& Umbach, 2016; Golde, 2000; Hertlin & Schute, 2007; Muller, 2008). As doctoral students typically work in close connection with faculty, especially once they reach the dissertation phase, faculty engagement and support becomes critical to student success (English & Umbach; Kallio, 1995; Pauley, et al., 1999). With regard to persistence, institutional culture and faculty engagement appear to greatly influence student completion at the doctoral level. Additionally several studies indicate that faculty who are welcoming and positive, who encourage friendly interactions, are key to the recruitment of students who persist and are ultimately successful in degree completion (Bair, 1999; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Poock & Love, 2001).

While background characteristics of students’ do help institutions predict overall potential student achievement, there are few established indicators of persistence pre-enrollment specific to doctoral student populations (Bain, et.al; 2011; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Golde & Dore, 2001; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). This is due to the nature of student matching, this idea
of ‘right fit,’ which is complex. Persistence is multifaceted and involves both academic and non-academic factors that are mitigated by student expectations and experiences once enrolled (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). Students who report positive experiences with peers and faculty, strong academic and program match, and alignment of program choice with personal and career goals tend to persist (Golde, 2006; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Shavers & Moore, 2014). However, there remains no clearly developed instrument to predict the success of students in their doctoral programs as many of the factors complicit in both persistence and attrition are beyond the control of the institution and often perceived by the student as beyond the control as well (Denson & Bowman, 2015; Golde, 2005; Tinto, 1997).

**Enrollment management: part of the right fit equation.** As an overall organizational tool, enrollment management remains foundational to strengthening institutional position (Goldman, Goldman, Gates, Brewer, & Brewer, 2004; Huddelston, 2000). Enrollment management practices assess student behavior and attempt to predict the likelihood of persistence, and ultimately graduation. The goal of enrollment management is to identify and admit students who are likely to graduate. Existing literature indicates a relationship between patterns of behavior and factors that result in graduate student withdrawal from online courses (Betts, et al., 2009; Cooke, Sim, & Peyrefitte, 1995; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Many of these factors are personal variables that can be difficult to mitigate. However, Cooke et al. (1995) found that the likelihood of persistence in the program could be assessed by examining factors such as student intent to remain, “affective commitment,” institutional meeting of expectations, and overall need for achievement (p. 677).

Presently institutions mitigate some of these risks by using projection models, retention theory, and enrollment management techniques (Black, 2004; Dennis, 1998; Hossler, 1996;
Keller, 1991; Yadav & Pal, 2012). These techniques, which include data mining and predictive analysis, typically remain reserved to the undergraduate application process. At the graduate level, the admissions process is multilayered and generally involves faculty members (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2013; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). Specific to the online doctoral student population, Perkins and Lowenthal (2014) note that an “entirely online doctoral program faces increased scrutiny, so it is imperative to have [enrollment management and admissions] systems and policies in place that emphasize the faculty’s commitment to both rigor and equality” (p. 34).

Despite the paucity of research particular to the doctoral student college choice the topic clearly has generated renewed interest in recent years. Key issues such complexity of process, the problem of right fit, and overall attrition/persistence factors necessitate further examination of the college choice process for doctoral students in particular (Bersola, et al., 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chuang, 2010; Zhang, 2005). As the majority of the literature focuses in on more traditional graduate programs that occur in on campus settings with participants of mixed gender, there is still need for focus on women specifically (Dua, 2007; Perna, 2004; Shavers & Moore, 2014). The next section of this review provides additional context for demonstrating the need for renewed attention to this particular problem of practice as it pertains to the specific student population subset consisting of women in online doctoral programs.

**Women in Graduate Education**

In addition to the gap in research on college choice among doctoral students, there is a gap in the literature concerning how the academic and non-academic factors used in the decision-making process influences women who select enrollment in an online doctoral program. Among enrolled doctoral students, women are more likely to enroll in online courses and pursue online
education for a variety of reasons, including flexibility and minimization of additional costs such as childcare (Kramarae, 2011; van Prummer, 2011). A brief review of the literature that exists and focuses on women in online graduate education is vital to understanding factors specific to women and those general to the overall student population.

**Women in Online Graduate Education**

In 2010, the Council of Graduate Schools indicated in a report that gender trends in graduate education demonstrate that women will continue to enroll at rates higher than men as institutions provide increasingly flexible programmatic options (Wendler et.al, 2010). Yet women in graduate education are still defined as an underrepresented group despite consisting of nearly 60% of the current overall graduate student population as they are understudied (Brow & Watson, 2010; Gardner, 2009; Gardner, 2010; NCES, 2014; Perna, 2004). Critical to understanding women as an underrepresented population is exploring the construct of gender and then considering the ways in which women understand and perceive their role within graduate student population.

**Impact of gender.** Despite the significant strides made by women in graduate education, there are still signs of gender inequality present (Dua, 2007). While there are more women than ever enrolled in graduate programs, especially at the doctoral level, they remain underrepresented in STEM specific fields (sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics), as well as some medical and dental specialties (Dua, 2007; Saeed et.al 2008; Shavers & Moore, 2014). They also remain underrepresented in faculty populations which can complicate mentoring relationships for female students (Brow & Watson; 2010; Dua, 2007; Hagedorn, 1999). Additionally, although women enroll in graduate programs in higher rates than men, they complete in in longer periods of time and have slightly higher rates of overall attrition (Dua,
One of the key factors to overall success of students’ in any higher educational academic program is integration, and in the women takes on additional significance (Dua, 2007; Tinto, 1975, 1993). The student must feel integrated into their academic environment to provide context, this context helps students then make sense of the world around them (Tinto, 1975; van Manen, 2007). The integration needs to be both social and academic in order for students to successfully persist and achieve (Gardner, 2008; Hagedorn, 1999). Relationship with both peers and faculty provide vital structure and support within graduate education, and women overall report having additional needs for flexibility, support, and understanding concerning family considerations (Hagedorn, 1999; Padula & Miller, 1999). Women indicate feeling of isolation and frustration surrounding lack of adequate mentoring and support specific to women and their unique needs especially concerning issue of work-life and family balance (Dua, 2007; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Padula & Miller, 1999; Shavers & Moore, 2014).

**Multiple role stress.** Multiple role stress was also a significant factor noted in the literature as specific to women (Brown & Watson, 2010; Gardener, 2009; Kramarae, 2001). Kramarae (2011) identified major obstacles to program completion including lack of spousal support and the additional strain of increased time demands on women already performing multiple roles. Women list some of the specific factors as creating obstacles to completion in traditional programs such as pregnancy, marriage and family, and time constraints, which may impact men as well, but have been engendered as women’s issues (Gardner, 2009; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008).
Maher, Ford, and Thompson (2004) found that family problems caused considerable duress regardless of gender, but that women typically bear the responsibility or childcare and family related difficulties and seem to be impacted with greater significance by these difficulties. Given the nature of multiple role stress and the nature of responsibilities still resting on many women, it is not surprising that many women seek online programs to continue their education (Kramarae, 2001). The overall flexibility of online education draws in women who might otherwise be faced with complications such as childcare issues, family commitments, and full-time work (Gardner, 2009; Kramarae, 2001, van Prummer, 2011; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008).

**Women as Online Doctoral Students**

Women comprise more than half of the doctoral student population and are more likely to enroll in online classes, yet research addressing women in online doctoral education is sparse (Gardner, 2009). While some evidence suggests that overall retention is lower in an online context (Carr, 2000; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005), Offerman (2011) found that in some online doctoral programs higher rates of retention and persistence are present due to the flexibility of the programs and the focus on non-traditional learners. As women enroll in increasing numbers into online doctoral programs, there remains a lack of understanding as to factors that contribute to attrition and persistence as well as their college choice process overall. Essentially - What factors lead to these women enrolling into this online program?

**Barriers to access.** The literature demonstrates that there are specific barriers to access for women (Maher, et al., 2004; Muller, 2008; Gardner, 2009; White, 2004). Factors that set women apart include marriage, child rearing, domestic responsibilities, financial concerns/constraints, institutional and geographical barriers, as well as socio-emotional
constraints (Bierema, 1999; Gardner, 2009; Hagedorn, 1999; Maher et al.; Muller, 2008; Offerman, 2011). Family issues are one of the most commonly cited issues to both enrollment in and completion of doctoral programs by women (Dua, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Maher et al., 2004; Muller, 2008; Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram, & Frels, 2014).

For many women, online doctoral programs represent a remarkable contrast to existing traditional programs of study, which are designed for younger more traditional doctoral students (Heinrich, 2000; Offerman, 2011). While online doctoral programs do not remove all barriers to access for women they may potentially help mitigate many of the barriers to entry into doctoral programs, especially in the case of older students reentering more at a mid-life point (Heinrich, 2000; Offerman, 2011). One of the key factors for consideration, which is further discussed later in this literature review, is the reality that many women seeking doctoral degrees are significantly older than male counterparts and fall into a non-traditional student population niche (Hagedorn, 1999; Heinrich, 2000; Muller, 2008; Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2014; Offerman, 2011). Women who fall into the non-traditional student population typically have extenuating life factors than can interfere with enrollment and program success and as such have need for programs that flexible to meet their needs and allow for part time enrollment (Gardener, 2009; Kramarae, 2011; Lovitts, 2001).

Lived experiences of women doctoral students. While we know women enroll in online doctoral programs, and that they enroll in higher numbers than men, we do not know their experiences overall or what factors influenced them to enroll. Heinrich (2000) makes a passionate call for an increase in “new conceptual frameworks that include women’s experiences” within doctoral programs (p. 63). Women voice a myriad of complex issues that contribute to both the selection of their program of study and their persistence in, or attrition
from, those programs (Dua, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Maher et al; Muller, 2008; Onwuegbuzie et al, 2014; White, 2004). These stories are important to hear to create systems that help women enrolled in their programs successfully navigate their journey along their doctoral programs.

Using women’s own stories to examine why they decided to enroll in an online doctoral program is a critical step in the expansion of our knowledge base concerning the overall online doctoral student population. As noted by Dua (2007), women seek opportunities to connect with their environment and that these connections are key to developing identity and voice as a professional and scholar. As noted by Henrich (2000) and Onwuegbuzie et al (2014), the women sharing seem to benefit from the process of sharing their experiences as well. Allowing women’s voices to rise above the intellectualism and research may also allow for better insight as to what truly sets apart women from their male counterparts in online doctoral programs.

**Online Doctoral Programs**

The online doctoral student population is distinct and reflective of the tremendous growth experienced in distance education in the 21st century (Gardner, 2010; Offerman, 2011). According to the NCES (2016), the breakdown of students in exclusively distance education courses, was 8.7% at Public Institutions, 13.1% at Private Non-Profit Institutions, and 51.7% at Private For-Profit Institutions. The NCES (2014) redefined distance education as “distance education or online classes and degree programs” and the data represented in accompanying tables demonstrates a 33% increase in overall graduate student online populations (Table 311.22).

Despite the tremendous growth in this sector, almost no research exists on online doctoral programs. According to Offerman (2011), online doctoral programs provide an important change in the nature of doctoral degrees and increase opportunities for previous underserved populations
of prospective students. By removing geography and campus atmosphere from that critical list of factors impacting graduate student college choice, possibilities for students greatly expand (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Offerman, 2011). This portion of the literature review will examine the existing research online doctoral student populations, and online doctoral degree programs.

**Student Population: Who Pursues an Online Doctoral Degree?**

Online graduate education refers to use of the internet and connecting systems to draw together graduate students, faculty, and connecting instructional resources when they are not in the same geographical location (Kramarae, 2011). In 2003, just 6% over the overall graduate student population completed their entire degree program via online education (NCES, 2014). By the fall of 2012, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that 22% of all graduate students were exclusively enrolled in online classes (NCES, 2014). This represents a remarkable amount of growth in a relatively short span of time, and the expansion of online graduate education has created a wealth of opportunities particularly in doctoral studies (Bowden, 2012).

**Non-traditional online students.** The non-traditional online student population is the fastest growing segment of the overall higher educational population (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Archetypal ‘traditional’ doctoral students are white males between the ages of 22 and 30, generally single and childless, enrolled full-time, with full funding through tuition waivers, working on research-driven doctorates in preparation for scholarly careers (Offerman, 2011). In contrast, non-traditional doctoral students are diverse and increasingly female, over the age of 30, married with children, enrolled part time, often in professional programs (such as EdD), already engaged in their career, and self-funded (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Offerman, 2011).

Online programs appeal to non-traditional students as they are typically more flexible and not bound geographically (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Kramarae,
Columbaro (2009) acknowledges that many factors potentially influence students’ decision to pursue their doctorate online stating that it seems typical for non-traditional adult students to face challenges regarding attendance at a campus based program. For students with a range of complex factors influencing enrollment such as family commitments, personal constraints, full-time job, possible dependents, and even at times physical challenges; online programs offer opportunities for non-traditional graduate students to become part of a learning community while remaining in their own fixed location (Columbaro, 2009; Karmarae, 2011; Truckluck, 2007; Park & Choi; 2009).

**Factors specific to non-traditional doctoral population.** Using a large online proprietary institution as his example, Offerman (2011) found that the majority of their doctoral students were female with children (many as single parents,) studying part time, and that nearly 90% were employed. According to his findings, the use of technology and distance education practices increased accessibility for women and also for students already engaged in their careers (Offerman, 2011). These students are not likely to be pursing doctoral studies to become full-time faculty members engaged in academic research (Columbaro, 2008; Offerman, 2011). Columbaro (2008) found similarly citing that especially for female minority students, the online doctoral programs at online proprietary institutions create a stepping stone to new levels within their careers while providing a flexible environment. In the case of minority women, several studies also found that online programs removed the context of race which some women felt was an additional benefit (Columbaro, 2009; Nance, 2004; White, 2004).

An additional factor critical to understanding the non-traditional doctoral student population online is the component of technology (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Offerman, 2011; Walker, et al., 2007). Many non-traditional doctoral students completing online programs are
familiar with the needed technology, but perhaps not always as savvy as their younger counterparts (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012). While these older non-traditional students may be initially less comfortable with online delivery, the results of Bollinger & Halpua’s (2012) study suggests that once students overcome technology based anxieties, they had greater success. This was attributed to the fact that many of the students surveyed were more experienced and seasoned students. Once they overcame the technological anxieties, they became confident learners who were highly motivated and persisted well overall (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012).

**Online Doctoral Degree Programs**

The growth in number and size of online graduate programs correlates with the overall growing non-traditional demographic in online graduate learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Colleges and universities continue to grow online learning programs primarily to remain flexible and meet the needs of non-traditional students returning to the classroom (Bell, 2009). As noted by Kramarae (2011), many online degree seekers search for online programs that grant masters or doctorate degrees because they are already established in their career field and require the flexibility.

Online doctoral programs have been developed by institutions to fill several particular student needs (Bell, 2006; Gardener, 2009; Kramarae, 2011). Three factors considered critical to the graduate college choice decision take on significantly less importance for students enrolled in online programs: geographical location, campus environment, and spousal career considerations (Bersola, et.al; 2014; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010;). The internet solves some potentially problematic factors in a prospective graduate students’ college choice decision. Coursework, research, and dissertation may be completed via the internet using online learning platforms and email or other educational technologies, without the constraints of needing to be physically
present at a campus. As such, the availability of online doctorates opens doors for students previously unable to consider the educational undertaking (Columbaro, 2009; Flowers & Lazeros, 2009; Shaw, Blyler, Bradley, Burrus, & Rodriguez, 2015).

**Factors in selecting an online doctoral program.** Flowers and Lazaro (2009) noted that one of the most critical questions students ask themselves prior to enrolling in any doctoral work is the following: ‘Is doctoral study right for me?’ (p. 25). As with any course of study, there are benefits and drawbacks to enrollment in online doctoral programs. This notion of right fit as previously discussed extends beyond programmatic and institutional factors as students must be truly prepared to undertake doctoral study (Bair, 1999; Bersola, et al., 2014; Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Truckluck, 2007). The growth of the educational technology industry has increased access to doctoral programs incrementally, however that does not necessitate that doctoral study is right for all students or that online doctoral study is the right fit for all students with barriers to entry (Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014; Ewing, Mathieson, Alexander, & Leafman, 2012).

Online doctoral study provides some clear benefits to many students (Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Offerman, 2011; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). Benefits of enrollment in online doctoral programs include ability to pursue coursework remotely (at times with no campus requirements), many online programs offer part time enrollment, and most online programs are flexible and developed for no-traditional career oriented students (Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Offerman, 2011.)

One of the key considerations as noted by several authors is the ability for students to remain in their current careers (Anderson, 2008; Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Offerman, 2011; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). This factor figured centrally as many no-traditional students are reentering educational programs for the reason of enhancing a career already in place or to
expand potential additional career opportunities within their field (Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Offerman, 2011). This is a factor that sets apart non-traditional doctoral students from their younger traditionally oriented counterparts. Instead of seeking an academic career immersed in research and scholarship, most non-traditional doctoral students are seeking additional career considerations (Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Gardener, 2009; Offerman, 2001).

As with any doctoral program, there are potential drawbacks to enrollment in an online doctoral program. Doctoral programs are rigorous, demanding, and require a great deal of personal motivation and sacrifice for persistence (Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Golde, 2000; 2005; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Some of those particular to online doctoral programs are the same as with any online educational program, issues such as the lack of face to face interaction, anxieties concerning the technology, student–faculty ratios, access to institutional resources, and overall students’ motivation are all of concern (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Flowers & Lazaro, 2009). Additionally, there are multiple factors for consideration such as area of study, institutional reputation, and overall support services offered that not only influence enrollment in a particular institution and program of choice, but that then impact student persistence and eventually career placement (Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Adams & DeFleur, 2005, Offerman, 2011).

One of the major potential drawbacks of earning an online doctoral degree is the acceptability of that degree in securing a faculty position (Adams & DeFleur, 2005). This notion of academic credentials and the idea of reputation is a key factor for consideration with potential online doctoral students. These students need to properly assess factors critical to potential career placement concerning reputation and academic acceptance if a faculty potion is sought following
degree conferral (Adams & DeFleur, 2005; Flowers & Lazaro, 2009). This issue is one of perception, which can be particularly significant for some students.

**Perceptions concerning online doctoral programs.** Another critical point for discussion involves overall perceptions concerning online doctoral programs (Adams & DeFleur, 2005; Kung & Logan, 2014; Preston, 2014; Rademaker, Duffy, Wetzler, & Zaikina-Montgomery, 2016). Students, faculty, prospective employers, and even the greater public at large all draw conclusions about and have differentiating perceptions concerning the quality and acceptability of online doctoral degrees. However, there is very little literature that examines these perceptions form a research driven standpoint (Adams & DeFleur, 2005; Allen & Seaman, 2012; Huett, Perkins, Jones, Kumar, 2012). One of the key considerations regarding the acceptability of online doctoral degrees centers around the notion of equivalence, is an online doctoral degree equivalent to that earned on campus? (Adams & DeFleur, 2005; Preston, 2014). This remains an underlying ethical, legal, and institutional consideration.

Until recently, the majority of online doctoral degrees have been offered by non-traditional online institutions (Huett, et.al, 2012; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). However, the growth and expansion of online doctoral offerings by traditional campus based institutions represents a shift in online education overall; as more students seek the flexibility of online programming the acceptability of online doctoral programs appears to increase as well (Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). As availability of online doctoral programs increase, so do opportunities for potential students and institutions (Flowers & Lazaro, 2009; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014).

Additional research is still needed to develop a stronger sense of how traditional institutions online doctoral programs truly compare to those offered by non-traditional online counterparts, especially as Offerman (2011) notes that the programs developed by non-traditional
online institutions such as Capella University are tailored to meet the needs of the non-traditional student population they enroll, while Perkins and Lowenthal (2014) noted that traditional campus programs are simply adapting existing structures to try and meet student needs. As more and more campus based institutions expand offerings for online doctoral students, they gain further acceptance within the academic community and students report high levels of overall satisfaction (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Lehan, Hussey, & Mika, 2014; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014).

There remains an intensive need for additional research concerning online doctoral programs overall. Existing literature focuses primarily on issues such as the acceptability of online doctoral degrees and the ways in which traditional campus based programs might use this venue as a way to expand access to potential students. However, there exists virtually no student derived data concerning how the college choice decision process leads students, specifically women, to a decision to enroll in an online doctoral program. As such, there remains an overall paucity of data which requires further exploration of the motivations and influences driving students to enroll in online doctoral programs.

Summary

This literature review demonstrates that prospective students give substantial time and attention to weighing out non-academic factors such as family considerations, personal reasons for institutional preference, financial concerns, and institutional culture (Olsen & King, 1985; Paulsen, 1990; Kallio, 1995; Poock & Love, 2001; Lei & Chaung, 2010; English & Umbach, 2016). The literature has also established equality gaps and the difficulties women have in balancing doctoral work, revealing that these issues affect both the doctoral work and the personal lives of these female students (Heinrich, 2000; Onwuegbuzie et.al, 2014). Finally, this literature review provided a starting point for information available on online doctoral programs.
while revealing a clear need for additional research in this area. The knowledge attained from this literature review facilitated in the development of the research methodology and plan for this inductive study which is outlined in the following chapter.
Chapter III: Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this inductive study is to understand how the academic and non-academic influences within the life experiences of women enrolled in online doctoral programs influenced their decision-making process regarding institutional and program choice. The study explored the academic and non-academic factors most influenced the college choice decision of women in online doctoral programs. Understanding the college choice process and how these influences impact students’ serves to inform institutions and support the enrollment of students who then persist and successfully complete their online doctoral programs.

Participants were asked a series of questions designed to reflect on the decision-making process that lead to their enrollment in the specific program of choice with focus on which factors were most influential during that process. The following research question guided the study: How do academic and non-academic factors influence the college choice decision of women who enroll in online doctoral programs?

Chapter III discusses the use of qualitative research methodology in the context of this study, research design, participants, procedures, analysis of data, ethical considerations, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, researcher role, and concludes with methodological limitations of the study.

Research Methodology: General Inductive Approach

Qualitative research can be best defined as exploration that situates the researcher as observer in a specific context where the researcher then collects data for analysis and uses the information to inform their worldview and practice. Creswell (2013) indicates that qualitative research begins with underlying assumptions which are then explored and interpreted, ascribed meanings, and then evaluated in to study a problem. In the case of this study, the problem
explored was a problem of educational practice. The process of qualitative research includes an examination of philosophical assumptions, the application of a theoretical lens for interpretation, collection of data, deduction or inductive data analysis, concluding with a final report that describes or interprets the data and makes a final call for change (Butin, 2010; Creswell, 2013).

A qualitative research design using general inductive approach or basic qualitative interpretive study (Thomas, 2006; Merriam, 2009) was selected for this study. The process itself is purposeful and direct; data was collected carefully and intentionally in a natural setting with the researcher serving as the key instrument of collection. An inductive analysis was completed in order to expose rich and thick descriptions of participants’ decision-making process and resulting thematic findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The data collected and analyzed gradually brought forth the most salient aspects of the phenomenon (college choice) to shed light on the decision-making process undertaken by prospective students as well as the factors that most influenced the process itself (Creswell, 2009). As Strauss and Corbin (1998) noted, the very nature of the research lends to a final understanding of phenomenon. By operating in an interpretivist research paradigm using inductive inquiry, the results of this inductive study emerged from the data naturally and provided the basis for the subsequent recommendations for practice (Thomas, 2006).

**Background.** The use of a general inductive approach was established to provide researches with a straightforward method of research design and strategy. Developed to facilitate an interpretivist paradigm which, the general inductive approach seeks to remove barriers that complicate analysis and provide researches with a set of nontechnical and systematic procedures (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Pope, et.al 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Thomas, 2006;). Previously this strategy was used in an unspecified capacity. However, Thomas (2006)
organized and described the approach facilitating further development of general inductive analysis as a fixed qualitative methodology.

**Interpretivism.** A general inductive approach is rooted in an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism suggests that reality is “constructed in the mind of the individual” rather than based in an understanding of an objective “truth,” (Ponerotto, 2005, p. 129). “The researcher and her or his participants jointly create (co-construct) findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation” to uncover deeper meaning (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). The perspective does not compete with other ‘truths’ or seek to determine a right answer. It is an exploration and investigation of individual and collective perspective.

**Research philosophy.** The general inductive approach serves as both the underpinning research philosophy and methodology for this study. The bottom up nature of inductive inquiry provides for the natural emergence of an interpretation of the human experience which then provides philosophical grounding (Creswell, 2013). The method provides for the development of research philosophy alongside the data analysis and summery, allowing for results that flow naturally from the inquiry itself to develop a new understanding of the phenomenon.

**Strategy Source**

The general inductive approach is rooted in qualitative research traditions (Butin, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thomas, 2006;). Designed as a simple and straightforward approach to qualitative analysis and research, the general inductive approach developed from a wide range of literature targeting research strategy and methodology (Thomas, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) described how “the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (p. 12). Merriam (2009) and Thomas (2006) both
established methodology in that flows naturally from the research design itself based on the goals of the research project.

Rationale

Utilizing an inductive methodology allowed themes to emerge from the collected data independent of restraints of a set methodology (Merriam, 2009; Thomas, 2006). In the context of this study, inductive analysis meant that themes and data emerged in a nontechnical sense with a structure that was not rigidly formatted. This straightforward method of analysis allows for a level transparency not afforded by other more complex methods of analysis. An inductive approach allows the researcher to push aside underlying assumptions and focus on detailed readings of the data to facilitate a “goal-free” evaluation process (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). While this study itself was not goal free, the removal of a goal from the analysis of findings allows for increased objectivity and clarity. In the case of this study, the goal in and of itself (development of implications for practice) became the result of the research, rather than serving as the driving force behind it.

Approach

Thomas (2006) listed three key outcomes of a general inductive analysis including: the condensing of extensive data into a brief summary format, the establishing of links between objectives and findings that are transparent, and to develop a model or theory concerning the “underlying structure” of experiences or processes “evident in the text data” (p. 238). In this study, the final goal was the development of implications for practice rather than a model rather or a theory. The process to be undertaken is illustrated below in Figure 7.
Use of an inductive approach shaped the type of questions asked, the form of data collection, and the steps of data analysis for this study. This general inductive study focused on the data itself and implications for practice, rather than a hypothesis or model for evaluation (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985.) The following sections describe in detail how this methodology shaped the participants, site, procedures, and data analysis. The last sections of this chapter then examine ethical considerations, trustworthiness, researcher positionality, and limitations of this study.

**Participants**

For the purposes of this study, participants were defined as women of variable race/ethnicity, who identify as female both in gender identity and biology, over the age of 30 years, residing in the U.S., and have been enrolled in or graduated from a regionally accredited degree program online doctoral program within the last 5 years (from 2011 to present.) Completion of some traditional campus setting classes may be/have been part of their program; however, the majority of classes must have occurred or be occurring in an online (distance and internet based) setting. Participants were derived from a group in pursuit of, or having
successfully completed, a Ph.D. or other degree program such as Ed.D., D.M.A., D.B.A., etc. For the purpose of this study the degree must require advanced work that exceeds the master’s level and includes the preparation and defense of a dissertation based on the participants own original research. Participants selected were those effectively in process or successfully having completed their program of study. Those who either opted not to enroll ultimately or failed/withdrew were not selected for participation in this study. Current Northeastern students were also excluded to prevent any potential ethical conflicts.

**Sampling.** Sampling was purposive and reflected the participant’s ability to provide an informed understanding of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the case of this study, the phenomenon is the enrollment in an online doctoral program. Sampling was used to establish a core group of participants that could describe and reflect on their decision-making process prior to enrollment in a typical manner. A typical sample was drawn to establish what is normative, or average, for the group and phenomenon of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), the breakdown of students in exclusively distance education courses, was 8.7% at Public Institutions, 13.1% at Private Non-Profit Institutions, and 51.7% at Private For-Profit Institutions. The NCES(2014) redefined distance education as “distance education or online classes and degree programs” (p.2). This study sought to drawn participants with similar alignment to establish a sample as typical and normative of the overall online population as possible.

**Participant selection process.** A google form survey was used to identify potential participants and gather precursory data. Delivered via networking and social media, the form included a series of questions and a request for a brief summary narrative in reflection on
potential participants’ three most influencing factors regarding their enrollment decision. Final participants for interview were selected for their knowledge of the phenomenon and indication of willingness to complete one structured interview session of approximately 45 minutes in length via telephone (Creswell, 2013; Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

**Number of participants and criteria.** Fifteen total participants took part in this study. Each demonstrated the criteria for participation as listed. Participants were drawn via a recruitment post issues via LinkedIn© and Facebook©. General criteria for participation in the interview phase of the study were ased according to the description listed in the preceding participants section and illustrated below in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female (gender identity and biology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (at least 30 years of age)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment status (enrolled in or graduate of a regionally-accredited online doctoral program between 2011 and present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability (able to complete at least one one-hour interview)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rationale.** The number of participants was designed to produce depth of information from and interaction with the participants (Gay et al., 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This selection process and number of participants was also designed to help the researcher fully understand the problem (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Some natural variation occurred in
the sampling and participant selection process. However, the design allowed for developing as purposive and typical of a group as possible. This was to create a consistent understanding of the decision-making process undertaken by women enrolled in online doctoral programs and the academic and non-academic factors that influenced that process.

Finally, the number of participants was important to achieving theme saturation (Bowen, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Thomas, 2006). An inductive approach seeks to reach saturation point in the data collections process (Bowen, 2008; Gay et al., 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the case of this study saturation was defined as the point where no new data needs to be added due to adequate explanation in the particular category of inquiry (Bowen, 2008). This is reached when no new information is forthcoming from interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was achieved at 15 participants.

**Site and Data**

As noted by Creswell (2013), most qualitative research focuses on natural setting for optimal data collection and observation. As using a single source or data based to draw participants from potentially could limit the study or risk internal validity due to over generalization (Gay et al., 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, participants were drawn via social media using both Linkedin© and Facebook© to drawn from a wider pool of potential candidates than would be achieved using only one source or techniques such as snowballing. Surveys and interviews were then conducted in a natural setting via online modalities including google forms and via remote interviews completed via telephone.

**Procedures**

This section on procedures, based directly on the central research question, describes how the data was collected based on the questions of interest. This section serves as a step-by-step
guide of how the study was completed, beginning with IRB approval and concluding with the transition to data analysis.

Prior to the start of the study, approval was obtained from Northeastern Thesis advisors and the Institutional Review Board (IRB). (See Appendix E.) Northeastern’s IRB approval ensured the protection of human subjects involved in the subsequent interviews (Lincoln, 2009). IRB approval also helped verify accuracy of the interview protocols, and materials for use in the interviews. Copies of these materials are located within the appendixes section of this study.

The core participants, women over 30 enrolled in or graduated from online doctoral programs, were derived from a recruitment survey. This document is contained in within the appendixes and is labeled Appendix A. The survey was designed to draw as typical a sample as possible. Once the survey responses were organized and potential participants were identified, emails were issued according to IRB procedure via the researcher’s Northeastern account. The email template is also located within the appendixes for this study and is labeled as Appendix C.

Once potential participants confirmed desire to participate, the interview day and time were established. Each participant was provided an informed consent before the interview began via email. (See Appendix D.) Participants provided a number they could best be reached at via telephone. The researcher responded in kind so that participants would recognize the caller. The researcher contacted participants at the predetermined time via the provided number and followed interview protocols as outlined in Appendix E. A secondary reading of the informed consent document was included prior to the interview recording. Interviews began recording after the reading of informed consent and the participant’s acknowledgement of the call being recorded.
Once interviews were concluded, each participant was sent a personal thank you email by the research reminding them that the transcript would be ready for their review within 24 hours. Recordings and Transcripts were labeled only with a pseudonym to protect confidentiality, and all transcripts were completed within 24 hours of the interview. Each participant checked over their transcripts and returned them with changes or approved them accordingly. The researcher then issued a secondary personal email of thanks.

**Data Collection**

Data collection reflects purposive sampling, occurred in a natural setting (online), and listed specific criteria for trustworthiness (Bowmen, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thomas, 2006). Data collection occurred via telephone to allow for participants to be comfortable and provide for deeper reflection (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A survey recruited potential participants, and interviews were then scheduled and completed. The interviews served as the main source of data collection for this study. The interview process was designed to uncover which factors most influenced the college choice decision of women in online doctoral programs and provide a participant accounting of their decision-making steps that occurred with the process.

**Instruments.** In qualitative research, typically the researcher acts as the instrument (Creswell, 2013.) In the case of this study, the role of the research is that of the primary instrument. This study did not rely on questionaries’ or instruments developed by outside researchers (Creswell, 2013), but does use additional supporting technologies in the process. Google Forms and Rev© voice recording and transcribing services both assisted with data collection. The Google Form was developed using only the approved Northeastern email account and results were stored in a locked file separate from other vital participant information. Only the
researcher’s Northeastern email account was utilized to communicate with participants. All recordings were transcribed and stored via a third-party transcription service that utilizes privacy protocols appropriate to the study. Recordings were saved using the participants pseudonym only to insure that recordings were completely disconnected from any potentially identifying information (Creswell, 2013; Thomas, 2006).

**Recruitment survey.** Designed to both recruit participants, the researcher developed an online survey using Google Forms. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), one of the advantages of online data collection is that many of the communication tools available create ready-made transcripts and allow for straightforward documentation of initial data. Part I of the survey asked students for basic identifying information such as name, gender, institution, and program of record. Part II of the survey asked students if they were willing to participate in the interview process, and then ask for a short narrative concerning their knowledge of the college choice process. Appendix A contains a copy of the recruiting survey.

Survey Respondents answered a series of questions designed to establish basic background information and identify potential interview participants. A total of 43 responses were recorded. Of the completed responses, all of the respondents indicated that they had read informed consent. All but one participant self-identified as being over the age of 30. All but one respondent self-identified as either currently enrolled in or graduated from an accredited online doctoral program within the last five years. Forty two respondents reported required dissertation work within their program. All 43 respondents had 1-3 years full-time employment and/or career experience. Thirty two respondents indicated they were willing to participate in the interview process. Participants who did not meet these specific criteria could not be included for interview selection.
Respondent demographics. To assure consistency within the sample population and to derive as typical a sample as possible, the survey gathered information on several specific areas including: type of institution selected, academic discipline/field of study, degree sought, information on self-identified characteristics associated with nontraditional doctoral learners, and self-identification of respondents three most influential factors in their college choice decision. Each category demonstrates alignment with research already established concerning this particular population.

The recruitment survey data aligned with national averages and trends in regards to breakdown of online student population as identified in chapter 2 of this study. The majority of respondents self-identified key characteristics associated with non-traditional leaners, the majority attended Private-for-Profit institutions, and most sought degrees within the fields of education. Respondents self-reported information, therefore it is important to note that one participant incorrectly identified the type of institution attended, assuming their for-profit institution was a non-profit. The reporting error was discovered during the analysis phase of data collection. However, it does not impact the results of the study as this portion of the survey data was used for the purpose of participant screening to establish a typical sample.

Selection of participants. The principal role of the survey was to screen individuals for interview participation. Information collected included whether the respondent had read the informed consent document and whether they met inclusion criteria, including age and gender. The survey asked about enrollment in or recent graduation (5 years) from an online doctoral program (excluding current Northeastern students), the type of institution, their academic discipline/field of study, the degree sought, and dissertation requirements. Respondents also addressed nontraditional doctoral learner factors, employment and career experiences, and self-
identified factors considered in doctoral program enrollment. The final questions involved willingness to participate in the interview process.

Twenty-three possible participants were identified. The selection of participants was purposeful and specific, designed to draw as typical a sample as possible. The goal was to establish as typical of a sample as possible to ensure data saturation during the interview process (Bowen, 2008; Gay et al., 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Respondents identified as potential interview participants met standards as established in the criteria for participation, filled out the survey fully, indicated a willingness to be interviewed, and supplied a valid email address. Once potential participants were identified, emails were sent to each potential candidate to establish interest and begin interview scheduling process (see Appendix E). Interviews were then scheduled based on availability of participants who responded to the recruitment email.

A total of 15 candidates were selected for interviews. The final participant selection included participants consisted of as typical of a group as possible. Participants selected for interview self-reported a strong career orientation as a central focus and had similar academic backgrounds. Participants had diverse backgrounds in regards to career path including: higher education, K-12 education, public policy and administration, law enforcement, psychology practice. While all participants had very similar demographics, the small variations in career experiences allowed for the potential to gain new information during the data collection process.

**Interviews.** Following the initial survey and subsequent selection of the desired sample, synchronous interviews were conducted via telephone and recorded using the Rev© voice recording application. This study utilized a recruiting survey and semi-structured, in-depth, laddered interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Veludo-de-Oliveira, et.al, 2006). Appendix E contains the interview procedures email. Appendix C contains the interview protocol form. As
observed by Creswell (2013), technologies such as utilized for these interviews helps overcome significant geographical distances. The survey was conducted via Google Forms, and all interview were completed and recorded via telephone using the Rev© voice recording application.

As part of the interview process a ‘laddering’ technique was applied to help develop an understanding of how participants integrate both their academic and non-academic experiences into their decision-making process (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Essentially, laddering provided a means of modeling personal constructs that impact consumer decisions (Veludo-de-Oliveira, et.al, 2006). There are three basic components that connected this laddering technique to a soft (or flexible) application of the EMEVF theory used to help frame and contextualize this study: exploration of product/service (institutional) attributes, consequences/benefits as perceived by the individual, and core values/goals of the individual (Iyanna, 2015). The laddering technique applied in the interviews takes these three concepts and builds on them, using the questions to link participant’s goals and values to their decision-making behaviors (Veludo-de-Oliveira, et.al, 2006).

During the interview process the researcher guided participants to define underlying abstract ideas by laddering interview questions (Veludo-de-Oliveira, et.al, 2006). The interviewer/researcher led participants to evaluate underlying meanings, associations, attributes, and perceived consequences/benefits by using targeted prompts. Question prompts contained phrasing such as: “why is this important to you,” “what does it mean to you,” “what is the meaning of this product having (or not) this attribute” (Veludo-de-Oliveira, et.al, 2006, p. 631). This design helped participants express how they interpreted the relationship between attributes, consequences, and value constructs/compositions during the decision-making process. The
resulting interview data provided rich, thick, detailed participant narratives that were built around these principles.

**Confidentiality**

Data and all recordings were set with a passcode and labeled using pseudonyms. A unique and coded study key was kept in a separate file and stored in an account that is password protected. The file itself was also password protected. Only the researcher had direct access to identifying information, which remained confidential, and will be destroyed following the completion of the doctoral defense.

**Data Storage and Management**

For the purpose of data storage and management, both hard copies and digital files were kept. Hard copies of the data and all recordings were downloaded to a secure password protected storage device. Digital storage took place on the password protected Northeastern Google system. Corresponding passcodes for accounts and interviews were recorded in a separate notebook to be stored in a locked safe within the researcher’s home office. Only the researcher had access to the materials in accordance with IRB procedures. Survey data, emails, recordings, all hard copies of data, and both accounts will be deleted one year following the successful completion of the study and defense of doctoral thesis.

**Data verification.** All interviews were recorded then transcribed via Rev© and final transcripts were then sent to participants for member checking (Creswell, 2013). Following all interviews and subsequent transcriptions, all transcripts were stored in a secure and separate file for use in data analysis process. All transcripts were subject to final participant approval. Areas where participants made clarifications or deletion were integrated into each transcript file and taken into consideration by the researcher prior to coding. Transcripts were checked by the
researcher to insure they were free of obvious errors and reflective of participants overall sentiments. Some areas where recordings were considered [inaudible] that neither participants nor researcher could define were left as such to ensure authenticity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis relied on a variety of analytic principles and strategies as appropriate to a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). In the case of this study, the inductive analysis developed from a bottom up process designed to uncover and interpret meaning (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Thomas, 2006). Initial observations from participant recruitment survey data and basic premise of the study were taken into consideration accordingly. Initial coding and preliminary phases of data analysis were completed in conjunction with the interview process to assess data saturation. As more participants were integrated into the interview process, and no additional information presented, it became clear data saturation was achieved and data analysis could begin as outlined in the steps below.

The data analysis was guided by evaluation objectives (Thomas, 2006), which included the development of an understanding of how academic and non-academic experiences in the lives of the participants influenced their decision-making process regarding doctoral college choice. Coding of the data and subsequent analysis followed the process as outlined by Thomas (2006) and supported by Saldana (2013). In a general inductive approach, coding and subsequent data analysis remains simple and direct to create a clear understanding of the phenomenon being examined (Thomas, 2006). The steps as outlined by Thomas (2006) and Saldana (2013) are designed to create consistency and allow for reproduction of the study. As outlined below, there are five basic steps put forth by Thomas (2006, p. 240) necessary for coding and analysis. These steps were followed during the data analysis process of this study. It is important to note these
steps did not occur in a straight sequential process, but rather in a fluid series of cycles designed to produce rich descriptions for analysis and discussion.

1) Category labels created using key words or short phrases. As recommended by Saldana (2013), data coding took place via iterative, labeled methods. The survey data and interview data was examined to seek out key attributes, consequences, and values as described by participants. Key words and phrases were then color coded and entered into tables for organization.

2) Category descriptions were developed around meaning, associations, attributes, consequences, and values then placed alongside category themes and definitions.

3) Text and data associations developed. Raw data was condensed into “key themes and processes identified and constructed by the evaluator during the coding process” (Thomas, 2006, p. 240). The findings were crossed referenced for additional potential interpretations and development of additional propositions by using patterned and focused coding (Saldana, 2013).

4) Links developed. Then data and resulting themes were organized into a matrix that reflected a simplified mapping of connections between attributes (of the institution), consequences, and values.

5) Finally, a ‘map’ of the decision-making chains (process) were developed for each participant (Creswell, 2013; Iyanna, 2015; Veludo-de-Oliveira et al., 2006).

The first wave of data analysis began in concert with the interviews. Following the data verification process (member checking), the first cycle of coding and analysis of the interviews was conducted within 24 hours of each session. Participant responses were simplified and grouped into three categories based on the central research question. These categories were
institutional characteristics, perceived benefits (or consequences), and personal values.

Responses were organized into a table (Table 2) to begin developing key words/phrases for preliminary data analysis. The purpose of this was to identify emerging themes and categories for further evaluation during data analysis process with interview participants as part of the inductive analysis process (as an observation.)

Table 2

Key Words and Phrases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Points</th>
<th>Institutional Characteristics/Attributes</th>
<th>Perceived Benefits (or Consequences)</th>
<th>Individual Factors/Personal Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Participants identified a wide variety of both institutional and individual factors that influenced their decision-making process. These words and phrases were used to organize data into meaningful segments (Hatch, 2002). To adequately capture associations concerning
meanings, attributes, and values, each recording was listened to while coding was occurring. This allowed for consideration of tone and voice inflection to capture personal emphasis. At times participants said very similar phrases, but framed them in a different context or had different vocal intonations that elicited different meaning. Though were coded and labeled accordingly using different colors of highlighting to indicate the differences in tone associated with values or meaning. Key words and phrases were labeled and categorized, organized into themes and categorized on a master table. All themes related back to the central research question and conceptual framework (Merriam, 2013; Thomas, 2006; Saldaña, 2012).

As the process moved forward, the data was condensed and organized into a matrix demonstrating the links developed between overarching themes (included with the findings in Chapter IV). Each time a new data presented itself within the interview process previous transcripts were checked for similar results. Initially there were over 100 associative codes broken down into 12 categories. Each time another rereading/listening of the transcripts was completed; the codes were refined and reduced for clarity and consistency. Steps one through three were completed in cycles until data saturation was reached. Around participant number 10, there were consistent and clearly emerging themes regarding influencing factors that were critical to the college choice decision-making process. By participant number 13, it became clear that the interviews were not producing additional new themes or different influencing factors. Two more interviews were completed to verify data saturation.

Following completion of the interview process, organized categories were utilized to continue reducing and condensing data into associative themes until underlying substantive categories could be developed using open coding (Maxwell, 2005; Saldaña, 2012; Thomas, 2006). Three primary types of coding were utilized during this phase of coding – descriptive, in
vivo, and patterned (Saldaña, 2012). The descriptive coding was designed to summarize the topic. Each area of a transcript that identified a point of summary for an emerging theme was highlighted yellow. Then transcripts were highlighted in blue in areas that gave direct associations, meanings, values, etc. Unique or diverging ideas were coded with green highlighter. A third reading then established direct participant quotes which were marked with purple comments. Finally, emerging patterns were marked accordingly in all transcripts using comments and key words such as flexibility, cost, value, time, investment, decision-making behavior, goal setting behavior, networking, etc.

Each time a transcript was reviewed and listened to more associative links were noted and rewritten. This was done to examine repetitive patterns. Some of this was done in a notebook kept by the researcher. Descriptions with cause and effect associations such as “cost is to affordability is to time is to flexibility” were developed to organize the interconnected nature of emerging themes and associations. Key patterns ultimately resulted in the development of the six influencing factors that emerged as distinctive themes within participant narratives. They were selected based on similarity, frequency, sequencing, and causation (Hatch, 2002; Saldaña, 2012). Constant data comparisons were made in order to make sure that each narrative contained key information from substantive categories, reduce redundancies, and verify the data derived from analysis (Merriam, 2009).

As more links were developed between influencing factors and values/associations, transcripts had to be recoded and relabeled to accommodate the associations and reductions. Then the data and resulting themes were organized into a matrix that reflected a simplified mapping of connections between attributes (of the institution), consequences, and values (this table is included with the findings in Chapter IV). This allowed for the development of six
categories which emerged as influencing factors that underpinned each participant narrative and captured significant evidence that addressed the research question. Multiple additional in vivo quotes were subsequently identified within each transcript that supported each influencing factor and produced the rich, thick descriptions needed to provide context to the findings (Creswell, 2007). Influencing factors that emerged coding process are the result of multiple close readings and careful listening of the data and are the product of many cycles of interconnected coding as described.

The final step, included constructing a ‘map’ of the decision-making chains to demonstrate the decision-making process as completed by participants. An individual decision chain developed for each participant capped off the process (Creswell, 2013; Iyanna, 2015; Veludo-de-Oliveira et al., 2006). This step did occur as a final step, and was completed after primary cycles of data analysis to see how those major influencing factors impacted each participant’s decision-making process. This last phase of the data analysis stemmed directly from a specific interview question designed to produce a rough approximation of the decision-making process as it occurred during the interview participants search process. Question 1, under the first listed subset question (See Appendix E), asked: “what steps did you take during the decision-making process?” The information reported by participants was then condensed into themes associated with the decision-making process as described by Iyanna (2015) with the addition of the theme of networking and then illustrated in a simplified format in Chapter IV along with all other findings and results.

**Ethical Considerations**

Primary ethical considerations for this study were the preservation of participant anonymity and overall document security. To maintain personal privacy regarding internet based
data collection and storage to prevent misconduct or potential improprieties (Creswell, 2013), a system of passcodes and individual folders via the Northeastern Google drive were be established. Only the primary researcher has access to email and Google survey results stored within the Northeastern system. Documents will be destroyed following successful completion of doctoral defense.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

This study was conducted with the utmost consideration for all participants. The initial survey contained a statement on confidentiality and no identifying data beyond email address was collected from participants. All information remained confidential and will be destroyed with all other data one year following upon study completion and degree conferral. Each participant was reminded that participation was voluntary and could be ceased at any time. Informed consent forms were issued via email as part of the interview scheduling process, and then read again to participants prior to each interview (Appendix D). Following each interview and subsequent transcription, a copy of the interview transcript was sent to the participant for the purpose of member checking and final approval.

**Trustworthiness**

As noted by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and supported by Thomas (2006) there are four general types of trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These four aspects can be used to assess overall trustworthiness of a general inductive study (Thomas, 2006). The application in the context of this study is detailed below.

In the context of this study, credibility and dependability are closely tied. A clear adoption of research methods as outlined by Thomas (2006) were developed to facilitate credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004; Thomas, 2006; Yin, 1994). The adoption of
the standard and straightforward methodology provided in a general inductive study also facilitates dependability. The information provided here allows other researchers follow the steps outline in this study and potentially produce similar results with account for context (Creswell, 2013).

Transferability refers to the degree in which the research creates a platform for findings to be applied in the wider context (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015 Shenton, 2004). In the case of this study, the sampling process was designed to create a degree of transferability in the sense that the sampling was typical, and indicative of normative or average experiences of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study provides an account that demonstrates common themes and experiences indicative of the typical to the phenomenon of enrollment in an online doctoral program for women. To facilitate transferability, context is detailed and emphasized.

Confirmability refers to the degree in which the results of this study can be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers. In the context of this study, confirmability is demonstrated by the established premises and an examination of the researcher’s role and positionality. Two premises were identified: that the factors and characteristics found in present literature concerning graduate student college choice are relevant, and that some of these factors will have varied importance or significance based on participants’ individual experiences and by nature of environment (physical/ geographical vs virtual/ online.) These premises were not assumptions either. As this study utilized an inductive approach, these premises served as the first steps in observations (made from existing literature) during the analysis process (Goddard and Melville, 2004; Patton, 2015; Thomas, 2006).

Positionality
Researchers in qualitative research have traditionally positioned themselves inside or outside the social group being studied. In this study, a blending of the two positions naturally occurs. It is important to recognize this double hermeneutic (Giddens, 2013) as I am a woman enrolled in an online doctoral program as well as an administrator and professor working in online education. The exploration of my own positionality helped determine how the dynamics of my own experiences potentially informed and impacted the research process (England, 1994; Rose, 1997; Merriam et al., 2001). My experiences have shaped my general interest in this topic as my own college choice process was inherently informed by my own lived experiences. My experiences and other lifestyle factors ultimately led me to seek a program that was online after choosing not to continue in a traditional campus-based doctoral program. This integration of my own experiences does lend to an ‘insider’ status, imparting a complexity of entanglements including multiple roles and the creation of a unique positionality (Chavez, 2008). It both complicates and facilitates the research in many ways.

**Potential for Research Bias**

It was important to recognize the potential for bias and to work to reduce biases. This was done to maintain awareness of how my perspective influences my understanding of participant contributions. My goal was to understand how and why women enroll in online doctoral programs to help institutions better manage enrollment by assessing ‘right fit’ and develop systems for improvement that may lower non-completion in this student population. Chavez (2008) noted one of the most challenging aspects of this study was discerning what I know from what I actually see emerge from the study (p. 490.) It will be critical for me to consciously set boundaries within my interviews, recognize my own role in this study as researcher rather than
participant, and engage in critical reflection concerning my own “closeness” to the research (Chavez, 2008, p. 491.)

**Limitations**

As with any study, there are inherent strengths and limitations (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The scope of this study was specifically limited to women in online doctoral programs. The focus in on women was not designed to produce limiting data, but rather to explore a population still under-represented across the whole of academia (Dua, 2007). Another potential limitation is the scope of the sample size and homogeneity. It was critical to develop a sample that is purposive and well aligned to achieve normative and typical results, however, this potentially limited additional outlying voices. Although the findings and results of this study subtly addressed some possible outliers, such population subsets require further study and exploration of uniqueness. The main focus on the typical or normative experiences and influencing factors for women in online doctoral programs was assessed in a wider context to facilitate focus on a typical experience.
Chapter IV: Presentation of the Findings

The findings presented in this chapter address the central research question for this study: How do academic and non-academic factors influence the college choice decision of women who enroll in online doctoral programs? The results of this inductive research analysis are divided here into two primary sections: participant biographical overviews with decision-making chains and the major influencing factors as revealed by participants. Participant biographical overviews and decision-making chains lay the foundation for the six major influencing factors revealed in this study: flexibility, access, cost, value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations. Biographical overviews, decision-making chains, and influencing factors were derived from analysis of the data collected during participant interviews.

Study Participants

Participants were drawn specifically from different institutions to reflect alignment with national trends in enrollment in online doctoral programs as established by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2014). Each of the 15 participants included in this study provided in-depth data in response to a set of semi-structured interview questions. These questions were developed to procure data on college choice decision-making process among women enrolled/recently graduated from online doctoral programs. Participants were given the opportunity at the outset of each interview to add additional relevant background information not contained in the survey. However, the majority of participant demographic information collected during the interview process flowed naturally via participants’ own narration. Each individual participant overview begins with a brief biographical sketch of the participant, then provides 3 most influencing factors to their college choice decision, and concludes with the participant’s individual decision-making chain.
In alignment with the theoretical framework, participants’ biographical overviews include the key steps in their individual decision-making chain to make sense of both the influencing factors and the process undertaken by this student population. Decision-making chains are a reflection of information gathered during the interview. This data was collected under question 1 within the first listed subset question (Appendix E). Participants were asked: “what steps did you take during the decision-making process?” The information reported by participants was organized into steps associated with the decision-making process as described by Iyanna (2015), and then illustrated in a simplified format. This information was included within participant overviews to provide context.

Decision-making steps identified from within the participant narratives included: goal setting, personal resource assessment, research/information (info) gathering, institutional assessment, networking, and college choice decision. Networking was not something discussed by Iyanna’s (2015) model, but was a necessary inclusion in the decision-making chains as described by participants. It emerged as a distinct action that participants discussed as separate from the rest of their research/informational gathering process. Individual decision-making chains were included in data reporting because they provide insight into participants’ decision-making process and serve to situate the research in its proper context.

Each biographical overview provides a sense of the individual participant’s background, goals, decision-making steps, and factors that most influenced their college choice decision. The college choice decision was characterized for each participant with a set of the three most influential factors as self-identified. Participants expressed in rich detail during interviews the particulars of their search process and college choice decision with regard to a myriad of influencing factors. Participants were specifically asked in question 2 “Why did you select this
program/institution specifically?” (see Appendix E) in regards to their final college choice decision. This was designed to evaluate which factors then were most influential to enrollment decision specifically to explain how certain influences affected the overall college choice process. Data collected was then used to make sense of the different influencing factors that contributed to their college choice decision and to map their decision-making process. The participant overviews are arranged in chronological order of their interviews.

**Participant Biographical Overviews and Decision Chains**

**Iris.** Iris described herself as a divorced mother of two living near a rural military installation. She discussed her affiliations with the military and noted she was a GI Bill recipient. Her background was in early childhood education with a focus on special education. Iris expressed a desire to transition into instructional design to expand her potential. This desire to transition careers and expand her opportunities influenced her goal formation process in the sense that she sought a very specific program. Iris noted that she had already graduated from her program and that she was actively transitioning to her new career. The factors that most influenced Iris’ college choice decision included: access (single parent, rural, military), cost (military discount, GI Bill), and reputation (“brick & mortar” associations.)

Decision Chain: Goal formation → networking → personal resource assessment → institutional assessment → college choice decision

**Penelope.** Penelope described herself as a woman in her late 30s/early 40s, a mother, and military spouse. She also indicated she was working full-time in higher education in a “pseudo-demanding” position. At the time she chose to enroll in a doctoral program, her husband was deployed overseas, leaving her as the sole, primary caregiver. Penelope described her background in educational psychology and discussed how she pursued her PhD in that specific
area. She noted that she had already graduated from her program and was engaged in her career actively. The factors that most influenced Penelope’s college choice decision included: flexibility (convenience of online, fit into her existing life framework – flexible with terms, hours, courses), reputation (“brick & mortar” associations, accreditation, credibility), and access (military, primary caregiver, unable to leave full-time employment).

Decision Chain: Goal formation → research/ info gathering → personal resource assessment → institutional assessment → additional research/ info gathering → college choice decision

Anthea. Anthea described how following her 21 years in military service she began the search for a new career path. Her goal was “to teach at the university level.” This desire to transition into a career in higher education resulted in her decision to pursue a doctorate. As a single mother, Anthea described how she searched specifically for a flexible online doctoral program with few/no residency requirements. She had already earned a master’s degree but felt that earning her doctorate would open more teaching opportunities. Her background in military leadership influenced her college choice process in several ways and contributed heavily to her college choice decision. The other significant influencing background factor in Anthea’s case was a strong spiritual component. This was something unique to her narrative. Anthea noted that she was still enrolled and working on her dissertation. Her final decision included the influencing factors of: flexibility (convenience, single parent, program flexibility/options that are military oriented), personal considerations (military experience, spiritual aspects – specifically selected a Christian University, interactions with military enrollment advisor), and cost (tuition and GI Bill coverage.)
Decision Chain: Goal formation ➔ research/ info gathering ➔ networking ➔ institutional assessment ➔ additional research/ info gathering ➔ college choice decision

**Kassandra.** Kassandra described herself as a working mother, over 35, and in full-time practice as well as part-time collegiate level teaching. Her decision to transition solely from practice (psychology, practice owner) to higher education was to gain flexibility and expand her career options. She wanted to develop expertise in higher education administration to expand her practice in career counseling. Kassandra noted she had already graduated from her program and was in process publishing a book in her new field. The factors that most influenced Kassandra’s college choice decision included: flexibility (convenience of online, self-paced factor, coursework options), reputation (alumni of her chosen institution with strong brand loyalty), and cost (affordability, timeframe).

Decision Chain: Goal formation ➔ institutional assessment ➔ research/ info gathering ➔ personal resource assessment ➔ college choice decision

**Calliope.** Calliope described her experience as a working parent living in a rural location. She noted that her rural location and work schedule did not leave her many options concerning doctoral programs. Calliope’s background in higher education served as a strong influencing factor in her decision to enroll. She talked about her love of curriculum development and mentioned that she would eventually like to be able to transition from being a faculty member to a member of administration. She cited one of her career goals as potentially being a “Dean of Curriculum” or similar administrative role. Calliope noted that she thought her enrollment in her program would help support that goal initially, only to discover she really should have followed her stronger desire to seek a PhD rather than an EdD. She also noted having been enrolled in a PhD program previously but that she had not completed that course of study. It is important to
note that Calliope was the only participant who discussed the possibility of choosing not to complete her doctoral process. She noted that she was still enrolled, but presently on a leave of absence. The factors that most influenced Calliope’s college choice decision included: cost (ended up free due to TA work), reputation (“brick & mortar” associations, well know large public institution), and access (rural, job considerations.)

Decision Chain: Initial goal formation → research/ info gathering → secondary reformation of goal → additonal research/ info gathering → institutional assessment → personal resource assessment → secondary institutional assessment → college choice decision

Rhea. Rhea described herself as “living in rural America” without options for doctoral study locally. She noted having no dependents as her children already have left home. Her background in mathematics provided a foundation for her faculty position at the community college. However, she went on to explain that it was necessary for her to purse her doctorate degree to expand her career potential. She discussed extensively being at the forefront of online education in the field of math. She discussed her own expertise in coding and programming, as well as online course development in her discipline. She also discussed her career goals as the effective internet delivery of math curriculum and writing a math textbook. Rhea talked openly and candidly about planning for retirement, stating that she focused on her potential return on investment (ROI) with regard to her enrollment decision. Rhea self-identified as being at risk for timing out of her program. She was working on her dissertation, but had experienced several setbacks in her process (both program related and personal factors) which put her at risk of timing out. She was actively enrolled in a program designed to help students in this risk category complete their dissertation process. She referred to it as an “ombudsman’s program.” The factors that most influenced Rhea’s college choice decision included: access (rural), cost (ROI, salary
increase, cost per credit hour), and reputation (accreditation, perception of degree quality by academic community.)

Decision Chain: Goal formation → research/ info gathering → institutional assessment → personal resource assessment → additional research/ info gathering → college choice decision

**Ione.** A single woman living in a large metropolitan area, Ione talked about her career and self-motivating factors extensively. She openly spoke about how she never wanted to be married or have children. She described herself as highly independent and driven, but still able to work as a team player. The majority of her career experience took place in the legal field. She decided to pursue her doctorate to switch career fields after a recommendation from a trusted mentor. She noted that while her background in legal studies was highly developed, she lacked what she described as “transferable skills” and wanted to have more career options. She started with a master’s and then decided subsequently to seek a doctorate to afford her the opportunity to teach at the university level. At the time she decided to begin her program search, she was working a very demanding job with a long commute. She noted her employer was not flexible, so she needed to find a program that could work within the parameters of her job. Ione noted that she had already graduated from her program and was enjoying her new field (including adjunct teaching). The factors that most influenced Ione’s college choice decision included: access (job related, commute bound her to a certain radius, was not accepted to traditional program in her accessible range), flexibility (could work at her own pace on her own time frame), and personal considerations (she likes being independent, does not like being bound by time/place constraints.)

Decision Chain: Networking/ recommendation → goal formation → institutional assessment → personal resource assessment → college choice decision
Athena. Athena indicated that she wanted to earn her doctorate before getting married or having children. She discussed being single with no children and noted she recently transitioned to a new job in a new state. Her background was in higher education administration. Athena indicated that, originally, she had not intended to seek out an online doctoral program. She discussed in depth how she came to realize that in higher education administration it seemed imperative to have a doctorate degree. According to Athena, having a doctorate was especially important because she felt that “sexist discrimination” still occurs within higher education. She stated that her primary objective was to select an institution with “good fit and a program that I liked.” Athena discussed her process excitedly noting that she was presently enrolled and near the beginning of her coursework. The factors that most influenced Athena’s college choice decision included: reputation (explicitly sought “top 20” institutions only), personal considerations (institutional fit and culture, program offered), and flexibility (able to maintain full-time work, independent, can work at her own pace.)

Decision Chain: Goal formation → research/ info gathering → insituational assessment → additional research/ info gathering → personal resource assessment → secondary institutional assessment → college choice decision

Nike. Nike was married at the time she selected her program but has subsequently divorced. She mentioned having at least one child with special needs, indicating that at the time of her search the evaluation process for her child was still underway. She has worked in higher education and she indicated at the time she began her search process she was employed by a “small privately held for-profit institution.” Nike noted that she first sought a traditional program but was logistically unable to find a traditional program compatible with her life. Nike discussed how her doctoral work was a change in academic discipline and indicated that this decision was
in part to increase career opportunities. Nike noted that she was graduated from her program and had successfully transitioned to her desired new position at a non-profit institution. The factors that most influenced Nike’s college choice decision included: access (location of program/residencies), cost (affordability), and reputation (“brick & mortar” associations, program recognition.)

Decision Chain: Goal formation → research/info gathering → personal resource assessment → networking → additional research/info gathering → institutional assessment → college choice decision

**Helen.** Helen talked about being a full-time law enforcement officer and described family life with her husband in the Army. They have no children, and often find that they have conflicting schedules. Helen also described a large network of family support and included the information that she was not born in the United States. Helen’s job required intensive 12 hour shifts, so she was not able to consider “brick and mortar” institutions. Having earned her master’s degree online, she immediately began researching similar programs at the doctoral level. In her search process, she did consider her Alma Mater, but ultimately selected another program that she felt was more compatible with her desired career goals. The program she selected is an FBI-recognized program for psychology. Helen noted that she was still enrolled and presently working on her dissertation. She self-identified as being at risk to time out of her program due to factors she considered administrative (Institutional Review Board hold-ups, advisor delays.) The factors that most influenced Helen’s college choice decision included: access (due to job constraints), flexibility (can work at her own pace, convenience, scheduling), and reputation (FBI recognized program.)
Decision Chain: Goal formation → research/ info gathering → institutional assessment → personal resource assessment → additional research/ info gathering → college choice decision

**Electra.** Electra described herself as single with one child residing in a relatively rural location. She noted military affiliations. Her background was in higher education, and at the time of her program search she worked primarily as an adjunct faculty member. Part of her rationale for pursuing a doctorate was to open additional career opportuneness that would better support her and her child. Electra began her search process looking at traditional programs. However, due to her rural location and constraints as a single parent, she was unable to find a program that fit with her needs. Electra noted that she was presently enrolled and in her dissertation phase. She seemed confident of her future graduation. The factors that most influenced Electra’s college choice decision included: access (rural location, family considerations), cost (competitive tuition, time to completion), and flexibility (convenience, ability to work within her schedule).

Decision Chain: Goal formation → research/ info gathering → institutional assessment → personal resource assessment → additional research/ info gathering → secondary institutional assessment → college choice decision

**Larissa.** Larissa discussed her background as a consulting firm member and noted she began her search process to become a “principal” in her firm. Larissa lived in a highly metropolitan area, and she began her search with traditional programs nearby. As a member of Society for Industrial Organizational Psychologists (SIOP), she utilized their database to assist in her informational gathering phase. She selected the program that best aligned with her career goals. Larissa successfully completed her program and graduated. She noted it had expanded her career opportunities and allowed for a job transition. The factors that most influenced Larissa’s
college choice decision included: access (job constraints, commute related), reputation (program was recognized by SIOP), and cost (tuition was competitive.)

Decision Chain: Goal formation \(\rightarrow\) research/ info gathering \(\rightarrow\) institutional assessment \(\rightarrow\) personal resource assessment \(\rightarrow\) additional research/ info gathering \(\rightarrow\) secondary institutional assessment \(\rightarrow\) college choice decision

**Fortuna.** Fortuna opened by talking about how being married with children and working full-time ultimately led her to seek an online program. She also noted that during her search process she transitioned from working at home to working in an office location. Her background in instructional design centered on work in higher education. She indicated several times that she wanted a “discipline specific” program with a certain curriculum and structure. This was in part due to advice from a colleague on future career opportunities. Fortuna discussed several times that she had multiple layers of responsibility that weighed into consideration during her decision-making process. She looked at several hybrid programs before settling on an online program as a result of family considerations. Fortuna noted that she had already graduated from her program and was enjoying career advancements. The factors that most influenced Fortuna’s college choice decision included: access (location, family and work constraints), reputation (public institution with strong research orientation, program that was discipline specific), and cost (inexpensive tuition at in state level).

Decision Chain: Goal formation \(\rightarrow\) research/ info gathering \(\rightarrow\) networking \(\rightarrow\) institutional assessment \(\rightarrow\) personal resource assessment \(\rightarrow\) additional research/ info gathering \(\rightarrow\) secondary institutional assessment \(\rightarrow\) college choice decision

**Hestia.** Hestia worked as a school administrator in a K-12 setting. Hestia described how living in a rural area and having children resulted in her search for an online doctoral program.
Despite her influencing factors being consistent with other participants, Hestia’s search process was uniquely pattered. She conducted her search in conjunction with a colleague/friend who was also seeking an online doctoral program. The final decision to enroll was based on her colleague/friend’s program and institutional selection. A key consideration Hestia noted in reflection was her desire to have conducted her own research and investigated other programs before enrolling. Hestia noted she was currently enrolled in her program. The factors that most influenced Hestia’s college choice decision included: access (rural), cost (both women could afford the program), and personal considerations (purposive selection based on colleague/friend’s enrollment decision.)

Decision Chain: Goal formation → networking → personal resource assessment → additional networking → college choice decision

Phaedra. Phaedra described herself as a single woman living in a semi-rural area. Her background is in a client-therapist setting in private practice. She knew “ground classes weren’t easily accessible” due to her location and full-time employment. She searched only programs that were completely online and used the SIOP database in her search to look for programs approved for the client-therapy setting. Phaedra wanted a specific type of program and looked more at the programs than the institutions overall. She noted that she had already graduated from her program. The factors that most influenced Phaedra’s college choice decision included: access (rural, job considerations), cost (competitive tuition, time to completion), personal considerations (very specific degree/program for client-therapist setting.)

Decision Chain: Goal formation → research/info gathering → personal resource assessment → program assessment → college choice decision
Table 3 provides a condensed visual summary of the findings specific to the college choice decision-making process. Participants are arranged in chronological order of interview.

Table 3

**Participant-specific Findings Related to the College Choice Decision-Making Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Degree Sought/ Discipline</th>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>Three Factors Most Important to the College Choice Decision</th>
<th>Participant Decision Chain Summary (Top 3 Actions as Discussed by Participant)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Iris         | EdD/ Instructional Technology | Public             | 1) Access  
2) Cost  
3) Reputation | 1) Networking  
2) Personal Resource Assessment  
3) Institutional Assessment |
| Penelope     | PhD/ Educational Psychology (Proprietary) | Private For-Profit | 1) Flexibility  
2) Reputation  
3) Access | 1) Personal Resource Assessment  
2) Institutional Assessment  
3) Research |
| Anthea       | EdD/ Organizational Leadership | Private Non-Profit | 1) Flexibility  
2) Personal Considerations  
3) Cost | 1) Personal Resource Assessment  
2) Goal Setting  
3) Institutional Assessment |
| Kassandra    | EdD/ Higher Education Administration | Private Non-Profit | 1) Flexibility  
2) Reputation  
3) Cost | 1) Institutional Assessment  
2) Personal Resource Assessment  
3) Goal Setting |
| Calliope     | EdD/ Educational Technology | Public             | 1) Cost  
2) Reputation  
3) Access | 1) Goal Setting  
2) Personal Resource Assessment  
3) Institutional Assessment |
| Rhea         | PhD/ Educational Technology (Proprietary) | Private For-Profit | 1) Access  
2) Cost  
3) Reputation | 1) Goal Setting  
2) Institutional Assessment  
3) Personal Resource Assessment |
| Ione         | PhD/ Public Policy & Administration (Proprietary) | Private For-Profit | 1) Access  
2) Flexibility  
3) Personal Considerations | 1) Networking  
2) Personal Resources Assessment  
3) Goal Setting |
| Athena       | EdD/ Organizational Change and Leadership | Private Non-Profit | 1) Reputation  
2) Program  
3) Flexibility | 1) Goal Setting  
2) Institutional Assessment  
3) Research |
| Nike         | EdD/ Higher Education | Private Non-Profit | 1) Access  
2) Cost | 1) Institutional Assessment  
2) Networking |
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<th></th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Helen PhD/ Psychology</th>
<th>Electra PhD/ Educational Technology</th>
<th>Larissa PhD/ Psychology</th>
<th>Fortuna EdD/ Educational Technology</th>
<th>Hestia EdD/ Education</th>
<th>Phaedra PhD/ Psychology</th>
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**Findings**

The data analysis process revealed six influencing factors critical to the college choice decision for women who selected online doctoral programs:

- flexibility
- access
- cost
- value/investment
- reputation
- personal considerations.

The data collected showed that participants were influenced by a myriad of complex factors during their decision-making process, but these factors clearly emerged as fundamental to the overall college choice decision. It is important to note here that these six factors did not differ in meaning, significance, or influence based on the participants’ institution regardless of type
(public, private non-profit, or private for-profit). Each of these influencing factors holds certain meanings, associations, attributes, and benefits/consequences for participants. A summary mapping of connected meanings, associations, attributes, and benefits/consequences as described by participants is provided in Table 4. The table represents an aggregate analysis of participant findings.

Table 4

Influencing Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Labels: Influencing Factors</th>
<th>Category Descriptions: Meaning, Associations,Attributes, Values, and Benefits/Consequences Connected to the Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility (Personal Factor)</strong></td>
<td>Meaning: Ability to modify—either to complete work at own pace, or in own environment, with fewer constraints.</td>
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<td>Associations: Convenience, practical, transitions, options, transferability, right fit, schedule, alignment, accommodating.</td>
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<td>Attributes: Institutional fit/match, program of study, curriculum paths, coursework options, residency, career oriented, allows for FT working.</td>
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<td>Values: Autonomy, openness, tractability, independence, ownership.</td>
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<td>Benefits: The ability to be independent, not tied to a physical location, learning process, time – both ability to work on own time and time to completion, allows multiple roles, creates space for doctoral work to occur alongside with family, not in place of it.</td>
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<td>Consequences: Struggles with work pace/ work-life balance – usurpation of family/personal, requirements weighed on participants, institutional flexibility include programs changes that impacted participants.</td>
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<td><strong>Access (Personal Factor and Institutional Attribute)</strong></td>
<td>Meaning: Ability to have access to doctoral program.</td>
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<td>Associations: Military, working, career, family considerations, childcare, acceptance, requirements, physical vs. virtual, possibility, context, priorities, responsibilities.</td>
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<td>Attributes: Geography, residency, not time bound, not place bound.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values: balance, autonomy, ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits: Rural/military participants stressed that online was the only option due to geographical constraints. Some participants indicated they searched for programs with no residency, all noted wanting the least amount of residencies possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribute</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost (Institutional Attribute)</strong></td>
<td>Monetary/fiscal aspect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value/ Investment (Personal Factor)</strong></td>
<td>Personal values placed on investment in the educational endeavor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reputation (Institutional Attribute)</strong></td>
<td>Influencing factors connected to the institution itself regarding structures and systems as well as degree granted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal</strong></td>
<td>Relational aspects of process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Considerations (Both Personal Factor and Institutional Attribute)

**Associations:** Commitment, responsibilities, motivation, networking, social interactions, independence, self-reliant, driven, personal expectations.

**Attributes:** Cohorts, admissions personnel experiences, faculty-student interactions, family considerations, developing expertise based on interactions, mentoring.

**Values:** Respect, recognition, success, achievement, learning, collegiality, consistency.

**Benefits:** Transactional vs transformational – specific to admissions personnel experiences, Value in networking and social media – cohorts, residencies. Colleague Recommendations/Networking/Professional Association Endorsement (Personal Factor) Underlying need for the personal connection – a certain depth of interaction. Family support.

**Consequences:** Loss of richness of face to face interactions, lack of intensive mentoring, solitary nature of dissertation phase, lack of family support, divorce, attrition.

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### Six Most Influencing Factors

The six most influencing factors in the college choice decision of women in online doctoral programs were found to be flexibility, access, cost, values/investment, reputation, and personal considerations. As demonstrated in Table 4, those findings consist of both personal factors as well as institutional attributes serving as influencing factors. Each factor identified was either directly or indirectly present within participant narratives and reflects those influences that occurred with the most frequency. As described below, these key influencing factors profoundly impacted participants’ college choice decision. Factors are presented in order of prevalence and importance to participants’ final college choice decision. Flexibility, access, and cost emerged as central influencing factors across the narrative. These factors most directly influenced the college choice decision in a way that superseded other considerations for all participants. Value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations acted as supporting influences within the decision-making process, and existed in concert with those central factors.

As displayed in Figure 8, final college choice decisions for each participant were typically
shaped by two central and one supporting factor. Factors are arranged in order of influence within participant narratives.

**Flexibility.** Flexibility emerged clearly as a strong influencing factor among participants. It presented as both a personal factor and an institutional factor. Some participants focused on the need for flexibility to accommodation for personal influencing factors, and some discussed flexibility in terms of program options and institutional characteristics. All participants noted aspects of this factor as being a major influence in the decision-making process, with seven participants identifying this factor as one of the most influential factors to their college choice decision. Often coupled with convenience, the flexibility of online programs afforded many participants with the ability to work along with already established schedules and routines.

Penelope sought a program that was flexible and adaptive on several levels. She discussed searching out a program that would really flow with her life rather than work against it. As she noted, “I was looking for flexibility, a way that I could have my education not work against me, that basically integrated into my already existing life. For me that was probably number one.” She also wanted program options, and the ability to take more classes in some terms, and less in others to accommodate the different seasons in her life. As a military spouse, mother, and full-time worker, Penelope’s decision was multifaceted and complex. Flexibility topped her list with respect to factors that led directly to enrollment in her program.

Nike self-identified as the mother of a special needs child and a full-time employee. She stated that “I was a mom and it was important to me to have some kind of assurance that doing this wouldn't take away time from him. Knowing that I could work in the evening [that was vital], or when I had time, or even at work. I had a lot of flexibility at work as well, so if I had a down day, I could do much of the homework and it wouldn't impact my life negatively. “She
went on to note: “There was a lot riding on [keeping] evenings available to him. So, that was probably the more important decision.”

Iris, who self-identified as a single mother, shared similar thoughts as Nike on needing to focus in on children in her care. She stated, “I expected and experienced a lot of flexibility.” Her reflects on enrollment really delved into her expectation of – and experiences with – the flexibility of her program overall. One of her key benefits was her ability to work ahead when her children were visiting their father over the summer. She noted, “That flexibility comes in handy, in the summertime my children spend time with their father for visitation.”

Kassandra also mentioned the expectation of flexibility and convenience was a key influencing factor; especially because she noted she was working and had children. The convenience of online allowed her to successfully manage multiple roles during her doctoral work. She noted, “I really needed the convenience of doing something online where I can also continue to work in the process.” When asked about her overall expected benefits of enrolling in her degree program she stated, “The convenience of being able to work during the program was a huge factor.” Kassandra also connected the flexibility of her program to her ultimate success in her program: “I needed the flexibility to be able to do things at my own pace and on my own time to be successful in a doctoral program at this point in my life.”

While each participant noted different ways the idea of flexibility was a critical influencing factor, participants noted that flexibility was key to their college choice decision. Anthea noted that:

The main reason I should say I went with online is due to the flexibility. It was really about [that] and convenience for me. Like I said before, being a single parent I needed that convenience. I didn't want to ... How [could I be on campus that] many days a week
sitting in that classroom for extra hours. It was really the convenience for me was a big
deciding factor.
Helen had already earned a master’s degree online and found that “the flexibility of what time of
the day you can actually do your work, that was by far what led me to that program…” and
“online, really it is the convenience of the whole thing.” Due to her work in law enforcement, she
needed to have a program flexible enough to accommodate her already established career. Ione
added, “That flexibility and that having all of the requirements of the class available to me at my
fingertips was very important to me. There really was no ambiguity.”

In the case of Anthea, Iris, Kassandra, Penelope, Nike, Fortuna, and Helen aspects of this
work-life balance aspect was prevalent. All expressed multiple roles and the need to try and
create a work-life balance that resulted in program flexibility being a top final factor in the
enrollment decision-making process. Despite several of these participants mentioning a
preference for a residential or on campus program (Iris, Penelope, and Kassandra all noted this
preference), each expressed that this flexibility aspect was vital to their final decision to instead
enroll online. They indicated flexibility as one of the strongest influencing factors noting benefits
such as convenience, self-paced environment, and independence.

An important note here in the realm of flexibility is that to gain flexibility, other aspects
were diminished. Despite relishing the benefits of the flexibility of their online programs, several
participants articulated the desire to have connections to a physical campus. This is discussed in
more detail under personal considerations. However, it remains noteworthy in regards to the
theme of flexibility because some participants noted that to gain flexibility they sacrificed the
depth of contact and connection found in on campus settings. Iris summed it up best:
I know I missed out on and if I could do it over, I would love to be a resident doctoral student. The whole [ridiculous bit as] a research assistant. Not having that constant contact with the faculty on a day-to-day basis and working on their research and developing a face-to-face network. I was able to do my Master's full-time so I saw my care in my community every day. Sometimes, towards the end, you're like, “We don't really love to see them every day.” “How's it going Joe?” “I'm working on it.” “How's the group thing?” “Got it.” But that richness of the other eighteen months of being around them, the conversations, the mentorship and the hallway conversations, I would have loved to have some of that time with the professors.

Iris’s sentiments were similarly reflected by other participants. Penelope mentioned missing interactions in a campus setting, as did Ione who selected online primarily due to job constraints. Many of the participants who expressly chose flexibility as a key factor to their enrollment decision noted critical barriers to access that also factored in strongly to their overall college choice decision.

**Access.** Access was a central and primary personal factor that influenced every participant as well. Access took on different meaning for different participants. Some were rurally located with no physical campuses nearby. Other participants had job constraints (needed to work full-time/had hectic job schedules) or family situations that prevented campus attendance. Several candidates noted military or law enforcement constraints due to schedules and deployments. The barriers to access certainly varied among participants, but each participant noted at least one barrier to access, and they often were subtle but significant. In order to flesh out how this impacted participants, the idea of access was divided into further sub-categories defined as “access barriers” and presented in Table 5.
Table 5

**Participant Access Barriers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Access Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>Rural, Family Responsibilities, Military Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>Military Affiliation, Job Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthea</td>
<td>Family Responsibilities, Military Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kassandra</td>
<td>Job Constraints, Family Responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calliope</td>
<td>Rural, Job Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhea</td>
<td>Rural, Job Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ione</td>
<td>Job Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>Job Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nike</td>
<td>Job Constraints, Family Responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Job Constraints, Law Enforcement, Military Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electra</td>
<td>Rural, Family Responsibilities, Military Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larissa</td>
<td>Job Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortuna</td>
<td>Job Constraints, Family Responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hestia</td>
<td>Rural, Family Responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaedra</td>
<td>Rural, Job Constraints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike flexibility which presented itself with relatively clarity, the issue of access was more subtle and emerged as participants divulged bits of additional details as they charted their experiences. Participants were afforded the opportunity to add to their background information (demographics) at the beginning of each interview, but most declined to add information outright. More often these barriers to access hidden within their personal narratives and generally were revealed in short aside type statements throughout the duration of each interview.

Job constraints featured most prominently. Many of the participants noted that they first sought more traditional campus settings, only to discover there were barriers to access preventing them from considering enrollment. For example, when asked to reflect on her decision to enroll in an online program, Larissa stated she “contacted the 3 schools in that area that offered doctorate programs in the degree area that I knew wanted to get my doctorate in. None of them would accept somebody who was working full-time.” Athena noted likewise saying, “When I
started looking at doctoral programs, I didn't necessarily intend to do an online one.” [I looked at] “an Ivy League because I knew that, because I was in the area, I thought that might be a good fit. They drastically changed their program so that you can't work full-time anymore.” Her final mention of the constraint as being a key individual deciding factor in her decision-making process noting, “I'm the only one bringing in the money for my house so I can't afford to not work full-time.” In Helen’s case, she noted that as law enforcement officer, she really could not even consider more traditional campus based programs due to job constraints. “Because of my job and because I work 12 hour shifts, obviously, it's not possible to go to a face to face brick and mortar school.”

Family responsibilities also featured prominently. Fortuna stated that she had “existing responsibilities. I still needed to be able to work my job, I have kids, I felt like I couldn't completely withdraw from my household responsibilities.” In Fortuna’s case, her main constraint involving access was due to her own multiple roles (mother, wife, full-time worker.) Kassandra noted similarly stating that the majority of her work had to be completed between 9pm and 1am due to work and family considerations. She mentioned that if she would have enrolled in “in a traditional program I wouldn't have those options.” She went on to describe how the traditional programs she explored ran on a schedule that prevented access for her simply due to scheduling and work-life balance with regard to family structure.

Residency requirements also entered into the discussion on access. Calliope noted the importance of having “no residency requirements. That was really important because of the kids.” Electra noted similar sentiment indicating her preferred school of choice had a residency requirement that mandated three months spent on campus. She indicated that, “The more I
thought about this, and the more I thought about being a single parent, that eliminated wanting to do that program.” It factored heavily into her decision to enroll in an online program:

I was going to do online, it couldn't be this quasi-online being where you were having to do a major residency, because, I'm not that young. I have a kid. Living in a dorm for 3 months would not be good, I was not looking forward to. That was the impetus for deciding online and then narrowing my choices to 2 online schools.

Participants in rural locations generally noted directly that their location prevented the access to other kinds of programs. Unlike some of the other barriers to access, geographical barrier present as a clear obstacle for potential doctoral candidates who are unwilling or unable to relocate. For example, Iris indicated although there are colleges near her, none provide doctoral degrees. Calliope and Rhea both described how there were only two programs within proximity and neither had the programs they were seeking. Hestia stated that she “was living in a rural area. The closest typical school, that offered such a program, was four hours away.” Electra indicated that she was located “a good hour away” from any potential campus based programs. Phaedra also indicated rural access issues “online was the only real option because I was in a part of the country where ground classes weren't going to be that easily accessible” Military Affiliations also presented unique challenges to several participants. Although none of the participants directly identified as being active duty, several indicated past or present military affiliations that created barriers to access. Penelope gave a clear and compelling example in her interview, “my husband was active duty at the time and overseas and I had two children at home. It wasn't really feasible to drive such a distance, being a single parent at that time, to pursue that.” She went on to note this very powerful statement about the meaning behind her access to doctoral education:
For me, especially as a woman who is moving every three years and never get to be stable long enough to achieve that kind of goal, I don't know if I can state how meaningful this was for me. I see around me every day people struggling to find jobs or you're happy if you just find a place at Starbucks out here. Now we have these opportunities to meet our full academic potential in ways that we never could before, and they're afforded to us, and there are institutions that are willing to meet our needs in these ways so that we can. Whether that is for career progression, a raise if it met your goal, for your intellectual curiosity. It's almost as if I can't put the meaning to the words because it allows me to achieve something that I didn't think was possible, literally following a male spouse around for 20-something years.

Helen noted that flexibility was one of her key considerations because it was an access issue in the sense of time constraints that surround students with military affiliations. She described having limited time with her military spouse and so to have a “weekend with him, I can either do my online at night when he's asleep or I can wake up very early in the morning and can do it. The flexibility of what time of the day you can actually do your work, that was by far what led me to that program.” In this sense, access is both geographical and time bound. At least these two participants strongly discussed the need for the ability to both be able to move with a spouse and be able to meet time needs in regards to military scheduling. While other participants did note military affiliations, none had such strong connections directly to access as those presented by Helen and Penelope.

Cost. Cost was mentioned directly as being a central influencing factor by 12 participants, and was mentioned by all participants in some form. It presented as both a personal factor and institutional factor. Some participants discussed cost in terms of personal cost and
some discussed it as an institutional characteristic. This varied among participants and reflects a myriad of internal and external considerations such as personal resources, tuition cost, tuition discounting, and external funding sources.

Anthea discussed cost in terms of what the GI Bill would cover tuition wise. Iris discussed a 25% military discount that heavily impacted her final decision to enroll. Kassandra discussed how her final decision to enroll was at least partly influenced by the overall "affordability" of her intuition’s tuition for her specific program. She directly noted the final cost as being a direct factor in selecting her specific program. Rhea noted that due to being relatively close to retirement age, she needed to closely examine return on investment (ROI). She noted specifically that it influenced her final decision, “This school would make it to where after I paid it off, I would still be able to earn some extra money.” Fortuna discussed cost directly in terms of money and a consumer decision stating that “I really didn't feel like I could siphon off all of our household resources for me and my education.” She went on to describe how she had to make her final decision in a way that balanced what she really wanted with the resources she had on hand in monetary terms. Calliope noted that in her case, her institution of choice offered her a remote Teaching Assistant (TA) position, which ultimately resulted in her having no cost to her directly for that program. She indicated that cost ultimately ended up being a “tipping point” that resulted in her college choice decision.

In some cases, the institution selected was not the cheapest or most cost effective alternative, but rather was the best use of resources. Nike explained that even though she could receive tuition reimbursement at the university she was employed, she felt the required return commitment of two additional years required employment beyond graduation made the cost not worth the overall time investment. “I wasn't interested in doing it because I had to be in the
organization for another 2 years upon graduation, and I just didn't want to do that.” While she looked for another institution that was “sure that we could afford” she did not select the institution with the lowest cost (which was no cost). Instead, her final decision, although based in part on cost, represented the underlying value structure where other intrinsic/extrinsic benefits can potentially outweigh monetary costs. She noted, [not only was] “the price per credit hour was much cheaper than other similar institutions and programs. It's increased a lot since I graduated. It's still a very affordable program, however. That's part of the value composition though.” Nike’s final thought on value composition lends to the relevance of separating cost from the following theme, value/investment.

**Value/investment.** This theme, although strongly connected to cost, required a separation. Nine participants drew a critical distinction between actual cost and overall value/investment in regards to their enrollment decision. Value/investment presented as a personal factor influencing the college choice decision. When discussed, this factor was situated by participants in context of long term planning and goals. Conversely, cost was described as something more immediate. Participants framed it in the context of “affordability.” Participants discussed their enrollment decision in terms though of value/investment in a different frame. Participants indicated that their doctoral degree would hold value and ultimately that it represented an investment was enduring. This distinction was established at a relatively specific point in the interview process. One of the questions asked participants how their enrollment in their program of choice supported their educational goals. The results of this section of the interview process really encapsulate this differentiation between cost and value/investment.

Many of the participants framed their discussion on this topic more in terms of career goals than educational goals. Larissa noted that she felt “no burning desire” to earn a doctoral
degree. The doctoral degree was primarily a career consideration for her. It was something she really needed though to become a principal in the consulting firm she was a part of at the time. She also described how after earning the degree she realized how important the investment was because her career goals shifted. “I've realized that it gives me the opportunity to teach, [gives] me an edge for jobs, I call it my retirement plan.” Rhea also discussed retirement, but really focused more on cost and tangible ROI. She felt that the strongest value the investment held was in expanded opportunities such as publishing, researching, and additional teaching opportunities. Phaedra placed a high value on her time investment. She indicated at several intervals one of the key aspects of her final decision was that in an online program her time investment would have a higher return because the institution she selected would accept her masters level credits. Ione discussed the idea of investment in terms of a career change, saying she was investing in “transferrable skills” that would allow her to move career fields and expand her credentials.

Another example of value/investment is demonstrated by Athena’s response. She noted that she actually was not initially interested in pursuing a doctoral degree. She felt secure with her masters. However, she was advised by a mentor that she should really consider instead a doctorate stating “where you want to go professionally, you're going to need it.” Athena also described how then the doctorate took on a very personal quality, but that her focus was distinctly career oriented. “It was being able to always know that I can support myself, that I have met what my professional goals are.” She also discussed how she felt it was critical to retain her independence, noting that she never wanted to be held back by having not attained her goal. For her the education was an investment and the larger value constructed rested in her ability to maintain this independence. These were her final thoughts on the subject:
For me, cost wasn’t a factor. I knew that this is going to be money well spent and it meant that I went into debt a little bit more because I had previous debt from one of my other Master's Degree, then so be. I fully understand and accept those consequences because I think in the long run, the benefits are going to outweigh any kind of negative implications that might be there.

Athena was the only participant who specifically noted cost was not a factor for consideration in her enrollment process. Her strongest influencing factor was reputation. Her notions of value were deeply tied to her personal perception and the public’s perception of her institution. For Athena, this resulted in reputation far surpassing other considerations and influences during her enrollment decision.

**Reputation.** Reputation factored in as a key influencing factor for 14 participants. However, where reputation fell on the scale of influencing factors and how it was discussed varied greatly between participants. Most participants discussed reputation as an institutional characteristic. Institutional features such as accreditation, program structure, and public perception of the institution figured centrally. However, several participants presented different constructs surrounding reputation that are best defined as personal factors connected to institutional characteristics.

For Athena, reputation was the most influencing factor leading to her college choice decision. Hestia did not mention reputation at all during the course of the interview (she was the only participant that did not mention reputation in some shape or form.) Ione thought about reputation, but ultimately made her decision based on where she was accepted. In some cases, such as with Penelope, the institution with the best reputation was unattainable due to barriers to access (geographic). So she used the curriculum and program model she preferred from the
ground campus program as the “gold standard,” researched and made comparisons. She then selected a program she felt was reputable and similarly aligned, even though they did not have the same level of reputation as her top choice.

An important consideration within the context of this study is that participants own determination of what constituted a good reputation varied. Most participants who touched on reputation or accreditation using that terminology used it in a way that is congruent with an academic definition of reputation. For example, Athena would only consider what she described as “top 20 schools” with “rich history” that were “well established.” Rhea stressed accreditation as did Ione and Anthea. Fortuna and Calliope indicated they felt public institutions that were research oriented had strong reputation. Iris indicated she felt that “established brick and mortar” with a “strong research base” meant good reputation. She noted to her that meant the institution was “not a diploma mill.” Penelope also used the term “brick and mortar” and “diploma mill” in connection with evaluating reputation. In her assessment of programs, she looked for one that was “established, reputable, credible.” Kassandra stated that for her choice, “the university’s reputation speaks for itself” indicating that her institution had a long history and was well established.

Some participants framed the theme of reputation outside traditional academic constructs. Helen discussed her program not just in terms of accreditation, but indicated that as she is a law enforcement officer she researched programs that had professional approval. Part of her college choice decision was based on the fact that her “program is recognized by the FBI academy.” She said that in her final decision enrollment process she was significantly influenced by that factor stating: “I figure, okay, if that's the case, if later I want to go work for the feds then, I have a degree from a school that's actually recognized by them.” Larissa and Phaedra mentioned using
the database of their professional organization, Society for Industrial Organizational Psychologists (SIOP,) to find an approved program. Larissa noted that she used the database as a starting point, extensively research programs, and then decided to choose between two “were recognized by the professional organization. Those were the only two I looked at then.” Phaedra noted similar and discussed how as a practitioner she needed a degree recognized by her professional organization, and used her organization’s database to help narrow down programmatic and institutional options.

Discussions on reputation also extended beyond the institutional level. Electra, Calliope, Iris, and Penelope all mentioned the notion of “online” verse physical “brick and mortar” as importation to reputation. Although some of the discussion by these participants was school/institution specific, some of it was more intrinsic and reflected on personal values and perceptions. Calliope noted that “I know that online education is as good or better, but I also know that they don't always have the same level of acceptance as other people ... For people who have gone to school in a more traditional path.” Electra discussed having similar concerns saying,

[T]here was, and I think there still is, a stigma about having an online education. If you're in an online program, you're paying for a piece of paper, you didn't do any work. I remember worrying about that too, and thinking by the time I get to the end where I'm going, am I going to owe all this money, and it's not going to be worth anything, it was just going to be that piece of paper.

Penelope and Iris indicated similar lines of thinking in discussion on “brick and mortar” verses “diploma mills.” Iris emphasized reputation saying: “it was an exclusively online program and if I said the school, nobody could be like, ‘You went to a diploma mill.’ They're out there and
people use them because they're a little less challenging.” Penelope cautioned, “there are some online schools that are not reputable, not credible, not accredited. They are diploma mills, if you will. By default I didn't choose any of those.”

Another key facet of reputation revolved around faculty. Participants noted that faculty credentials, research interests, and career experience were important to their selection. Most participants noted looking at faculty credentials before making the enrollment decision, only Calliope notes having the opportunity to communicate with faculty prior to enrollment. Other participants indicated they had utilized institutional websites to view faculty credentials specifically. Penelope noted: “I looked at the websites, looked for quality, different types of accreditation, comprehensiveness. I looked at the credentials of their faculty.” Helen also reported checking credentials of faculty, as did Calliope, Iris, Electra, Athena, and Kassandra. Nike mentioned she should have looked more intensively at faculty research interests,

In hindsight, would I have looked at all the faculty and what their research interests were?
Yes. That wasn't on my radar, it wasn't even in my brain at the time. They, fortunately, they all ended up being fantastic, but I would have done that research had I really understood I should do that.

Given the limited interactions with faculty prior to enrollment for participants, the majority of commentary on faculty strictly centered on faculty credentials and experience as listed on the website of each institution. This is a point of differentiation from the existing literature in the sense that often not only faculty credentials and experiences are part of institutional reputation assessments by prospective students, but in a traditional program setting, faculty interactions during campus visits and the admissions process would factor in as well. As this was largely absent from the experiences of participants in this study, faculty really became
almost exclusively part of the reputation piece rather than acting as a bridge between the themes of reputation and personal considerations.

**Personal considerations.** The final influencing factor was that of personal considerations. These were personal influencing factors that impacted the college choice decision. All 15 participants discussed a variety of personal considerations that influenced their college choice decision. In addition to the more traditional personal considerations discussed (recommendations from mentors, social life considerations, faculty connections, and/or family/spousal concerns) several additional influencing factors figured among participants in this study. Additional factors for personal consideration included both individual factors and institutional attributes that took on importance at a personal level. Table 6 demonstrates the breakdown.

Table 6

*Personal Considerations as Individual Factors or Institutional Attributes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Factors</th>
<th>Institutional Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colleague recommendations, Mentor</td>
<td>Interactions with Enrollment/Admissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations, Networking, Time to</td>
<td>Personnel, Program Design/ Structure/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion, Spiritual Influences, Brand</td>
<td>Specificity, Non-traditional Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty, Family Influences, Personal</td>
<td>Orientation, Institutional Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational Influences, Personal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Certain factors listed here could theoretically have been integrated into other categories. However, the way in which participants discussed these particular factors that resulted in them being categorized as personal considerations. Many of these factors are participant specific and were discussed mainly based in terms of how the participants integrated personal experiences and value into their decision-making process. In the case of personal considerations, many
participants rated them lower on the hierarchy (so not as say the top consideration or as a key contributing factor to her college choice decision.) However, the results of the data analysis found these types of personal considerations to be foundational elements in participant’s individual goal formation process, the way in which they weighed out influencing factors, and as a supporting factor in the overall college choice decision.

The types of personal considerations that emerged at the individual level during the college choice process included normative factors mentioned in the existing literature such as mentor advice/recommendations, colleague recommendations, family input/considerations, and personal/ intrinsic motivational factors. In addition to those factors, participants brought in a number of additional personal factors they considered to have greatly influenced their college choice decision including: colleague recommendations, networking, time to completion, spiritual orientation, and brand loyalty. Aside from the strictly personal individual factors, several institutional attributes considered as personal considerations are woven into this complex theme as well. Those are as follows: interactions with enrollment/admissions personnel, program design/structure/specificity, non-traditional program orientation, institutional mission. In the discussion below, core areas where multiple participants mentioned overlapping factors are highlighted.

One of the primary personal considerations discussed as influential to the decision-making process involved participants own personal networking and colleague recommendations. A clear example of this was described by Iris who discussed how her colleagues had researched online programs together and “matrix of doctoral programs.” When Iris decided to begin her own search, she first went and consulted with these colleagues indicating that “They were going to an online school, and they had talked about the program. They were very happy about it, so
basically, the first thing I did was go talk to them.” She went on to note that it saved her a lot of time in the search process and indicated that her colleagues’ advice ultimately served as the foundation for her information gathering process. Hestia indicated her college choice decision was actually made in conjunction with another colleague/friend. Hestia’s college choice decision was based on not her own strong influences, but rather her colleague/friend’s own decision. She noted about her college choice decision, “it was the first choice of the person I started the program with and so we kind of wanted to do it together.” Nike noted that a colleague also did research with her, ultimately introducing her to her program of choice. She described how a colleague she was close with at the time, who already had a doctorate degree kept encouraging her to do the research. She said: “He's just one of those friends that he knows that you're eventually going make your decision, but immediately does the research before you do to help with your conversation.” For her this interaction also served as a foundational piece, “that was the very first one with the major contributing factors.”

Two personal considerations that figured prominently across several participant narratives are program design and non-traditional program orientation. This includes the notion of time to completion as this was closely tied to participant’s perception of the program of study itself. The majority of participants noted they were seeking specific programs and some discussed in detail specific program needs. For example, Rhea wanted a focus on “e-learning” specifically. Fortuna stated on four occasions that she really wanted a “discipline specific” program rather than a more general course of study. Helen, Larissa, and Phaedra sought out programs that corresponded to professional organizations they were connected to feeling that supported both the reputation of the institution and their own personal career goals and considerations. Helen’s final decision was strongly influenced by the design of her program
(FBI recognized structure) and by the orientation of her institution to work students. Phaedra also selected a program recognized by her professional organization (SIOP) and indicated that she used her experience in her “client – therapist setting” to select a program tailored to enhance her practice. Larissa noted that “my career goals defined the program” that she ultimately selected. In her case, personal career experiences and goals ultimately acted as a kind of personal consideration.

For Phaedra, several personal considerations factored greatly into the college choice decision process, but one of the major factors in her decision was the overall program structure and time to completion. In her case this personal consideration was both an individual factor and an institutional attribute. As a practicing psychologist, she wanted the complete her coursework and process as expeditiously as possible to minimize disruptions. She enrolled into her program believing that since she already had completed a master’s degree, she could “drop into the actual dissertation process” immediately. She noted that she would have potentially selected a different institution had she known that her coursework would be “just repetitive classes that I took in my master’s program.” Ultimately Phaedra expressed satisfaction with her program despite the perceived redundancy, but wished she would not have had to “go back through and pay for coursework I've already done.”

Helen also noted that time was an important personal consideration. She essentially indicated she did not want to “spend forever” working on her degree. Although she selected a non-accelerated program, she had really planned on sticking to a tight schedule only to discover there were two “additional classes” right before the dissertation phase. She noted, “Had I known this ahead of time, maybe I would double question the school but, at the end of the day, I think I would still go into the school. But the fact that I wasn't told, it kind of bothered me.” She went on
to indicate it cause both a loss of valuable time and monetary resources, something she personally felt strongly about stating that these considerations had influenced her college choice decision.

Another key area of personal consideration in the decision process was the interactions of prospective students with enrollment/admissions personnel. Athena and Calliope described being actively pursued by admissions personnel. They felt that made them strong candidates for their programs. There was an important reciprocity factor that influenced them. Athena stated:

I had a really nice one on one conversation with the academic advising team and the admissions folks so I could really see what I was getting into. I did a lot of the outreach for, but as soon as they knew that I was interested I would say that it was a very reciprocal relationship. They reached out a lot.

Calliope discussed how she had felt like she was inadequate at one point during her search, as thought she was doing most of the reaching out. She noted, “they just weren't very interested in talking to me which was heartbreaking to me.” Then she was actively recruited by her institution. She discussed how that institution “did a lot more recruiting me, and [they] had people calling me and talking to me.” For both participants, the reciprocity factor figured in heavily with regard to the decision-making process.

Other participants also discussed ways in which those interpersonal connections were critical to their college choice decision. Penelope noted: “One school had vastly superior customer service over the other. One treated it more as a sales transaction, as if I was buying a vehicle. This is a large investment of money in my education and something that I really wanted, so ultimately that's how I chose my institution.” Anthea really connected on a personal level with an enrollment advisor who shared her military background. She stated, “He was able to
speak my language ... Made me feel comfortable with being able to relate, okay we have this military division at the university, we understand your background which is really cool. It really put me at ease ... With making that decision.” Electra also mentioned developing a strong personal connection with an enrollment advisor at her institution of choice. She described how this advisor walked her through the process, took the time to address all her questions, even completed some research into aspects for her:

"
It didn't matter kind of question I gave him, if he didn't know the answer ... At the time, I was going through a divorce, so I was worried about starting school while still being married. How was I going to be able to navigate name change and things like that? He did a lot of research for me to make sure that, when I applied for financial aid, how that would look, and when I had to use my income tax and stuff like that on the financial aid, how that would look. He was more helpful with more than just the enrollment stuff. I felt like he took a personal interest in me and helped me through it.
"

For Electra, the personal attention and commitment to her success was a strong influencing factor into her decision to enroll. She noted that it made her feel secure in her choice and felt that she would go into her program with at least some idea of really being “more like a person than a number” throughout the process.

Personal expectations also factored in considerably in the data on personal considerations. A number of the participants had strong expectations concerning benefits they would receive from enrollment that went beyond the basic academic descriptions. Many of the underlying expectations of participants were expressed as key influencing factors. For example, Kassandra only considered her preferred institution and then narrowed down program choice from there. While her final decision centered on the institution’s reputation, she noted that “I
think of the university it is a place where I was incredibly successful and had always been that to me.” Athena mentioned that she really wanted to be part of a strong academic community, a place where she felt she fit in well and was fully integrated into the existing environment. She described how when she discussed her institution among alumni contacts that it had a very strong return loyalty rate, “if you ask anybody, they’ll tell you this, it's like joining a cult and they are not kidding.” She went on to say, “what goes on there, the kind of culture it is. I always found that appealing.”

Participants also discussed consequences surrounding personal expectations as well. Calliope acknowledged that she felt very strongly that she preferred to earn a PhD over her selected EdD program. In her case, her institution of choice offered her a remote Teaching Assistant (TA) position, which ultimately resulted in her having no cost to her directly for that program. However, in return she described that she knew even in the decision-making process she was “sacrificing” her preferred degree sought (PhD) to purse an EdD, a choice she ultimately regretted. Helen noted that she picked her program rapidly, when asked to reflect on her decision and consider if there was anything she wished she would have known before enrolling, she talked about how she had not realized there were additional courses required to prepare for the dissertation phase. Although she indicated it probably would not have altered her decision she did state, “If I knew about it maybe I would have done a little more research on it. Maybe I would have gone online and seen what other students at that particular school are saying about that.”

The final piece of the data here in regards to personal considerations is the information yielded from the final interview question in reflection on what they wished they would have known before enrolling. Several other participants reflected similarly concerning the dissertation
phase noting delays, difficulties with topics, sample population, feelings of isolation, and weak advisor support. Iris, Anthea, Rhea, Helen, Phaedra, Penelope, Fortuna, Electra, Nike and Kassandra made note of the fact that there was a lack of full understanding of the intensity, timeline, and costs associated with the dissertation phase. Most participants expected on enrollment that the dissertation phase would be extremely difficult, but each of those participants noted having enrolled holding certain expectations that then were not met. An example of this is clearly noted by Nike, “I think more transparency around the dissertation process would have been helpful.” She went on to say, “I think understanding that would have saved me a significant amount of money and continuation fees and probably saved me a lot of time to know how I should have been preparing for that.” Penelope noted that the dissertation phase was like “paddling alone in a canoe” on an unfamiliar river with little support. She indicated that she did not expect it to so quite so “solitary” and stated she wish she would have known before enrolling.

Phaedra noted that she believed that she would enter her program and move almost immediately in the dissertation phase because her master’s work was nearly identical to her program’s course work. After enrolling she discovered that she essentially had to retake those courses. She stated “before I signed up with them and [I would have] looked again at other schools and say “Okay, they might not have exactly the degree I'm looking for, but they're not going to make me go back through and pay for coursework I've already done.” Rhea described similar redundancy stating” I'm not trying to be egotistical, but I didn't read any of the textbooks. I would randomly turn to a page and say, that looks like a nice citation and I would write around it, but I had taught online for 10 years. I aced all my classes. I had a 4.0. I didn't have to read the book.” Then she described how during the dissertation phase she truly began to struggle in the unstructured environment. She noted, “I expected it to be lonely. I expected it to be hard. I
expected the normal stuff.” What she did not expect were four different advisors in just a few short years or the rigors of the intensive writing phase as she has a background in math. She noted that she would still enroll despite the roadblocks and hardships, but also expressed strong sentiments about the dissertation phase not meeting personal expectations she held upon enrolling.

Summary

Overall the influencing factors and connecting associations though complex, still presented a stable decision-making chain and centralized influential factors. Participants engaged in initial goal setting, gathered information, examined and evaluated their resources, assessed institutional attributes, matched their resources and values with an institution, and then made their enrollment decision based on specific factors fundamental to their overall goals and surrounding influences. Subsequent conclusions drawn from data, the discussion of findings, implications for practice, and recommendations future research are included in Chapter V.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of this inductive study was to understand how academic and non-academic factors influenced the college choice decision-making process of women enrolled in online doctoral programs. This study was completed to yield viable solutions for enrolling students who successfully complete their online doctoral program of choice. A central research question guided this study: How do academic and non-academic factors influence the college choice decision of women who enroll in online doctoral programs?

The inductive analysis conducted for this study allowed the research findings to emerge naturally from the themes present in the data collected. Careful analysis of the data collected revealed six major influencing factors relevant to the college choice decision-making process for women enrolled in online doctoral programs: flexibility, access, cost, value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations. Two core conclusions were then drawn from the data that support an understanding of how those factors influenced the college choice decisions made by participants in this study. First, flexibility, access, and cost emerged as central influencing factors across the narrative. Factors such as value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations acted as supporting influences within the decision-making process. Second, certain factors self-identified by participants as influential within the decision-making process did not always directly contribute to their college choice decision due to external pressures. However, despite not having a central influence on the decision-making process, these same factors do affect participants’ satisfaction and success within their selected program of choice.

This chapter provides an overview of the learner population included in this study, a discussion of the findings in relationship to the Theoretical Framework and Literature, implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations. Each section blends the results of
this study with existing literature and applies those results in a way that is meaningful to practice. The findings and recommendations discussed in this study are designed to answer the central research question. The discussion provided here elucidates how the complex factors present in the lives of women impacted their college choice decision and provides ways for practitioners to support in this student population to foster strong student retention within online doctoral programs.

**The Learner Population of this Study**

Participants were drawn specifically from different institutions across all three sectors of higher education, public, private non-profit, and private for-profit (proprietary), to reflect alignment with national trends in enrollment in online doctoral programs (NCES, 2014). The learner population described by this study also aligns with extant literature and serves as an important starting point for discussion, providing important context for making sense of the results of this study as well as the potential for transferability across institutions.

Women are found to be concentrated in certain types of doctoral programs (mainly education) and are more likely to seek out online education (Gardener, 2009; Mueller, 2008; NCES, 2014; Offerman, 2011). Many of these women fall into a non-traditional student population grouping, drawn in by the accessibility, flexibility, and convenience of online programs (Muller, 2008). Women often fall into a non-traditional student population groups. They are typically drawn in by the accessibility, flexibility, and convenience of online programs (Muller, 2008). This study sought to draw a typical a sample population that aligned with the extant research with regard to women enrolled in doctoral programs conducted online.

One area where key alignment emerged in the findings is the breakdown of participants based on enrollment in the three different types of institutions: private for-profit (proprietary),
private non-profit, and public. As reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), students in exclusively distance education courses broke down as follows: 8.7% at Public Institutions, 13.1% at Private Non-Profit Institutions, and 51.7% at Private For-Profit Institutions. The NCES (2014) defined distance education as “distance education or online classes and degree programs” (p. 2). The sample population similarly aligned with this national trend. Of the 15 participants, 8 reported being enrolled in a private for-profit (proprietary) institution, 4 reported being enrolled in private non-profit institutions, and 3 reported being enrolled in public institutions. This approximate alignment was important to establishing a sample considered typical over the overall population.

In further alignment with existing literature, the sample population selected for study participation self-reported characteristics typical of non-traditional online learners. Non-traditional learner factors as established in the literature featured prominently within participants demographical information and background narratives. Non-traditional leaners represent the fastest growing overall student population, and they often seek out online education due to life circumstances (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Mueller, 2008; Offerman, 2011.) The population observed in this study consisted of participants that fit non-traditional doctoral student criteria specifically: diverse population that is increasingly female, over the age of 30, married with children, enrolled part time, often in professional programs (such as EdD), already engaged in their career, and self-funded (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Offerman, 2011).

**Discussion**

This inductive study is rooted in two critical premises: that the factors and characteristics found in the literature concerning graduate student college choice are relevant, and that some of the factors’ importance or significance vary based upon the participants’ individual experiences
as well as the nature of the environment (physical/geographical vs. virtual/online.) As this study utilized an inductive approach, these premises served as the first step in data collection and were designed to find patterns for analysis that would produce meaningful implications for practice (Goddard & Melville, 2004; Thomas, 2006). Findings in this study upheld these two premises and carried them forward to reveal critical differences in participants’ college choice decision-making process regarding online doctoral programs. This was an important part of the analysis process as the extant literature in this case provided the foundation for both the findings and conclusions extending from this study.

As a result of the in-depth inductive data analysis process conducted, two clear conclusions emerged from within the findings. First, the six major influencing factors (flexibility, access, cost, value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations) all contributed significantly to each participant’s college choice decision, but flexibility, access, and cost emerged as central influences across the narrative. Factors such as value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations acted as supporting influences within the decision-making process. These factors presented as secondary to those central influences. One of the supporting influences (value/investment) featured prominently within the narratives but was not identified as a factor in any college choice decisions among participants. The second conclusion reached was that certain factors self-identified by participants as influential within the decision-making process did not always directly contribute to their college choice decision. Participants’ participated in a non-linear decision-making process where influencing factors were often tempered by additional external pressures. Despite not having a central influence on the decision-making process, these same factors did affect participants’ satisfaction and success within their
selected program of choice. These conclusions provide context for the discussion and implications for practice as elucidated below.

**Findings in relation to the literature.** The six influencing factors were grouped into two categories (central and supporting) based upon how participants discussed those factors in context to the college choice decision. The central influencing factors were flexibility, access, and cost. The supporting influencing factors were investment/value, reputation, and personal considerations. The first grouping consists of factors participants described as being vital to the overall decision-making process. The second grouping consists of factors that supported the decision-making process, but were not central to the final college choice decision. While still vital, the supporting factors existed in conjunction with central factors. Participants typically listed two central factors and one supporting factor as directly contributing to their college choice decision (Example: cost (central), access (central), and personal considerations (supporting).)

**Central factors.** Flexibility, access, and cost are discussed in the extant literature as key factors driving students to seek online education (Allen & Seaman, 2013, Offerman, 2011). The literature established that online doctoral programs were developed by institutions to meet student needs (Bell, 2006; Gardener, 2009; Kramarae, 2011). Online programs are developed to be flexible and provide access to students with a myriad of circumstances that prevent them from enrolling in campus based programs. Online programs offer opportunities for non-traditional graduate students to become part of a learning community while remaining in their own fixed location (Columbaro, 2009; Karamarae, 2011; Truckluck, 2007; Park & Choi; 2009).

In alignment with the existing literature on women in online education, flexibility figures centrally as a driving force in prospective students’ college choice decision (Gardner, 2009; Kramarae, 2001, van Prummer, 2011; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008). Participants
described in detail how the flexibility of online programs developed for non-traditional learners contributed to their decision. Participants noted that online program options added a layer of flexibility that extended beyond just the virtual environment. Program options as described by participants included aspects such as path to completion, course work selections, program structure, and overall time commitment. In alignment with the extant literature, the findings of this study showed that flexibility of program remains one of the highest rated factors considered among prospective students (Hearn, 1987; Poock & Love, 2001; Schapiro, O’Malley, & Litten, 1991). Participants in this study discussed how complications such as childcare issues, family commitments, and full-time work created a tertiary layer within the decision-making matrix. As a result, the flexibility afforded by online programs proved vital to their enrollment decision.

In regards to access, participants in both metropolitan and rural locations noted either geographical/physical and/or job/family considerations presented barriers to access. A range of different situation experiences ranging from single parenting to rural location to military affiliations to job considerations, participants all mentioned barriers to access which prevented them from seeking a doctoral program at a physical campus location. Access remains a central issue not just within the context of this particular study, but for higher education overall. Access and choice end up inseparable as students cannot choose institutions that are not accessible to them (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). So, while the majority of participants mentioned at least considering some campus bound programs, ultimately, they ended up enrolling in an online program based on one of the aforementioned barriers. For prospective students with a range of complex factors creating barriers to access, the issue of flexibility became a central influencing theme within the college choice decision.

Participants also discussed overall cost as a central influencing factor with regard to their
enrollment decision. This is an area where the extant literature provides little information. Though some studies do discuss cost as a factor, it is typically framed in terms of financial aid or overall cost of living given location (Bersola, et.al, 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995). Many traditional doctoral students enrolled full-time in campus based programs receive a financial aid type package typically blending loan funding, tuition waivers, and cost of living stipends. These packages are associated with graduate student responsibilities such as teaching assistant positions or grading positions. In contrast, the literature shows that non-traditional students are more likely to already have established careers and be self-funded (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Offerman, 2011). So rather than seeking specific and comprehensive financial aid package, online doctoral students are looking directly at overall cost.

Participants in this study were all self-funded with the exception of Calliope. Calliope noted that in her case, her institution of choice offered her a remote Teaching Assistant (TA) position. This ultimately resulted in her having no cost to her directly for that program. Calliope noted this was a “tipping point” in her decision. She framed her college choice decision in terms of cost, reputation, and access with cost described as the single most influencing factor in her college choice decision. In her case, this is an important consideration as she went on to describe regretfully how allowing cost to be such a central and driving factor in the process caused her to opt for a program that perhaps was not a right fit. Calliope felt she had sacrificed pursuing her preferred degree sought (PhD) to pursue an EdD based on access and cost, a choice she ultimately regretted. Although the institution had the desired reputation facets she felt necessary, her decision lacked alignment with other influencing factors including her own personal goals (primarily her desire for a PhD specifically.)

Participants framed their discussion on cost in terms of affordability and discussed factors
such a “competitive” tuition costs, discount, cost per credit hour, and time to completion. So unlike extant literature (Bersola, et.al, 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995), which frames cost in terms of final financial aid package and cost of living expenses, participants looked at overall expense of the endeavor in a time:cost ratio. Participants sought information on how quickly they could complete the program, if transfer credits would be accepted, and program flexibility (in terms of could they take more classes some terms and less others). Many participants noted that their expected costs had risen incrementally due to factors such as hidden fees, program changes, or extended time needed for the dissertation process. Participants expressed direct desire to have known this information prior to enrollment and noted that they felt institutions should be required to disclose these potential additional costs.

These factors emerged from the findings as central influences, enveloping both the decision-making process itself and the subsequent final college choice decision for participants. Participants talked about each of these factors as central to their process because these factors made a difference in whether or not they could even consider entering a doctoral program. While previous studies focus on elements such as residency, work concerns, family considerations, and financial aid as influencing factors, none of those studies frame these influences as deciding factors in students’ actual ability to consider pursuing their degree of choice (Bersola, et al., 2014; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chuang, 2010; Paulson, 1990; Olsen, 1985).

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that flexibility, access, and cost act as central influences in a way that deviates from existing literature focused on traditional graduate student populations. While these themes are present in extant literature, they act in support of influencing factors such as residency status (location), academic quality/characteristics, diversity, and work considerations (Bersola, et al., 2014; Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chuang, 2010). Conversely,
participants in this study indicated they could not form their initial enrollment goal without considering these central factors.

**Supporting factors.** Though vital to the narrative, value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations acted primarily as supporting influences. Existing studies focus on supporting factors such as campus social environment, diversity, quality of pre-enrollment faculty interactions, campus life quality, and income levels (Bersola, et.al, 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995). The findings of this study demonstrated that supporting factors for women in online doctoral programs focused less on campus and institutional culture or atmosphere and more on personal perspectives of their expected experience or benefits involving enrollment. This is likely due to what Kallio (1995) described as life stage developmental characteristics associated with non-traditional graduate students. As non-traditional students possess different background characteristics than younger more traditional student populations, goals and values shift creating a different supporting focus regarding influencing factors.

Value/investment demonstrates this shift in goals and associated values among non-traditional students. Value/investment figures in the extant literature as an afterthought (Kallio, 1995; English & Umbach, 2016). Though abstractly included in discussion on institutional attributes or personal financial considerations, value/investment is not mentioned directly with factors that influence the college choice decision for graduate students. In contrast, the findings in this study demonstrated this factor of value/investment as being highly influential for several participants. Three participants even discussed retirement directly as part of their value/investment composition. Those participants indicated that their decision was influenced by retirement either in terms of a way to continue work after retirement from their primary career (teaching, consulting, etc.) or in direct terms of ROI and retirement goals.
In this study, the context of value linked closely to the idea of the educational process as being an investment which supported other career and life goals (means to an end rather than the doctorate itself even being a core goal). Participants noted that their decision to enroll despite costs was part of a larger value composition, where the cost upfront would be offset by returns (monetary and intrinsic) following graduation. Overall, participants expressed that they sought an institution that treated their enrollment decision as a serious investment not a service transaction. While monetary cost remained a critical factor to participant’s college choice decision, their perception of value regarding their educational investment tied in strongly to the decision-making equation and contributed to perceptions on institutional reputation.

Reputation factored into participants’ enrollment decision as part of the overall value composition and generally supported participants career driven goals. Participants framed aspects of their discussion of reputation in similar terms as the existing literature; the academic reputation of the institution (Kallio, 1995.) They talked about program structure, accreditation, faculty quality/credentials, institutional services, and brand recognition. However, there were additional ideas central to reputation that were unique to this study including: notions about “brick and mortar” (having a physical campus in place,) concerns about “diploma mills” and institutional credibility, and the overall acceptability of an online degree. Participants also demonstrated different value constructs surrounding the idea of a “good” reputation and what that consisted of specifically.

For the majority of participants, the dialog on reputation centered on concerns surrounding the potential consequences of enrolling in an online program. This remains an area though of significant influence for many students seeking to enroll in online programs. However, very few studies examine these perceptions form a research driven standpoint (Adams &
Students, faculty, prospective employers, and the greater public at large all draw conclusions about and have differentiating perceptions concerning the quality and acceptability of online doctoral degrees. This issue is one of public and industry perception, which can be particularly significant for some students.

An area that emerged as part of reputation that was distinct from the existing literature, involved participants overall value composition concerning what “good” reputation constituted. This varied among participants, but clearly was more than just academic quality and public perception. Some participants placed high value in personal recommendations or recommendations from professional organizations. An example of this is Helen’s selection of her program because it aligned with the FBI’s program through Quantico. The program she selected was listed as one of the FBI’s approved and recommended programs. In her case, the seal of approval from the FBI carried more value in terms of reputation than other factors such as institutional branding or public perceptions of institutional reputation. Two other participants noted similar sentiments regarding their selection of program based on SIOP’s database. In contrast, Athena fixated on reputation in both an academic sense and in the saturation of branding via institutional culture. Career wise, she felt the institution selected generated positive public/industry perception and provided strong brand recognition in the job market. In a personal context, she felt the institution’s “vast network” and “cult like” community buy in from students and stakeholders was vital to her overall achievement personally and professionally.

Personal considerations also figured prominently within participant narratives. This aligns with the existing literature which demonstrates that non-traditional students have a myriad of complex factors and personal considerations influencing their decision-making (Columbaro,
Findings in this study supported existing research find that the decision to enroll in a doctoral program is indeed a life changing choice for prospective students’ that is impacted by multiple influences (Kallio, 1995; Lei & Chaung, 2010; Olsen & King, 1985; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001). Participants cited a variety of personal considerations that extended into categories beyond individual factors named in literature. In some cases, participants even discussed institutional attributes in terms of personal considerations that influenced the decision-making process.

Many of these influences fall under into the realm of personal considerations and include factors as described by participants such as: spiritual considerations, family-work-life balance, job considerations, personal preferences regarding institutional attribute (program style/type structure, interactions with admission/enrollment advisors and personnel), and networking or personal recommendations. Participants narratives reflected multiple roles, personal barriers to achievement (divorce, lack of family support, lack of support at job), and other personal considerations such as military affiliations. Family issues remained one of the most commonly cited influencing factors related to both enrollment in and completion of doctoral programs by participants. This is something well detailed within the existing literature (Dua, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Maher et.al; Muller, 2008; Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram & Frels, 2014).

The findings in this study centered on supporting influencing factors that were intensely individual and directly connected to each participant’s own value hierarchy (Woodward,1997; Iyanna, 2015). These supporting influences are foundational to the central influencing factors that are fundamental to both process and college choice decision. Thinking about the enrollment process as a structured process, the supporting themes reflect underlying associations, values, attributes, ascribed meanings, and consequences/benefits to the college choice decision. They act
as pillars, supporting a kind of decision arch where the participants’ primary reason for enrolling
serves as the keystone. Though their role is supportive, they remain key influencing factors and
serve as the base for the second conclusion found in this study.

**Findings in relation to the literature concerning influencing factors and student success.** The second conclusion reached was that certain factors self-identified by participants as influential within the decision-making process did not always directly contribute to their college choice decision. Participants’ took part in a non-linear decision-making process where influencing factors were often tempered by additional external pressures. Participants discussed a great number of influencing factors within their narratives that while significant, did not always directly contribute to their college choice decision. Despite not having a central influence on the decision-making process, these same factors do affect participants’ satisfaction and success within their selected program of choice. This aligns in particular with the literature on right fit and is a result of the formation of co-created values during the goal formation process as described by Iyanna (2015). Within the layers of co-created value that exists as part of goal formation rests the notion that a good match, or ‘right fit.’

The notion of right fit continues to gain traction within the discourse surrounding doctoral programs (Allum et al., 2014; Bersola et.al, 2014; English & Umbach, 2016; Offerman, 2001; Poock & Love, 2001; Saeed et al., 2008; Wergin & Alexandre, 2012). The findings of this study support the importance of a good institution-student match in term of student perceptions regarding achievement, success, and student satisfaction with their program/institution of choice. Participants who made college choice decision that not only reflected those factors but also an integration of the key supporting factors seemed most satisfied with their selected programs. They used descriptives such as satisfied, successful, alignment, supportive, growth, knowledge,
confident, increased experience, and valuable when discussing how they felt overall about their college choice process and subsequent enrollment.

Participants described how associations with their given institution made them feel and focused on their own value constructs, meanings, and associations when discussing even institutional attributes. Participants who were satisfied with their programs felt successful. They felt that they had achieved something extraordinary and expanded their career opportunities. This finding aligns with and supports the literature base in the sense that although there is an established baseline of factors known to contribute to student success, those can vary greatly between individual students (Saeed, et.al, 2008). Additionally, reason for study is of equal importance and remains a very personal influencing factor (Bersola et. al, 2014; Denson & Bowman, 2015; English & Umbach, 2016; Walker, et al., 2007).

*Right fit, a different narrative.* Instead of looking at right fit in a traditional sense, which focuses in on matching key student characteristics with institutional attributes and culture, participants in this study looked at how enrollment would satisfy other external goals. Participants provided a narrative that reflected a decision to pursue a doctorate for different reasons than many more traditional campus-based students. The dialog was also saturated with the discussion of career goals over educational goals. Almost all participants when asked their educational goals instead provided career goals. This finding is critical to developing a strong sense of understanding the differences in the decision-making process among this student population. In the context of this student population, the influencing factors present within participant narratives altered the decision-making process and the prospective students perceptions surrounding ‘right fit.’
Participants described giving up preferred alternatives during their decision-making process, thus providing an alternative narrative to that presented in the existing literature. Most of these decisions were a result of barriers to access. Each participant noted at least one barrier to access. These barriers were often subtle but significant. Job constraints, rural location, military affiliations, and family responsibility impacted participant decisions. The majority of participants discussed giving up their most preferred choice for something that was flexible, accessible, and/or cost effective. Even of those who described their program and institution as being a good fit, did so in terms which differed from the extant literature.

In the case of women seeking online doctoral programs, the majority of participants looked at right fit in terms of flexibility, access, and cost. This is not to say students disregarded the idea of right fit or institutional culture, but it did not feature as centrally in participant narratives as it does in the existing literature. Simply put - other influencing factors took precedence during the decision-making process that reflect the unique circumstances of this student population. Extant literature looks at how well a student integrates into the institutional culture and predicts whether or not those students will then meet programmatic requirements with success (Bersola et al., 2014; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Saeed, et.al, 2008; Tinto, 1993). In the case of this study, most participants did not indicate that they were seeking this kind of integration into a larger campus culture. Instead, participants in this study discussed how they felt the institution would fit into their existing lifestyle and family culture.

It is important to note that while not a primary focus for this student group, right fit still remains important in the context of student success. In certain cases when the decision to enroll in their selected program displayed a disconnect from personal goals or values, the participant
noted being dissatisfied with their program choice and in some cases at risk for non-completion. This is where the notion of right fit becomes critical. The three participants who all self-identified as being at risk for non-completion displayed this particular disconnect between goals and values from their enrollment decision. Essentially, all at risk students had made their selection of program based on central influencing factors at the expense of other supporting influencing factors that were strongly connected to their own personal values and goals. Of those three participants the disconnects are as follows: 1) access had to take precedence over other factors due to rural location, 2) job constraints necessitated the flexibility of an entirely online program but the program selected did not contain personal connections developed in face to face settings resulting in the participant feeling very frustrated and isolated, 3) cost and access took precedence over all other influencing factors including the participant’s real desire to pursue a PhD instead of an EdD.

These examples demonstrate how a disconnect in process associated with consumer behavior can result in problems with right fit that increase the risk of attrition (Olsen & King, 1985; Paulsen, 1990; Saeed, et al., 2008). It is why understanding college choice decision-making behaviors and overall educational goal or career objectives of the student are critical to retention and persistence (Astin, 1993; Bailey, Leinbach, & Jenkins, 2006; Hossler & Hossee, 2001). Existing literature attributed the higher attrition women experience rates for reasons that have been engendered as “women’s issues” (Allum, et al., 2014; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998). Those issues (pregnancy, marriage and family, and time constraints, etc.) do impact women, however, the findings of this study demonstrate that attrition among women in online doctoral programs may also be a result of their decision-making process as well.
The extant literature discussed right fit and the importance of factors such as social integration into campus environment, location, and other factors considered pertinent to suitably matching candidates to programs (Allum, et al., 2014; Bersola et al., 2014; Poock & Love, 2001; Saeed et al., 2008; English & Umbach, 2016). In contrast, the findings of this study show that women in online doctoral programs need different context. Right fit in the case of women selecting online programs needs to be reevaluated from a position that incorporates the differences in their decision-making process, recognizes the mitigating factors stemming from those central influencing factors of flexibility, access, and cost, and emphasizes the significance of the supporting influences in prospective students’ final choice.

**Findings in relation to the theoretical framework and decision-making process.** The findings of this study included the individual college choice decision-making chain for each of the 15 participants. Developing an understanding of the steps prospective students took in their search during the college choice decision-making process remains vital to establishing how those factors led to the student’s enrollment decision. As mentioned previously, the decision-making process for the women who participated in this study was influenced by six factors: flexibility, access, cost, value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations. The findings also established that the following steps occurred within each narrative: goal setting, personal resource assessment, research/ information (info) gathering, institutional assessment, networking, and college choice decision.

Like the six factors found to influence the college choice decision for this population, the steps present in the data occurred in varying degree and frequency. The order in which these steps were completed varied from participant to participant, as did how often each step occurred within the process. Some participants had a very clear process and trajectory. They followed a
straight line from initial goal formation to enrollment, completing each phase of the process while integrating influencing factors along the way. Some participants looped back and repeated certain steps as they hit access barriers, uncovered institutional attributes, or developed new preferences. Some participants repeated the entire process several times while trying to mitigate influencing factors. This is where the theoretical framework, EMEVF, utilized in the development of this study becomes critical to the discussion (Iyanna, 2015).

**EMEVF applied.** Iyanna’s (2015) EMEVF is critical to developing an understanding of this part of the process. Essentially the process as described by participants demonstrates the co-creation of additional values and goals within the larger goal setting construct. The final goal of all participants could be defined as career oriented. The decision to enroll in their selected program/institution of chose is only a step in the larger goal setting framework. The goal setting process in the college choice process is not a static goal. Students do not simply enroll; the process does not end there. Students must continue forward and complete the educational process. The findings of the study showed that the college choice for women enrolled in an online doctoral program represents a dynamic process with additional layers of goals that follow the enrollment decision. The process contains layers of goal directed actions and co-created values. In this way, the college choice decision extends beyond assessing intuitional attributes and weighing out individual factors, it encapsulates the different kinds of influences that impact the process. The process as developed by Iyanna(2015) is demonstrated below as found for participants involved in this study.

Figure 8 demonstrates the application of EMEVF in a straight line to provide for clarity. Not all participant’s individual decision-making chains align with the model, but all do move through this basic template while goal setting and while engaged in their search process. Note
that the networking step is particularly fluid, occurring at a highly variable set of points within the process.

Figure 8. EMEVF applied to study findings.

The assessment of resources and values can be more time consuming steps than the other steps within the process. At least two participants discussed spending more than two years evaluating the resources and information they worked on gathering as well as weighing out the consequences and benefits of enrolling in an online doctoral program (Rhea, Athena). In accordance with existing literature, participants who spent more time in those two steps reported
higher levels of program satisfaction overall (Allum, et al., 2014; Lei & Chaung, 2010; Wergin & Alexandre, 2012). Other participants moved forward quickly, noting that they wanted to make an expedient decision. Several participants who moved through their processes more quickly noted that they wished they had spent more time assessing other programs before enrolling (Calliope, Ione, Hestia, Phaedra).

**Summary**

In summary, influences described in the findings occur at each level with varying significance as previously noted. The illustrations provided within these results serve as a glimpse of the process as it applies to this particular population. The significance of each influence depends on the participant and varies based on the participant’s individual process. Flexibility, access, and cost figured as central influences particularly in the goal formation and informational gathering phases of participants’ decision-making process. Supporting factors of value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations influenced different phases of the process but generally influenced goal formation and value phases more intensively. While these influences affected student’s enrollment decision in different ways, the process and steps taken are centralized as are the most important influencing factors. Additionally, the findings of this study showed, that some students are essentially sacrificing good institutional fit, or right fit, for strongly influencing factors that essentially act as barriers to access as well as influences in their decision-making process (cost and access primarily.) Ultimately, understanding the process and how these influences impact students’ serves to inform institutions to support the enrollment of students who then persist and successfully complete their online doctoral programs.

**Implications and Recommendations for Practice**
The purpose of this study was to understand how academic and non-academic factors influenced the college choice decision-making process of women enrolled in online doctoral programs. Understanding the process and how these influences impact students’ serves to inform the admissions process and support the enrollment of students who then persist and successfully complete their programs. The findings of this study do not contradict existing literature, rather they build on it. This section details recommendations for practice including the following target areas:

- Recruitment Strategies: retention begins with admission and enrollment.
  - Recommendations for Program Administrators and Admissions/Enrollment Staff/Personnel concerning student support services.

- Retention Strategies: mitigating student perception.
  - Program Expectations: mentoring as a retention strategy.
  - Dissertation Phase: Strategies for easing student transition.

**Recruitment strategies: Retention begins with admission and enrollment.** Although data collected targeted the college choice process rather than the admission process, elements of the admission and enrollment processes were woven into participant narratives. Among participants, most described an admissions and enrollment process that aligned with processes associated with large online institutions. Applications were sent electronically and instead of having direct contact with faculty and program administrators as traditional to doctoral programs, online doctoral students reported having contact pre-enrollment with centralized admissions and enrollment personnel/advisors. Participants noted that their interactions with these staff members often proved to be critical influencing factors for personal consideration during their enrollment decision. Participants also noted that when the interactions with these
staff members felt transactional in nature, or if they felt pressured to enroll, that it impacted their decision negatively as well.

**Personal connections.** The recommendation for programs in this regard is to extend these personal connections developed during admissions and enrollment with key support staff in admissions and enrollment keeping in mind that retention begins with admissions and enrollment. Studies show that adequate academic supports play a critical role in the persistence of doctoral students (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Golde, 2000; Walker, 2007). During the admissions and enrollment processes, staff and administration need to be assessing student characteristics, identify potential areas of student need, and have support services in place to help students transition into their programs successfully. These supports often exist at the undergraduate level, but have been overlooked within doctoral student populations. This is due to the expectation that doctoral students, particularly those enrolling in online (distance) programs are independent and motivated learners. While this is generally true, participants in this study clearly expressed a desire and a need to make supporting connections within their selected institution and program. Those who found this support reported higher levels of programmatic satisfaction and success.

**Support systems.** Support systems which involve teams of support staff and faculty members could be developed to support student’s transition into their online programs. If institutions worked to group admissions and enrollment support staff and faculty members teaching core foundational classes that the majority of students take upon entering their programs, a team approach could be utilized to support student success. Support staff could gradually release students then to faculty members who would serve as mentors and guides for students during coursework. This would also create key connections later needed for matching
students to advisors during the dissertation process. Participants also noted detachment in the dissertation process with regard to advisor assignment. This factor could be mitigated by a process that begins with enrollment and transitions the student along each phase of their program: newly enrolled, coursework in process, and then finally the dissertation phase. This could help provide academic socialization and support students feeling integrated into the online “campus life” that traditional studies have found to be so critical (Austin, 2002; Luzzo, 1993; Shapiro, et al., 1990).

*Enrollment management.* The literature suggests that admissions staff, faculty, and administrative personnel use enrollment management practices to make informed admissions decisions based on institutional capacity and student characteristics (Astin, 1993; Black, 2004; Paulsen, 1990; Yadav & Pal, 2012). The findings of this study support this assessment and further recommend the development of trainings that bring key staff and faculty from these areas together to examine the key influences impacting student enrollment and give insight into behaviors that would indicate either student success or attrition respectively. As demonstrated by the findings in this study and supported by the literature, college choice decision-making behaviors and overall educational goal or objectives of the student can serve as predictive indicators (Astin, 1993; Bailey, Leinbach, & Jenkins, 2006; Hossler & Hossee, 2001). A survey issued to enrolling students that asked students to identify key elements and influencing factors in their decision-making process that included key background demographics, did they enroll quickly, did they consider other schools, did they make a decision based solely on personal considerations or reputation, etc. These types of assessments could help identify students at risk for poor match, who could then be marked for additional follow up by the support team prior to enrollment to ensure right fit and good program matching.
Retention strategies: Mitigating student perception. Following successful programmatic enrollment, participants noted a variety of perceptions and expectations that they felt were potentially not well met. Many of these concerns and considerations developed out of the isolation experiences by many online students. Disengaged faculty, misunderstandings about requirements, and difficulty navigating the shift from structured to unstructured within the dissertation phase topped the list of student concerns. In particular, participants cited two major areas of concern: program expectations and expectations from faculty.

Participants noted a disconnect in what they thought they would experience and what they actually experienced once matriculated into their program. Some participants described being part of larger classes that felt impersonal and had little faculty engagement overall. The quality and quantity of faculty interactions did not meet expectations. Neither did expectations regarding classmates or cohort members for some participants. While classes remained flexible and convenient, they lacked what participants described as the “richness” found in face to face experiences. Participants noted really feeling like they lost some of the richer deeper connections afforded in traditional programs. This is something reflected in the extant literature on women in online classes as well (Kramare, 2001; Muller, 2008). Despite needing the flexibility and convenience of the online setting, many women long for those personal connections developed in face to face settings.

Faculty members play a key role in post-enrollment retention. Doctoral students often cite issues with faculty as either a factor in persistence or as a key barrier/factor in attrition (English& Umbach, 2016; Golde, 2000; Hertlin & Schute, 2007; Muller, 2008). As doctoral students typically work in close connection with faculty, especially once they reach the dissertation phase, faculty engagement and support becomes critical to student success (English
& Umbach; Kallio, 1995; Pauley, et al., 1999). Participants in this study noted that when faculty were disconnected or disengaged from the learning process, the feelings of isolation already underlying the experience were heightened.

**Mentoring.** The recommendation here is a development of strong mentoring programs for women (or men) who desire these strong interpersonal connections. Studies demonstrate that well-developed mentoring programs do increase both faculty and student engagement, which lends to overall student success - particularly among women (Columbaro, 2008; Gardner, 2009; Karmarae, 2011). In conjunction with the recommended early support services extension, students could be identified by those core admission/enrollment teams as having an interest in mentoring programs. Once students are identified, program administrators can work to match students along with peer or faculty mentors accordingly. As noted by Muller (2008) women thrive in online learning environments that develop this personalized context. When women feel they are well supported in a holistic sense, they feel less isolated and report higher levels of overall satisfaction (Mueller, 2008, Gardner, 2009). As such, the connections developed by mentoring programs can serve as critical support systems that enhance student success. Instead of students becoming isolated and generating their own perceptions concerning program expectations, these mentoring systems would give students a place/person to have personal connection and received information or advice on program expectations.

Women in particular indicate feeling of isolation and frustration surrounding lack of adequate mentoring and support specific to women and their unique needs especially concerning issue of work-life and family balance (Dua, 2007; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Padula & Miller, 1999; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Participants in this study noted that during points of change in particular (institutional or personal,) they felt the strongest feelings of isolation.
Having a strong mentorship program in place would help participating students weather the changes. So each transition would have the underlying consistency of the mentor acting as a key stabilizing factor. It would also help minimize the problem of social isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2007) as mentorships can include peer to peer mentoring programs as well as faculty-students relationships. In addition, a strong mentorship program could also help mitigate the difficulties reported by participants within their dissertation phase.

**Dissertation phase: Strategies for easing student transition.** When participants were asked if there was anything they wished they would have known before enrolling, participants discussed challenges within the dissertation phase associated with both individual and institutional factors, hidden fees and costs associated with extending time to completion, and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Participants felt that if they had been better informed before enrolling they would have taken care to try and develop or seek out supports to assist in their process. Many participants noted that they resorted to social media groups for support, and mentioned how they did not receive support needed from their advisors. Several participants discussed being poorly matched to their dissertation advisor, meaning that either research interests did not align or that the advisor felt distant and was not integral to their process.

Participants described in depth the difficulties they encountered when moving from the structured atmosphere of classes and course work to the unstructured atmosphere of the dissertation process. Much like the disconnect felt in the transition from admissions to enrollment in course work, the transition from enrollment in course work to the dissertation phase proved challenging. Essentially, each of these transition points involved minor shifts in goal setting. Students have to complete a “reset” in thinking – from search to coursework, then
from course work to dissertation. Each phase contains a goal completion and new goal formation. Each transitional shift represents an area where students then need additional support.

**Connecting process and practice.** The recommendations here are twofold and begin with processes. Institutions need to develop materials for students that detail the dissertation process and make that information available to students prior to enrolling. This includes expected time frames, steps in the process, checkpoint goals along the way (proposal development/acceptance, IRB, defense timing), and what to expect concerning advisors availability (draft turn arounds, email response times, verbal/video check-ins). Participants also noted what they described as “hidden fees” and “additional costs” associated with the dissertation phase that included paying large tuition sums up front, editing fee incurred when advisors suggest students contract an outside editor, and tuition payments to stay matriculated after the initial time allotted for the dissertation process expires. Several participants noted that their institutions provided time for the dissertation phase was not in alignment with the actual average time students needed to complete that dissertation process. One example noted involved a participant who stated her institution grants an 18 month period granted under the tuition payment for completion. She went on to describe how her advisor then let her know it was an impossible task and that most students needed approximately 3 years to move through the process.

The transparency regarding the dissertation process in terms of potential time and costs involved remains important because it is part of the consequences/benefits evaluation within this context. Students look at their resources; time, money, experiences, location, information gathered (etc.) and then make the best decision they can with the information on hand. Participants unknowingly made decisions that caused dilemmas with regard to the dissertation process as a result in errors or lack of information regarding the process. When decisions get
made without all the information at hand, students run the risk of the return value of the final selection being reduced (Payne, Bettman, & Luce, 1996). As such, institutions should seek to provide as much information on processes to students as possible so that students are fully informed prior to matriculation in an effort to both increase student success and over student satisfaction.

Several participants noted that they only discovered post enrollment that they would not be able to develop a relationship with a faculty member and then ask them to become their dissertation advisor. Participants discussed finding out about the dissertation process only when they actually reach the dissertation phase and become categorized as students with all but dissertation (ABD). Participants expressed directly that they did not feel comfortable with the process, and many felt their own needs and research interests were not adequately considered. If prospective students were at least privy to information regarding the process before enrolling, they could then make a more informed decision concerning their own personal resources and values in regard to how the process is handled at a programmatic level. This leads to the second recommendation in this regard.

**Mentoring: Part of the dissertation process.** The second recommendation for supports within the dissertation process circles back to this notion that programs/institutions should consider developing stronger mentoring programs for women who need to feel connected during their process. The relationship between dissertation advisor and advisee in traditional programs is one of intensive contact. During the doctoral students typically work in close connection with faculty (Columbaro, 2008; English & Umbach; Kallio, 1995; Pauley, et al., 1999). Faculty engagement and support becomes critical to student success within this intensive part of the doctoral process. (English & Umbach, 2016; Golde, 2000; Walker, 2007). Conversely,
participants reported that the dissertation phase itself is particularly isolating, even more so than what they anticipated. Participants reflected the need to develop strong connections, both personal and academic, to mitigate the challenges associated with the dissertation process, but noted that those were largely absent on a programmatic level. Participants felt disconnected from their advisors, and several noted they felt their assigned advisors were a poor fit either in personality or research interests.

Establishing a strong mentoring program would help alleviate some of the stressful elements noted by participants surrounding the dissertation process. It is recommended that the mentoring occurs at two levels, faculty to student and peer to peer among students. Faculty to student mentoring should be based on research interests and potential dissertation matching. This would serve to ease stress for students regarding the dissertation process and provides a point of contact to a faculty member who can then help guide and direct the dissertation advising match process if they are unable to advise one of their student mentees. Peer mentoring groups could provide a critical support role and contribute to the persistence of online doctoral students (Bollinger & Halpua, 2012; Denson & Bowman, 2015; Golde, 2000; Walker, 2007). Peer to peer mentoring should ideally create pairs of grouping consisting of students who are in various stages of completion so they can provide support and insight into process and various expectations. Students could then share experiences and resources while developing much needed socio-emotional interactions with classmates.

The recommendations for practice listed here are in no way exhaustive. They are however, designed to provide a basis for developing processes that support the admission and subsequent enrollment of students who ultimately have success within their online doctoral program of choice. As institutions continue to cultivate online doctoral programs and expand
online offerings, these recommendations provide information designed to create meaningful connections between students, staff, faculty and administration while providing transparency of process.

Limitations

As with any study, there are inherent limitations (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The scope of this study is specifically limited to women in online doctoral programs. The focus in on women was not designed to produce limiting data, but rather to explore a population still under-represented across the whole of academia (Dua, 2007). As such, this study focused intensely on this one population subset to provide further insight into the experiences of women specifically.

Additional limitations emerged during data collection and analysis. With regard to the gathering of background information via the survey and non-traditional characteristics of the sample population, it would have been beneficial to break down the “married” category further into: married, divorced, single/never married. This might have provided additional information useful in participant screening and the interview selection process. Concerning the interviews, instead of asking participants if they would like to add to the background information provided in the survey (to which almost everyone said “no”), instead a question asking participants to describe their background would have provided better information and a richer picture of their overall life and experiences. Observations concerning body language and facial expression could not be included in this study due to the use of phone interviews.

By nature of their status as doctoral students/recent graduates, participants were very interested in what I was “looking for” out of their responses. They would occasionally pause and say things like “is this what you are looking for here?” or “Let me know if this isn’t what you are looking for.” In some cases it disrupted the natural flow of the interview and at times participants
held back certain information because they thought it would not be relevant to the study. Once the recording was stopped, they would relax and add a good deal of information off the record, which then could not be included in the study directly.

The final limitation involves sample size and homogeneity. Although it is critical to develop a sample that is purposive and well aligned to achieve normative and typical results, this specific sampling process potentially limited additional outlying voices. Such population subsets require further study as well for exploration of uniqueness. Furthermore, a larger and less purposive sampling might have addressed both outlying voice and other core dynamics within the population. This is an area where future research is merited.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future recommendations for research include taking the findings of this study and scaling them to test the results over a wider population, developing a new model specific to online students that can be applied across institutions, further exploration into the dissertation process for women, and an exploration of the personal considerations in regard specifically to external influences. Each of these recommendations are designed to fill in gaps still existing in the literature and provide new insight into the experiences of women enrolled in online doctoral programs.

The first recommendation for future research is that the core and supporting themes along with categories established for the decision-making process steps would be tested over a larger and less purposeful sampling. Done via survey delivery, similar demographical information could be collected and analyzed along with the key themes and factors which could be rank in order of most important to least important to the college choice process. Subsequent categories that emerged as decision-making steps could be indicated as steps taken or not taken. This would
help establish transferability of these findings to a wider population and provide insight as to how students view those themes within a scale that gauges influencing factors.

The second recommendation for future research is to develop a new model specific to online students that can be applied across institutions. While the model applied here in relation to the theoretical framework does provide good insight into the process and connected goal formation, it does not detail out how those influencing factors specifically contribute to each stage. In order to establish this, additional target focus groups would need to be conducted to assess how student groups felt the layers of goal formation interacted specifically with those influencing factors. While key themes were associated with specific layers within the goal formation process and subsequent decision to enroll, how students perceive those themes as working within the layers was not clearly established. Further exploration of students’ own analysis of their goal formation process in conjunction with these themes would elucidate this process and better allow for development of a model that integrates influencing factors directly into the model’s structure.

Future research involving an exploration of the dissertation process for women remains a necessary endeavor. Although this was a study focused on college choice, participants all wanted to discuss the dissertation process in some way, shape, or form. When asked if there was anything they wished they would have known before enrolling, 13 out of 15 participants noted that they wished they had more information on and a better understanding of the dissertation phase. The dissertation process is fraught with challenges and barriers to success. Many of the participants noted having an incredibly difficult time transitioning from the structure, pace, and rigor of the classroom and their course work to the unstructured self-paced dissertation process. Additional research to gain insight into how to help women through the dissertation process
would add significant insight to the body of literature as women in academia remain an understudied population. They want their voices heard, and it will probably shed light on factors critical to persistence/attrition, potentially fostering higher student success rates among women in doctoral programs.

The final recommendation centers on the final influencing factor listed by this study: personal considerations. Although personal considerations did not figure as centrally to the actual college choice decision, it was still a highly important factor. As this category covered a myriad of issues that focused on external and internal influences that the participants described in detail; this category in particular would make for a rich qualitative study. Issues such as family/spousal influences, personal preferences/values, and personal motivations need additional consideration as they are tied closely not only to enrollment, but also to persistence.

**Final Thoughts**

This study provided insight into how academic and non-academic influenced the college choice decision-making process of women enrolled in online doctoral programs. The findings of this inductive study indicated that six factors, flexibility, access, cost, value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations, saturated the data and shaped participants’ college choice decision in meaningful ways. From those influencing factors and connecting associations emerged a stable decision-making chain and centralized college choice decision-making factors for each participant. The results demonstrated how the influencing factors of flexibility, access, and cost were supported by the themes of value/investment, reputation, and personal considerations during the decision-making process. The result was the application of the theoretical framework in an organized aggregate EMEVF model and a set of implications and recommendations for practice.
It is important to note here that although this study was inherently student-centric, the recommendations for practice were indeed institution-centric. The recommendations for practice made here were developed to support the successful enrollment and retention thereafter of women in online doctoral programs in hopes that institutions will carefully consider the implications in regards to persistence and attrition among female students. My final thought for practitioners and scholar alike in regards to developing sustainable student populations that successfully graduate is to be the change that you would want to see. The recommendations here have been made in hopes that institutions take the first step in change from within to support existing and future student populations.
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Appendix A: Recruiting Survey

Women in Online Doctoral Programs: Institutional Selection and Program Choice

Informed consent: You are invited to participate in a web based online survey. The survey is part of a research study whose purpose is to uncover how the decision-making process regarding college choice emerged naturally given the various academic and nonacademic influences present in the experiences of women. This survey should take about 15 minutes to complete. You are being asked to participate because you are a woman at least 30 years of age, residing in the U.S., and enrolled in/ recently graduated from an online doctoral program. You must be at least 18 years old to take this survey.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. The decision to participate in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate, you can refuse to answer any question, and may quit at any time. Even if you begin the web based online survey, you can stop at any time.

There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this preliminary survey for this study. However, your responses may help the researcher learn more about how women make the decision to enroll in an online doctoral program and will be used to identify potential participants for further follow up interviews.

If you agree to participate in further phone interviews and are selected based on qualifying criteria.

If you have any questions regarding electronic privacy, please feel free to contact Mark Nardone, NU’s Director of Information Security via phone at 6173737901, or via email at privacy@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kathleen Scarpena at scarpena.k@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Sara Ewell at s.ewell@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (CPS16-08-02).

By clicking on the survey link below [Or the “accept” button below] you are indicating that you consent to participate in this study. Please print out a copy of this consent form for your records.

Thank you for your time.
Kathleen Scarpena

* Required
A copy of this consent form will be emailed upon request. By answering “yes” below, you indicate that you understand the above information, have had all of your questions
about participation on this research project answered, and you voluntarily consent to participate in this research. *
Mark only one oval.
  o Yes, I have read and understand the above consent form and I voluntarily consent to participate in this research.
  o No, I do not wish to participate.

For the purpose of this study women are defined as female both in identity and biology who are over the age of 30 years. Do you meet this criteria?
Mark only one oval.
  o Yes
  o No

Are you currently enrolled in/graduated from within the last five (5) years, an Online Doctoral Program? (NOTE: Current Northeastern students are excluded from this study.)
Mark only one oval.
  o Yes
  o No

Type of institution you are enrolled in/ did you graduate from?
Mark only one oval.
  o Public
  o Private Non-Profit
  o Private For-Profit (Proprietary)

Please provide your Academic Discipline/Field of Study
Degree Sought (E.g.: PhD, EdD, DBA, DNP, etc.)

Does your program require advanced work beyond the master's level, including the preparation and defense of a dissertation based on original research?
Mark only one oval.
  o Yes
  o No

Nontraditional doctoral learners are best described by sets of factors including, but not limited to; mature learner over the age of 30, responsible for their own day to day life decisions, oriented towards self directed learning, married with children/dependent parents, professionally driven, enrolled part time, and self funded(meaning your tuition is not covered by a stipend.) Please check all of the following selections that apply to you.
Mark only one oval.
  o Over 30
  o Mature Learner
  o Responsible for Own Decision-Making
  o Oriented to Self Directed Learning
  o Married
  o Have Dependent Children
- Have Dependent Parents
- Professionally/Career Driven
- Enrolled Part Time
- Self Funded (either via loans or directly out of your own pocket.)

Do you have at least 1-3 years of full-time employment and career experience?
Mark only one oval.
- Yes
- No

Please identify the three most influential factors for consideration in your decision to enroll in your doctoral program at your institution of choice, and then explain why those factors were important to you.

Would you be willing to participate in a more in depth phone interview approximately 45 minutes in length? (If yes, please complete follow up question providing contact information.)
Mark only one oval.
- Yes
- No

If you answered "Yes" to the above question, please provide a valid email address for follow up information regarding the interview process.
Appendix B: Facebook and LinkedIn Invitation to Participate in Survey

Greetings!

My name is Kathleen Scarpena, and I am seeking participants in a study on women enrolled in online doctoral programs. Attached here is the link to the recruitment survey – if you are interested in participating or know someone who might be – please fill out and share!

Survey Link:
https://docs.google.com/a/husky.neu.edu/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdIuolnmKvltOtBtVzh6Vl7jumHgHMK0s98-3URuZLJr_7BQw/viewform

All questions can be directed to Kathleen Scarpena at scarpena.k@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Sara Ewell at s.ewell@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.
Appendix C: Email for Interview Selection

Subject: Participation in Interview for Study on College Choice of Women in Online Doctoral Programs

Greetings!

Based on the information offered in the Recruitment Survey, you have been identified as a good match for participation in a study on How Academic and Non-Academic Experiences Influence Institutional Selection and Program Choice for Women in Online Doctoral Programs. As indicated on the survey, you are also willing to participate in an interview. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not reply to this email, you will not be contacted again regarding this study.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes of your time. Attached you will find a consent form that provides in writing the details of the study. We will discuss the consent at the beginning of the interview. If you are not comfortable proceeding you may quit at any time. By agreeing to the interview, you agree to the consent terms.

Please email me at my student email address only scarpena.k@husky.neu.edu only if you wish to volunteer for the interview. Let me know what date and time is best for the interview. Remember there is no pressure for you to proceed.

Best,

Kathleen Scarpena
Appendix D: Unsigned Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Sara Ewell, Student Researcher, Kathleen Scarpena

Title of Project: Women in Online Doctoral Programs: How Academic and Non-Academic Experiences Influence Institutional Selection and Program Choice

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to uncover how the decision-making process regarding college choice emerged naturally given the various academic and non-academic influences present in the experiences of women.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project. The study will take place via phone and will take about 45 minutes. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you answer a series of questions about and reflect on about your decision-making process while deciding with institution and program of choice to enroll in for your doctoral program.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being of this project. The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kathleen Scarpena at scarpena.k@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Sara Ewell at s.ewell@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Kathleen Scarpena
Appendix E: Interview Protocol and Questions

Interview Protocol and Questions

Interviewee (Pseudonym): _____________________________________

Interviewer: _________________________________________________

Interview

Part I:
Introductory Session Objectives (5 minutes): Build rapport, describe the study, read informed
consent form, describe elements included in the informed consent form, and answer any
questions.
Introductory Protocol
You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who
has a great deal to share about the experience of how women decide to enroll in their online
doctoral program of choice. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part
in this study. Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. The decision to
participate in this research project is up to you and you may choose to end the interview session
at any time.

My research project focuses on the experience of women enrolled online doctoral programs with
particular interest in understanding their college choice decision-making process and
influencing factors in institutional/programmatic selection. Through this study, I hope to gain
more insight into the experience of prospective female online doctoral students. Hopefully this
will allow practitioners the chance to help institutions understand why women students enroll,
how to keep them enrolled, and how programs can be improved for future students.
Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I
would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this
interview?

We are now being recorded. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this process. I will also be
taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a
pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. Recordings will be eventually
destroyed after they are transcribed. The transcribed data may be used for future research
studies. However, only a pseudonym will be used to label the transcripts.

After the interview is transcribed, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript for your
review.

We have planned this interview to last no longer than about 45 minutes. During this time, I have
several questions that I would like to cover. Therefore, it may be necessary to interrupt you in
order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this
time?

Basic Background: age, occupation, enrolled/graduated, marital status, children/dependent
parents, self-funded (by what means?).
**Part II: Interview** (35-40 minutes)
Objective: To gather data to address the research questions above. Questions remain soft, or flexible, to accommodate participant responses and build off them accordingly.
Questions:

- Can you reflect on how you made the decision to enroll in an online doctoral program?
  - What steps did you take during the decision-making process?
  - How many institutions total did you consider?
  - What types of programs were considered? (Online, traditional, hybrid, etc.)

- Why did you select this program/institution specifically?
  - How does/did enrollment in your program of choice support your overall educational goals?

- What specific individual factors influenced your decision?
  - Which factors were considered most important to your decision?
  - Why were those factors important to you?
  - What do these factors mean to you?
  - Can you describe why you thought those factors would benefit you?

- What institutional attributes were considered during the decision-making process?
  - Which attributes were considered most important to your decision?
  - Why were those attributes important to you?
  - What do these attributes mean to you?
  - What were some of your perceived benefits/consequences from those attributes based on your expected experience with the institution?

- When you reflect back on the process, is there anything you wish you would have known before enrolling?