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**PERCEPTIONS AFTER COMPLETING THE DEGREE:  
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF SELECT HIGHER  
EDUCATION DOCTORAL GRADUATES**

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**ABSTRACT**

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| Aim/Purpose | Limited research exists on the perceived value that a doctoral degree has on higher education administrators' goals; therefore, this collective case study had two purposes. The first was to assess qualitatively the perceptions of four doctorate-holding higher education administrators to explore the potential value associated with their degrees, and the second was to determine whether they perceived that their degree attainments influenced the achievement of their professional goals, if at all. |
| Background  | Understanding goal attainment and the value associated with obtaining a doctoral degree is important to recognize the needs of doctoral students and to inform how to support degree-seeking professionals in achieving their professional goals. Building upon the conceptual model of doctoral value, as defined by Bryan and Guccione (2018), the researchers also utilized Becker's  |

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(1964) human capital theory as the framework for understanding the perceptions of select administrative professionals who have completed their doctoral degrees in higher education.

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| Methodology                       | Because this was a collective case study, four doctorate-holding higher education administrators were selected, through convenience sampling, to engage in a formal semi-structured face-to-face interview. Interview responses were evaluated using ethnographic analysis (i.e., domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis).   |
| Contribution                      | Findings from this research can be used to better understand the perceptions of graduates who earned a doctoral degree in education, particularly with an increase in the number of doctoral degrees in that field. The results from this study align with findings from previous studies.   |
| Findings                          | The ethnographic analysis of the data indicated that the administrators perceived their doctoral degree as a way to advance professionally (e.g., career opportunities and research publication) and as a way to improve personally (e.g., increased confidence and becoming a role model). Two domains emerged: attainment of goals and perceptions of doctoral degree value. The taxonomic analysis revealed that the attainment of goals included personal and professional goals. Lastly, the componential analysis led to the discovery of nine attributes associated with obtaining a doctoral degree. |
| Recommendations for Practitioners | Administrators in higher education degree programs should understand the needs of their students while they are participating in doctoral studies. By knowing what doctoral students expect to gain after obtaining a doctoral degree, doctoral-program administrators might consider tailoring courses and support programs to meet doctoral student needs.   |
| Recommendations for Researchers   | Additional longitudinal studies should be undertaken to understand better how doctoral graduates view the value of their degree many years later. Do their perceptions change over time, or are they solidified?   |
| Impact on Society                 | With an increasing number of individuals obtaining doctoral degrees in higher education, departments, colleges, and universities need to understand whether graduates find that their degree has been useful. Because there is a demand for agencies to emphasize skills and work-related training, the perceived value of the degree can inform policymakers on changes in curriculum and programming to increase the perceived value of the doctoral degree.   |
| Future Research                   | Future research should expand upon the number of students who are interviewed, and students in other academic programs may be interviewed to understand similarities and differences. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to understand if the perception of degree value changes over time.  |
| Keywords                          | doctoral degree, perception of value, human capital theory, qualitative research methods, higher education administration, professional goals  |

## INTRODUCTION

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Limited research exists on the perceived value that a doctoral degree has on higher education administrators' goals; therefore, this collective case study had two purposes. The first was to assess qualitatively the perceptions of four doctorate-holding higher education administrators, selected through convenience sampling, to explore the potential value associated with their degrees. The second was to determine whether they perceived that their degree attainments influenced the achievement of

their professional goals, if at all. Becker's (1964) human capital theory served as the framework for this collective case study. The authors conducted interviews of the administrators and evaluated their replies using ethnographic analysis (i.e., domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis; Spradley, 1979), and they reported observations of the administrators' nonverbal behaviors using Gorden's (1975) typology of nonverbal communication. The ethnographic analysis of the verbal data indicated that the administrators perceived their doctoral degree as a way to advance professionally (e.g., career opportunities and research publication) and as a way to improve personally (e.g., increased confidence and becoming a role model). A discussion of the findings, limitations, and recommendations is presented.

From 2000 to 2016, doctoral degrees in education have increased by 88% (Snyder et al., 2019). Many program directors track some aspect of their graduates' employment after degree completion (Glenn, 2010); however, the perceptions held by the graduates of the value of the degree often are not obtained. A review of the literature revealed few published studies of the perceived value that a doctoral degree has on higher education administrators' goals. Because of this gap, new studies are needed to explore the perceived value that administrators place on their doctoral degree attainment related to their professional goals. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of the value of the doctoral degrees held by select higher education leaders, and the perceived influence of the degree on their professional goals. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways do select higher education administrators perceive that the attainment of their doctoral degrees influenced the achievement of their professional goals, if at all?
2. How do select higher education administrators perceive the value associated with the completion of their doctoral degrees?

We hoped that the findings from this case study would provide additional information that can be used by both faculty and students in higher education doctoral programs. Further, we hoped that, perhaps, findings from our study also would provide unique insights and possibly new understandings based on the perceptions of the select administrators interviewed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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Bryan and Guccione (2018) developed a conceptual model of doctoral value consisting of four main components: career, skills, personal, and social. These components were influenced by the following factors: time since graduation, supervision, social connectivity, and the employer's perceived value of the doctorate. These authors developed their model through a qualitative research study that involved the use of semi-structured interviews of 22 Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) graduates. Participants were doctoral degree-holders for more than 15 years and were employed either at an academic institution or in non-academic roles. We used this study as the foundation for the four categories of research discussed within this literature review.

### *CAREER VALUE*

Differing opinions exist among prospective students as to whether a doctoral degree is worth the effort. Upon surveying 362 college students (92% undergraduate, 8% graduate), Beale et al. (2014) reported that students were reluctant to pursue a doctoral degree for fear it would limit their opportunities in corporate positions. Recotillet (2007) noted similar arguments against the degree. This researcher examined private-sector wage earnings related to participation in post-doctoral programs among French Ph.D. graduates in science and engineering. Recotillet's longitudinal study evaluated salary and position data throughout a period of 10 years. After she had controlled for selection bias, she discovered that participation in post-doctoral studies had no positive effect on private-sector wages. However, an advanced degree did appear to play a formative role in the initial stages of their careers.

Alternatively, an empirical analysis of the income and working time conditions of doctoral graduates in Germany revealed that although doctorate holders worked longer hours than did other university graduates, they generated a significant net wage premium for all fields of study (Mertens & Rübken, 2013). Doctorates in law and economics achieved the highest wage returns, with students completing education degrees at the lowest end of the wage spectrum. These results corresponded with Becker's (1964) human capital theory, which posited that the attainment of additional education should increase one's knowledge, skills, and values, and this capital is often correlated with economic gains.

Additional studies have revealed that doctoral graduates valued the application of learning and career advancement opportunities that became available due to their degree completion (Else, 2007; Jablonski, 2001; Scott et al., 2004). For some graduates, career objectives were a key motivator for pursuing a professional doctorate as opposed to a research doctorate. Zambo et al. (2014) surveyed 269 participants online to investigate their incentives for pursuing a doctoral degree. These researchers uncovered that the completion of a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree helped the participants to meet their professional goals, especially those who wished to feel secure in their current positions, to advance in their careers, or to make themselves more marketable.

Despite the perceived positive value of the doctorate, some professions have experienced a shortage of students pursuing degrees. In particular, Graham et al. (2011) examined the perceptions and outcomes of licensed physical therapists, a field with a shortage of doctorates, who completed their degrees between 2002 and 2006. These researchers distributed to 103 participants a questionnaire that elicited demographic information and information about the type of academic program, the anticipated and actual outcomes, the perceived benefits and value, and the overall impact on professional credibility. The researchers documented that 98% of respondents valued their doctoral degrees, and approximately 93% of them stated that the benefits outweighed the hardships. The respondents indicated that the attainment of their degrees was a positive experience despite the challenges faced (e.g., time limitations, family distancing, and cost). These participants posited that their professional credibility also increased because of earning their doctoral degrees.

Alternatively, this professional credibility might not always transfer if the degree is obtained online. For example, after interviewing 12 mid-career English language teaching practitioners in Asia who completed an online doctorate, Kung (2017) gleaned that convenience was a motivating factor to pursue an online doctorate, although the interviewees expressed concern about their career prospects. Kung put forward that future research was necessary to determine any influence that this method of degree attainment has on employers when they make hiring decisions.

### ***SKILL VALUE***

Else (2007) identified skill knowledge and formation as key motivators in the pursuit of a doctoral degree. Additionally, Wellington and Sikes (2006) noted that graduates' participation in professional programs and projects during their Ed.D. programs led to increased reflective abilities, the capacity to view alternative perspectives, and the ability to analyze information with greater skill. Other researchers have reported similar findings. Zambo et al. (2014) determined that leadership skills with an emphasis on collaboration and communication, an increased ability to lead change, research skills for practical solutions in their fields, and ways to integrate theories with practice were all desired by Ed.D. students when embarking on their degrees. Additionally, the participants of Jablonski's (2001) interviews attested that time management, the organization of ideas, the ability to accomplish greater tasks, and integrating theories with practice were all skills gained in their doctoral programs.

Sinclair et al. (2013) synthesized 15 research studies that examined influencing factors apparent in doctoral programs that produced graduates with a proclivity for active research. These researchers gleaned several factors that appeared to influence a scholar's propensity to publish. Of those factors, the relationship with their academic advisor, their emotional involvement with the research topic, the collaborative culture of research in the cohort program, and the purpose of the doctorate were all

factors that influenced degree-holders with a higher proclivity for publication. These researchers recommended further research to examine the depth of advisory relationships and what creates a culture of research within specific doctoral programs.

Additionally, Casey and Fletcher (2017) illustrated some of the tensions and uncertainties experienced by early- to mid-career-academics that existed after the completion of their degrees. Upon examination of the authors' reflective journals, they cited a lack of awareness in understanding what constituted the full expectations of members in academia, specifically referencing the emphasis on publication and external funding. They emphasized that doctoral programs need to educate thoroughly new academics about higher education governance, external funding, policies, practice, and whether these institutional imperatives stifle new academic creativity.

### ***PERSONAL VALUE***

In another study, Brailsford (2010) interviewed 11 doctoral graduates with degrees in history from an Australian university. All participants were in their 30s and 40s when the study began. This qualitative research study involved the use of semi-structured interviews to explore students' motivations for embarking on their non-traditional path of study. Key themes, identified as motivators, encompassed an overall interest in the dissertation topic and a desire to complete the highest levels of study. Employment aspirations were not a key indicator of motivation for this group because many of them were employed when they started their academic journeys.

Additionally, Scott et al. (2004) discovered that some doctoral graduates were intrinsically motivated and completed their doctoral degrees for the intellectual challenge and personal fulfillment. Participants who were more intrinsically motivated were typically well-established in their careers and were not as motivated by career placement or advancement. Barnett et al. (2013) highlighted the primary author's autoethnography of reasons to pursue her doctoral journey. This study shared the intrinsic need for knowledge as an important motivator. Job success and family obligations were other factors, thereby allowing the primary author the ability to pursue her degree for purely personal and intellectual reasons (Barnett et al., 2013).

Elsley (2007) distributed an online questionnaire to determine the original goals and ambitions of 94 business doctoral graduates from an Australian university. A secondary investigation examined outcomes after graduation; 84% of respondents stated that their personal goals were realized. Participants also revealed that a sense of achievement and enriching life were values derived from their doctoral experiences, along with positive self-development, credibility, respect, and trust.

### ***SOCIAL VALUE***

Professional doctorates have indicated the importance of social networking as a value attributed to their degree completion. In particular, Wellington and Sikes (2006) interviewed 29 Ed.D. graduates and discovered that many of them valued the "collegiality, support, friendship, and social interaction" (p. 732) that they gained through their degree programs. These researchers indicated that this result differed from the experiences of those who sought a traditional research doctorate, in that their research programs did not embrace social networking, alternatively emphasizing individual research and study.

Jablonski (2001), in her interviews of 23 instructional leadership doctoral students, learned that few of the respondents wanted to move into academia, but instead, they desired to stay in occupations at the primary or secondary grade levels. The respondents regarded the doctoral degree as not only an enhancement to their current positions, but an opportunity for greater credibility in their specialties, especially within their communities and their area school boards. These participants also expressed an increased self-confidence in the ability to work with their peers because of their degree completion. Similarly, Zambo et al. (2014) reported that community relations were of importance to doctoral

students, resulting in accomplishing personal goals, fulfilling childhood aspirations, setting examples for their children, and giving back to their communities.

### ***SUMMARY***

Leonard et al. (2005) examined whether former doctoral students thought the task of completing a Ph.D. or an Ed.D. was worthwhile. Bryan and Guccione's (2018) model with four indicators (i.e., career, skill, personal, and social values) provided the foundation for the studies presented in this literature review. Additionally, Leonard et al. (2005) summarized the benefits of a doctoral degree as (a) pleasure in study, (b) satisfaction in completing a project, (c) establishing friendships, (d) improving intellectual networks, (e) enhancing writing skills, and (f) making contributions to the field, community, and profession.

Several of the aforementioned studies have involved an examination of the motivations for undertaking a doctoral degree (i.e., Barnett et al., 2013; Beale et al., 2014; Brailsford, 2010; Elsey, 2007; Kung, 2017; Scott et al., 2004; Zambo et al., 2014). Some have examined the perceived benefits or drawbacks of doctoral degrees (i.e., Casey & Fletcher, 2017; Graham et al., 2011; Jablonski, 2001; Mertens & Rökken, 2013; Recotillet, 2007; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). Few researchers (e.g., Leonard et al., 2005) have asked about the perceptions of the value of the doctoral degree. Because of the lack of consistency and gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of the value of the doctoral degrees held by select higher education leaders, and the perceived influence of the degree on their professional goals.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

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This study utilizes Becker's (1964) human capital theory as the framework for understanding the perceptions of select administrative professionals who have completed their doctoral degrees in higher education. Becker (1964) described human capital as the accumulated knowledge and abilities a person brings to their position or industry. Becker (1993) posited that education and training are investments in human capital because they contribute to economic growth and benefit the general population. According to human capital theory, the attainment of additional education should increase one's knowledge, skills, and values that equate to an increase in earning potential and self-efficacy (Becker, 1993).

Becker (1993) further explained that human capital investment consists of three primary components: 1) occupational training, entailing the essential skills to perform a job, 2) education, which is the building of cognitive knowledge relevant for a career, and 3) health, typically involving workplace benefits such as medical insurance, employee assistance programs, positive work policies, and self-efficacy. Because the researchers examined the perceptions of individuals with advanced education, human capital theory suggests that the educational process associated with earning a doctoral degree should allow graduates to contribute more to the general population and likely achieve their professional goals.

## **METHOD**

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### ***PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING***

This collective case study, as defined by Stake (2005), involved four participants who had previously completed a doctoral degree in higher education to gain insight into the perceptions held by select administrative professionals. We selected the participants from a population of 72 higher education doctoral graduates who had completed their degrees within the past 10 years at a single institution of higher education in Texas. The institution was a public 4-year university, enrolling more than 18,000 students (U.S. News and World Report, 2018), with a Research 3: Doctoral Research University-

Moderate Research Activity classification (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2018). The institution was known for educating public servants in a variety of disciplines and was more than 135 years old (U.S. News and World Report, 2018). We selected the participants after a discussion among our research team based upon who we thought would be available and willing to participate. By selecting all four participants in this manner, we employed convenience sampling, which is a sampling scheme whereby availability and willingness to participate are used for selection (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007a). Creswell and Creswell (2018) advised that three to five cases were suitable for case study research. Therefore, with a sample size of four participants, we met the recommended sample size for a case study.

Four members of our research team selected a participant whom they each wanted to interview, with each member of our team interviewing one participant. We conducted a formal, face-to-face, semi-structured interview with each participant in their workplace's private office. The researchers who conducted the interviews all had prior knowledge of each interviewee and a connected working relationship. This knowledge and connection helped to establish rapport between the interviewers and participants. Curry et al. (2009) posited that rapport between an interviewer and interviewee is helpful because it motivates honesty and minimizes fear or discomfort when sharing information during the interview process.

Additionally, because the researchers were doctoral students, we maintained an emic (insider) perspective in the study (Pike, 1967). We assigned the pseudonyms Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin to protect the identity of our participants. Table 1 details additional information about each participant, including each participant's gender, race, ethnicity, age, institution type, years of employment at their current institution, and whether they received an advancement or promotion during or after receiving their doctorates.

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

| Characteristic  | Scott        | Mary     | Lily         | Justin       |
|---|--------------|----------|--------------|--------------|
| Gender  | Man          | Woman    | Woman        | Man          |
| Race  | Black        | Hispanic | White        | White        |
| Ethnicity   | Non-Hispanic | Hispanic | Non-Hispanic | Non-Hispanic |
| Age   | 47           | 56       | 40           | 37           |
| Institution type (where employed)                                   | 2-year       | 2-year   | 4-year       | 4-year       |
| Years of employment at current institution at the time of interview | 10           | 19.5     | 17           | 15           |
| Received upward change in title during or after receiving doctorate | Yes          | Yes      | Yes          | Yes          |

## ***INSTRUMENTS***

Formal, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews served as the instrument for data collection in this case study because they allowed flexibility for us to ask clarifying and follow-up questions (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Prior to conducting the interviews, we spent 2 hours together developing, revising, and solidifying the interview protocol for this study. We selected four research team members to conduct the interviews; each of those selected interviewed only one participant. We ensured

the comfort of each interviewee when preparing to conduct an interview for the purpose of qualitative data collection. On average, our interviews with the participants lasted approximately 34 minutes in length. The interview questions focused on the goals that each interviewee had prior to starting their doctorate programs, the outcomes related to those goals, and the value that they associated with their degrees. The entire interview protocol is detailed in Table 2, and a description of each question's type (i.e., basic descriptive and experience/example), as defined by Janesick (2016), is included.

**Table 2. Interview Protocol Including Follow-up Questions**

| QUESTION   | DESCRIPTION       |
|--|-------------------|
| What were some of your goals going into the doctoral program?  | Basic descriptive |
| In what ways, if any, did you achieve those goals?   | Follow-up         |
| In what ways, if any, did obtaining a doctoral degree impact your professional opportunities within your position, your department, your division, your institution? | Basic descriptive |
| Describe the skills, developed in your doctoral program, that have contributed to the achievement of your professional goals, if any?                                | Basic descriptive |
| In what ways, if any, have you used your doctoral research since completing the program?   | Basic descriptive |
| Have you presented or published?   | Follow-up         |
| Did it help you to think more broadly or critically?   | Follow-up         |
| Does your research connect to your work?   | Follow-up         |
| What value, if any, do you associate with the completing of your doctoral degree?  | Basic descriptive |
| Do you believe the personal and financial sacrifices you committed in achieving your degree were worth it? Please explain.   | Basic descriptive |
| Please list five words that describe your perceptions of the value associated with your doctoral degree.   | Basic descriptive |
| Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't discussed?  | Basic descriptive |

*Note.* The description type for each question was derived from Janesick (2016).

Interviewers in this study were informed by Roulston's (2010) romantic typology. The romantic typology is a conception of qualitative interviewing that develops research questions that ask about a participant's beliefs, perspectives, opinions, and attitudes about a particular subject. The typology aids the interviewer in understanding the interviewee's viewpoints about the topic and the interview questions. This approach also allows an interviewee to ask questions and the interviewer to respond to those questions. In short, romantic typology allows for a conversation that produces self-disclosure by the interviewee and the interviewer.

Lincoln et al. (2018) outlined five criteria for authenticity in phenomenological inquiry. These criteria were labeled as fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. In this study, we elicited the views and concerns of the interviewees via member checking, suggesting that we met the fairness criterion (i.e., the researcher's ability to value and to honor the evaluation process). Ontological authenticity (i.e., raised awareness of the participant) and educative authenticity (i.e., increased awareness by the individuals who surround the participant) also were met because the participants reflected upon their perceptions. Catalytic authenticity (i.e., action



taken by the participant) and tactical authenticity (i.e., the researcher motivating participants to take action) were not relevant to the questions designed by the research team.

Each interview was recorded on both a cell phone and laptop or tablet to note chronemic (e.g., pacing) and paralinguistic (e.g., variations in volume and pitch) data, as defined by Gorden (1975), as well as linguistics (e.g., language, form, meaning, and/or context) data. Interviewers also took handwritten notes during the interview to capture nonverbal data such as kinesic (e.g., body movements and facial expressions) and proxemic (e.g., the physical distance between interviewer and interviewee) data, also defined by Gorden (1975), and the interviewers also noted optics (e.g., use of eyes) data. On the day following the interview, each interviewer transcribed the recordings and inserted notations of observed nonverbal behaviors.

After the completion of the transcriptions, each interviewer emailed a digital copy of the interview transcript to the interviewee for member checking. Member checking is a process whereby the interview participant reviews the transcript to check for the authenticity, accuracy, and adequacy of the recorded information (Manning, 1997). All the interviewees returned the transcripts with no requests for changes.

Each interviewer also engaged in a debriefing-the-researcher interview (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008) with another research team member, approximately one week after conducting her/his individual interview. The debriefing interview protocol, containing four open-ended questions, was organized by one member of the research team and confirmed by all members. The interviewers each conducted four semi-structured, formal debriefing phone interviews that lasted approximately 10 minutes in length. The four questions for this interview were selected from Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008) and are highlighted in Table 3. An example of a debriefing question was: To what extent do you think your own empathy and insights of the participant evolved during the course of the interview? Each debriefing question was descriptive (Janesick, 2016), which is also notated in Table 3.

**Table 3. Debriefing the Researcher Interview Protocol**

| QUESTION   | DESCRIPTION       |
|--|-------------------|
| How comfortable were you interacting with the participant?   | Basic descriptive |
| What findings surprised you?   | Basic descriptive |
| To what extent do you think you have sought and obtained evidence of the participant's increased awareness of their own lives? | Basic descriptive |
| To what extent do you think your own empathy and insights of the participant evolved during the course of the interview?       | Basic descriptive |

*Note.* The four debriefing-the-researcher interview questions were selected from Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008). The description type for each question was derived from Janesick (2016).

## ***PROCEDURE***

### **Data collection**

As mentioned previously, the purpose of this interview was to collect data about the perceptions held by select administrative professionals who had previously completed a doctoral degree in higher education. Formal, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed both verbal and nonverbal data to be collected by the researchers (Opdenakker, 2006). Interviews occurred between October 15, 2018 and October 22, 2018.

## Research paradigm

It is important to identify explicitly the researcher's philosophical worldview in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this research study, we engaged in a social constructivist worldview. Social constructivists seek understanding of the world in which they live. The goal of using this philosophical research lens is to rely on the participant's view of the situation. Open-ended questions are used to understand how the participant interacts with others, including in specific contexts. Ultimately, the goal of the researcher is to interpret the meaning that the participant has about the world. For this research, we used open-ended questions to explore the meaning that higher education doctoral graduates held of their experiences related to the value of their degrees and the attainment of their professional goals.

## Research design

The research design was an exploratory case study conducted to understand a general phenomenon and to discover potential hypotheses (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2019). We chose a collective case study, which involved multiple individuals (Stake, 2005), to learn more about what shaped select administrative professionals' perceptions of their doctoral degrees. The goal to gain further understanding of a larger collection of cases (Stake, 2005) rendered this research design appropriate.

## Verification.

Member checking refers to the opportunity for an interviewee to review and, if necessary, to revise a transcript, promoting accuracy and adequacy (Manning, 1997). As previously mentioned, Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin reviewed a copy of their individual transcripts. None of the participants requested any changes.

## *LEGITIMATION*

Benge et al. (2012) defined legitimation as a process of assessing the credibility of research findings and/or interpretations. Reflecting on the limitations of findings and interpretations when planning a research study can help researchers develop the best possible research design. Additionally, the identification of potential legitimation concerns can provide direction for future research (Benge et al., 2012). After completing the study and reflecting on the process, our team identified several potential threats to both external credibility and internal credibility. We have outlined these threats in the following sections.

## Threats to external credibility

External credibility refers to "the degree that the findings of a study can be generalized across different populations of persons, settings, contexts, and times" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b, p. 235). Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007b) identified 14 possible threats to the external credibility of the findings in qualitative research. With the purpose of the research focusing on a select sample, generalizability of the findings was not a research goal. Of the 14 possible threats to external credibility identified by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007b), the most applicable threats in this research were interpretive validity, order bias, and researcher bias.

**Interpretive validity.** Interpretive validity refers to the researcher's attempt to understand the perspective and meaning attached to the interviewee's words and actions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b). This particular threat to interpretive validity was lessened because Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin each had an opportunity to review their interview transcript and to make changes to it. Also, we reduced the threat to interpretive validity by engaging in researcher debriefing interviews, as discussed previously.

**Order bias.** Another threat to external credibility is order bias. Order bias refers to the underlying assumption that the order in which questions were asked might influence the study's findings

(Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b). In this study, we implemented member checking to help inform us of the accuracy and adequacy of each interview transcript. After the interviews, Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin had an opportunity to review their transcript and to correct the words that they used and to clarify concepts that they conveyed. Thus, even if the order of questions had influenced their initial responses, Scott's, Mary's, Lily's, and Justin's review of their responses mitigated potential order bias.

**Researcher bias.** Researcher bias was another potential threat to external credibility because the researchers might have had a bias, known or unknown, that would have threatened the generalizability of the results (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b). In this study, we assumed that any researcher bias was limited because we did not attempt to generalize to any population. This study focused on four participants' perspectives on the value that their doctoral degrees had in relation to the attainment of professional goals. With such a select sample of individuals, no assertion was made about the generalizability of the findings.

### Threats to internal credibility

Internal credibility pertains to how well the researcher's findings can be trusted (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b). Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007b) identified 14 possible threats to the internal credibility of the findings in qualitative research. Of these 14 possible threats to external credibility, the most applicable threats in this research were (a) descriptive validity, (b) observational bias, (c) reactivity, and (d) researcher bias. Each of these threats to internal credibility will be discussed in the following sections.

**Descriptive validity.** Descriptive validity pertains to the accuracy and adequacy of data collected by the researcher (Maxwell, 2002). To reduce the threat of descriptive validity, we employed the processes of member checking (Manning, 1997), whereby we asked the participants to review their transcripts for accuracy and adequacy. Although Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin responded with no requests for changes to be made to each of their transcriptions, we cannot guarantee how thorough they were when they conducted their reviews.

**Observational bias.** Observational bias can occur when researchers have not obtained enough data (e.g., behaviors or words) from the study participants(s) (Onwuegbuzie, 2003). This type of threat can occur throughout the study, beginning with the planning stages and data collection, to the final phases of data analysis. Because Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin had just a set amount of time to devote to the interview, we conducted only one interview with each of them. Additionally, each participant was interviewed by a different member of the research team; therefore, the interviews might have lacked consistency. Because time was a constraint, we limited the total number of interviews conducted. Ideally, a single interviewer to conduct all interviews or multiple interviewers at each interview session would have lessened observational bias.

**Reactivity.** Reactivity relates to the possibility that participants alter their responses when they are aware that they are a part of a research investigation (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b). For this study, all the participants were assured that their identities would be concealed by a pseudonym, thereby reducing this issue. This assurance of confidentiality allowed the participants the opportunity to respond freely and honestly, and without the threat of reactivity.

**Researcher bias.** Researcher bias presents an internal threat when the researcher possesses personal biases or has made *a priori* assumptions that influence the research process (Onwuegbuzie, 2003). Researcher bias is common in qualitative research because the researcher usually serves as the instrument in the data collection process (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b), which was the case for our study. To account for possible researcher bias, we conducted individual debriefing-the-researcher interviews to allow each interviewer the opportunity to reflect upon the experience and examine themselves for potential biases (Weinbaum & Onwuegbuzie, 2016).

## *ANALYSIS*

To increase the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007b) recommended that researchers use more than one type of data analysis; therefore, verbal data from this collective case study were analyzed utilizing three types of ethnographic analysis (Spradley, 1979), and nonverbal behaviors were analyzed using Gorden's (1975) nonverbal communication typology. Ethnographic analysis is a process of finding connections by examining the cultural knowledge of informants and generating cultural meaning from people's words, behaviors, and surroundings (Spradley, 1979). Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008) specified that "It is the examination of these parts that helps the researcher to understand the overall culture of the informant" (p. 595). We conducted domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis to examine the verbal data utilizing QDA Miner Version 5.0.23 (Provalis Research, 2016). QDA Miner is a qualitative data analysis software package that allows researchers to code, to annotate, and to analyze documents and images. Each type of ethnographic analysis and nonverbal communication is detailed in the following sections.

Domain analysis involves "a search for the larger units of cultural knowledge called domains" (Spradley, 1979, p. 94). To discover this cultural knowledge, researchers search for cultural symbols that embody three aspects: (a) the symbol itself (i.e., cover term), (b) one or more elements to what the symbol refers (i.e., included term), and (c) a relationship between the symbol and the referent element (i.e., semantic relationship; Spradley, 1979). Domains then emanate from the cover terms, included terms, and the semantic relationships between the two terms (i.e., cover terms and included terms).

To conduct the domain analysis, we used Spradley's (1979) six-step analysis to identify domains. These steps consisted of (a) selecting a single semantic relationship, (b) preparing a domain analysis worksheet, (c) selecting a sample of informant statements, (d) searching for cover and included terms that fit the semantic relationship, (e) developing structural questions for each domain, and (f) creating a list of hypothesized domains. We repeated the first five steps to identify domains related to Scott's, Mary's, Lily's, and Justin's perceptions associated with the completion of a doctoral degree related to the attainment of professional goals.

Following the domain analysis, we completed a taxonomic analysis, which created a classification system of the domains to assist us in identifying relationships among those domains. To develop this taxonomy, we utilized Spradley's (1979) eight steps of taxonomic analysis: (a) selecting a domain for taxonomic analysis, (b) identifying the appropriate substitution frame for analysis, (c) searching for possible subsets of the included terms, (d) searching for larger more inclusive domains that could include the subset being analyzed, (e) constructing a tentative taxonomy, (f) formulating structural questions to verify taxonomic relationships, (g) conducting additional structural interviews, and (h) constructing a completed taxonomy. We completed the first six steps. We did not complete the last two steps because of time constraints.

The final ethnographic analysis performed was a componential analysis. Spradley (1979) defined componential analysis as "the systematic search for the attributes (components of meaning) associated with cultural symbols" (p. 174). Componential analysis focuses on the relationships between folk terms (i.e., words people use to refer to experiences) and other symbols to understand the "psychological reality of the informant's world" (Spradley, 1979, p. 175). Componential analysis "is useful for seeing comparisons in the data and identifying places where the researcher needs further clarification from the participant(s)" (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008, p. 576). Spradley (1979) designated eight steps for a componential analysis: (a) select a contrast set for analysis, (b) inventory all contrasts previously discovered, (c) prepare a paradigm worksheet, (d) identify dimensions of contrast that have binary values, (e) combine closely related dimensions of contrast into ones that have multiple values, (f) prepare contrast questions to elicit missing attributes and new dimensions of contrast, (g) conduct an interview to elicit needed data, and (h) prepare a complete paradigm. Results were obtained by

completing the first six steps of the componential analysis leaving out the final two steps because we were only able to conduct one interview with each participant.

In addition to ethnographic analysis, nonverbal communication data were analyzed using Gorden's (1975) nonverbal analysis framework. As mentioned previously, each interview was recorded to note chronemic, paralinguistic, linguistic, kinesic, proxemics, and optics data. An analysis of nonverbal communication data was the final analysis for this study.

Constas (1992) posed that category creation required (a) origination (i.e., language, investigation, and literature review), (b) verification (i.e., explaining the categories by way of the existing literature), and (c) nomination (i.e., neutrally naming the categories). For this research, origination occurred with Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin. That is, the language that each participant used is what led us to originate the categories, as outlined in the domain analysis. Verification took place by reviewing some of the relevant literature, and nomination took place after the data analysis, allowing each participant's language to direct the naming of the categories (i.e., a posteriori), as opposed to developing and naming the categories before the interview and the analysis (i.e., a priori).

## RESULTS

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### *DOMAIN ANALYSIS*

We began the domain analysis (Spradley, 1979) by carefully examining the participants' transcriptions. A domain analysis worksheet helped our team to identify cover terms and included terms, allowing us to identify semantic relationships. The most fitting semantic relationship identified from the transcriptions was *strict inclusion* (i.e., X is a kind of Y) (Spradley, 1979). To classify each domain, we developed structural questions for possible domains. We identified two domains: attainment of goals and perceptions of doctoral degree value. Each of these domains is discussed in the following sections.

#### **Attainment of goals**

The data indicated a prominent relationship between each participant and their goal attainment at the completion of their doctoral degree. Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin each discussed what it meant to earn a doctoral degree and how this related to their goal attainment. The participants explained how earning a doctorate assisted them in achieving their goals. All interviewees' transcriptions revealed terms such as *earn a doctorate*, *career opportunities*, and *publish*. However, Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin also expressed other unexpected opportunities that arose from the attainment of their doctoral degrees. The following quotation from Justin's transcription provides an example of how earning a doctorate impacted his goal attainment:

I had a few professional goals. One of them was to become a director, which I did. One was, I always wanted a doctorate. . . . I wanted to publish something. Which I did in the program. . . . I became a director, got my doctorate, [and] I got published.

Another example, from Lily's transcript, is as follows:

And so, my goals at that point were to stay at a higher education university, and then, really just be able to have opportunities, not just on the administrative side, but to be able to possibly teach a little as well.

Mary expressed her goals for pursuing a higher education doctoral degree in this response:

I learned, working in higher ed [education], that to be in higher-level positions . . . you have to have a doctorate degree. Without a doctorate degree, you'll hit a ceiling that you can't go further. It wasn't until I went to [an] institute that I did know that I did want to be a college president someday, and I knew that in order to do that, I needed to have a doctorate degree.

## Perceptions After Completing the Degree

Mary also described success in attaining her goals as ultimately advancing into a senior-level position. Mary stated:

Three years ago, there was an opportunity at the college for an interim position, because one of our presidents had retired. And I was asked if I wanted to fill that position on an interim basis, and so the opportunity came. And I do believe that if I had not had that doctorate degree, I probably would have been passed up.

Scott also identified achieving his goals by advancing into a senior-level position and being eligible to apply for any position in higher education as a result of the conferral of his doctoral degree. Scott stated:

Before, I had limitations; I had a ceiling. But now, if I want to, there is not a position in higher ed [education] that I can't apply for if I truly wanted to apply for it, right? So, that's a game-changer, you know, that changes things. People just look at you differently. So, with that comes an obligation.

The distinct perspectives represented in the research study directed the creation of three structural questions. These questions were (a) What are the reasons to earn a doctorate (i.e., internal and external influences)? (b) What unexpected career opportunities were experienced by participants? and (c) What were the results of publishing (i.e., did it create career opportunities or develop the participants professionally)? Due to the timeframe of this research study, we did not conduct follow-up interviews; however, these questions might be useful in a future interview protocol to investigate this domain.

### Perceptions of doctoral degree value

We asked Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin to describe their perceptions of the value associated with their doctoral degrees using only five words. We detail these words in Table 4. The words *confident* and *confidence* generated particular interest because three of the four participants shared those words. Although the perceptions of value were not completely identical among the participants, they acknowledged the value from their own voices based on their experiences. For this domain, the identified perceptions of value from each participant were designated as the included terms.

A passage from Mary's transcription illustrated her perceptions of the value of her earned doctoral degree. Mary shared:

One, it allowed me to have a wider network of professionals in the region, again, both in community colleges and at K-12, and it gave me a sense of confidence that I could present at national conferences. It gave me a sense of confidence, as well as understanding data much better, and research, so that I would make better decisions in my positions at the institution. And overall, just having that doctorate degree and knowing that you are able to achieve that higher level of education. . . . There's an inner assurance that you are ready for higher responsibility.

Scott described his perception of the value of the degree as it related to helping students. Scott perceived:

The value of this doctorate is that I can give back, also to these students, by being a real-life example of someone that, if you work hard, and you don't give up, and you're resilient, and you surround yourself with good people, good mentors, and just dedicate yourself to, "No matter what, I'm gonna get knocked down, but I just gotta get back up and just keep going and keep going and keep going," you can accomplish your goals. And I think that's what our students need the most and that's the value of this doctorate.

Because the participants' perceptions of the value of their doctoral degrees differed, we created three structural questions. These questions were (a) Which identified perception of value is the most and

least important to each participant? (b) What are the uses of this identified perception of value? and (c) How do the identified perceptions of value connect? Due to the timeframe of this research project, we did not conduct follow-up interviews, but these questions could clarify the perception of the value of an earned doctoral degree among Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin.

**Table 4. Participants' Perceptions of Doctoral Degree Value Using Five Words**

| ORDER OF<br>SPOKEN<br>WORDS | SCOTT         | MARY       | LILY          | JUSTIN             |
|-----------------------------|---------------|------------|---------------|--------------------|
| 1                           | confident     | confidence | grit          | worthwhile         |
| 2                           | relaxed       | readiness  | perseverance  | skills             |
| 3                           | self-centered | wealth     | growth        | knowledge          |
| 4                           | ambitious     | influence  | dedication    | confidence         |
| 5                           | driven        | pride      | opportunities | career progression |

*Note:* Each participant was asked to describe their perceptions of the value associated with their doctoral degrees using five words. The words in the table reflect the participants' actual words in the order that they were spoken.

### **TAXONOMIC ANALYSIS**

Following the domain analysis, we conducted a taxonomic analysis. Utilizing Spradley's (1979) approach, we conducted an eight-step process to provide a deeper understanding of the identified domains. Although Spradley included eight steps in his model, we did not perform the final two steps of the analysis (i.e., conducting additional structural interviews and constructing a completed taxonomy) because of time limitations. Spradley suggested that a taxonomic analysis allows a researcher to uncover a deeper understanding of the domains identified in the domain analysis because of the discovery of semantic relationships around the folk terms in the provided domain.

#### **Attainment of goals**

For this study, we used a substitution frame (i.e., X is an example of Y). All participants stated that the completion of their doctoral degrees was an example of attaining a goal. Justin specified that becoming a director was a goal of obtaining a doctoral degree. Accordingly, the substitution frame would be *becoming a director is an example of goal attainment*. We subdivided the frames into two classifications: (a) personal goals and (b) professional goals.

For the taxonomic analysis, we developed three questions: (a) What are all the kinds of goals (personal, professional, or financial)? (b) Were these goals long-term or short-term goals? and (c) Did your goals change during the progression in the program? As previously mentioned, time constraints prevented us from returning to the interviewees and asking them these questions.

#### **Perceptions of doctoral degree value**

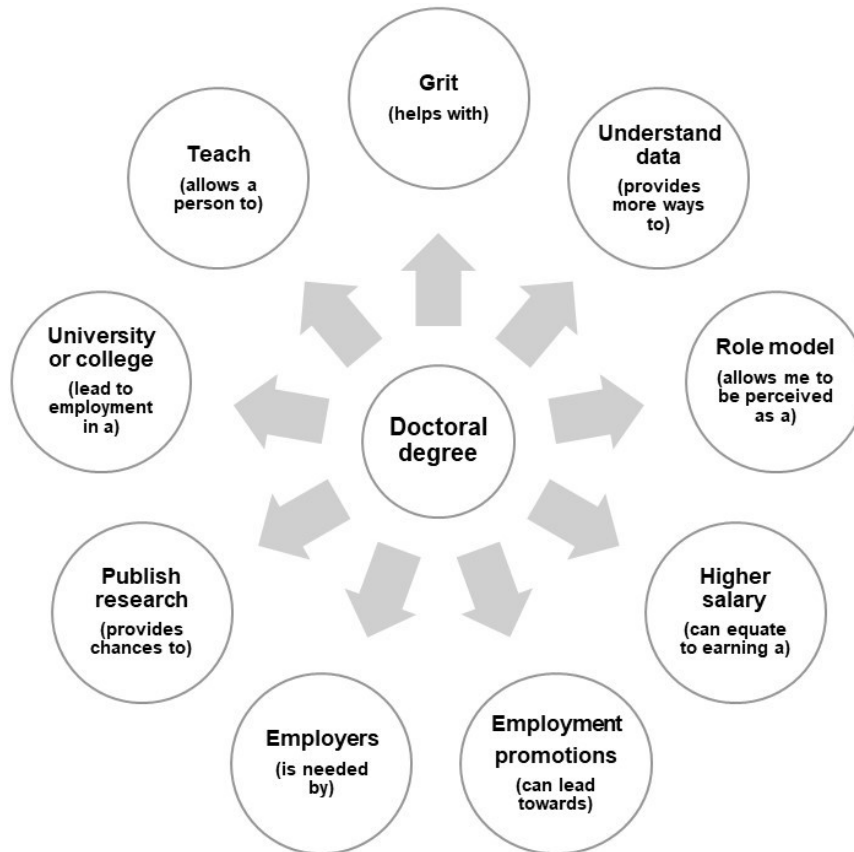
Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin provided varying perceptions of the values of their doctoral degrees that comprised the included terms identified in the domain analysis. For this analysis, we used the substitution frame *is a kind of* (e.g., improving networks is a kind of perceived value of obtaining a doctoral degree). Although participants described many types of value associated with obtaining a doctoral degree, we subdivided the values into two major categories: (a) intrinsic values and (b) extrinsic values.

We then formed three structural questions: (a) Is conference attendance a perceived value in obtaining a doctoral degree? (b) Which conferences were more beneficial? and (c) Does obtaining a doctoral degree increase confidence? As previously mentioned, a completed taxonomy was not possible because of time limitations.

**COMPONENTIAL ANALYSIS**

After conducting a taxonomic analysis, we completed a componential analysis. As previously discussed, a componential analysis focuses on contrasts, and, for this analysis we analyzed the participants’ transcripts, informed by the taxonomic analysis, to categorize contrasts. Following Spradley’s (1979) instruction, we identified those dimensions of contrast that had dual values (e.g., yes or no). Thereafter, we developed contrasting questions that we would have asked the participants in a follow-up interview. We intentionally did not conduct follow-up interviews because of time constraints.

In this study, we focused on the perceptions of the value of the doctoral degree by select post-graduate professionals. We discovered attributes associated with the symbol *doctoral degree*. Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin perceived at least nine attributes associated with the term *doctoral degree*. Figure 1 displays these attributes, which highlight “a single folk term with some of its attributes in a diagram that shows how each attribute is related to the term by semantic relationship” (e.g., a doctoral degree helps with grit; Spradley, 1979, p. 175).



**Figure 1. Some attributes and semantic relationships of a doctoral degree.** This figure highlights “a single folk term with some of its attributes in a diagram that shows how each attribute is related to the term by semantic relationship” (e.g., a doctoral degree helps with grit, Spradley, 1979, p. 175).



We developed contrasting questions to differentiate the perceptions of the participants that would have been asked of the participants if time and instruction allowed. The questions were (a) Does the doctoral degree help with personal goals? (b) Does the doctoral degree help with professional goals? and (c) Does the value of the doctoral degree change over time? These questions can elicit a “yes” or “no” response, and upon reflection, the questions could also elicit a “maybe” response, allowing for changes in perception over time. Even though Spradley (1979) encouraged the use of binary responses to contrasting questions, he also noted that “maybe” is an allowed answer. The results of our componential analysis are outlined in Table 5.

**Table 5. Componential Analysis—Results**

| CONTRAST SET               | DOES IT HELP WITH PERSONAL GOALS? | DOES IT HELP WITH PROFESSIONAL GOALS? | DOES IT CHANGE OVER TIME? |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Being an example to others | Maybe                             | No                                    | Maybe                     |
| Improved finances          | Yes                               | Maybe                                 | Maybe                     |
| Professional advancement   | Maybe                             | Yes                                   | Yes                       |
| Presenting at conferences  | No                                | Yes                                   | Yes                       |
| Publishing research        | No                                | Yes                                   | Yes                       |

### ***NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS***

The final analysis consisted of evaluating nonverbal behaviors exhibited by Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin utilizing Gorden’s (1975) typology of nonverbal communication. Overall, each participant was relaxed during her/his interview and exhibited an open body posture. When analyzing the proxemics of the physical placement of those involved in the interview, Scott, Mary, and Justin all sat behind a desk or table with the interviewer situated on the other side. In contrast, Lily and her interviewer sat in two chairs across from one another with no barrier between them. The majority of kinesic data (e.g., body movements and facial expressions) notated included each participant motioning with their hands to add emphasis, shrugging their shoulders, as well as simple facial expressions such as raised eyebrows or frowning, depending on the information shared. Eye contact for all participants was consistent, collected as optics data. Paralinguistic data also was present through shifts in vocal tone and volume in each interview. Lastly, the interview question asking each participant to list five words that described their perceptions of the value associated with their doctoral degrees elicited a pause, presumably for each participant to gather their thoughts, which was notated as chronemic data related to pacing.

### **CONCLUSION**

With an increase of 88% of doctoral degrees in education over the past 16 years (Snyder et al., 2019), it was important to understand the perceptions of graduates who earned a doctoral degree. Becker (1993) linked education and training to investments in human capital and posited that the attainment of additional education should increase one’s knowledge, skills, and values, thereby increasing human capital. Previous research revealed perceived values to earning a doctoral degree (Else, 2007; Jablonski, 2001; Scott et al., 2004; Zambo et al., 2014). Values from the literature were (a) career value,

(b) skill value, (c) personal value, and (d) social value (Bryan & Guccione, 2018). Although this study was limited to a collective case study of the accounts of four select doctoral graduates who graduated with their doctoral degrees from the same university, we discovered similarities in Scott's, Mary's, Lily's, and Justin's accounts as revealed through their voices. Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin indicated their perceived career value, skill value, personal value, and social value associated with the earning of their doctoral degrees in ways that were similar with the literature.

After conducting a domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and a nonverbal communication analysis, two main themes emerged: perceptions of doctoral degree value and attainment of goals. Although Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin all had different, yet similar, purposes for earning their doctoral degrees, each discussed the previously mentioned values as influential to their lives after the completion of their doctoral degrees, which included achieving goals. This consistency in emergent themes from the different types of data analysis added to the confirmability of the findings in this study (Privitera & Ahlgrim-DeLzell, 2019). Furthermore, Scott, Mary, Lily, and Justin could have been interviewed several times after the initial interview to investigate further each of the ethnographic analyses (i.e., domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis) to discover whether their perceptions might change over time. Because of the timeframe of this research study, we did not conduct follow-up interviews.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of four doctorate-holding higher education administrators to explore the perceived value associated with their degrees and to determine the ways these administrators perceived that the attainment of their degrees influenced the achievement of their professional goals, if at all. We recognized that our findings are not generalizable to a larger population. We encourage other researchers to explore this line of research to understand the value, if any, held by other doctoral graduates. Even if those studies result in different findings, the findings will help administrators in higher-education degree programs to better understand the needs of their students while they are participating in doctoral studies. In other words, by knowing what doctoral students expect to gain after obtaining a doctoral degree, doctoral-program administrators might consider tailoring courses and support programs to meet doctoral-student needs. We also recommend that additional longitudinal studies be undertaken to understand better how doctoral graduates view the value of their degree many years later. Do their perceptions change over time, or are they solidified?

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## BIOGRAPHIES

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**Meredith L. Conrey** is a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership program at Sam Houston State University. She earned both her bachelor's degree in Speech Communication and her master's degree in Educational Administration from Texas A&M University.

Meredith has worked for over 15 years in higher education, and she currently serves as the Director of Leadership Initiatives at Sam Houston State University, where she oversees leadership development programs, service-learning initiatives, and the recognition, management, and development for over 250 student organizations. Prior to working at SHSU, Meredith worked at Texas A&M University in Residence Life, Baylor

University in Campus Living & Learning, and she served as an adjunct faculty member at Baylor. Meredith is actively involved in NASPA. She has served as a regional board member, and she co-chaired the 2017 NASPA Region III Summer Symposium. Additionally, Meredith is a Gallup Certified Strengths Coach.



**Gene Roberts, Jr.** is a doctoral student in the Higher Education Leadership program at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. He is also the Director of Student Legal and Mediation Services at Sam Houston State University. His research interests include organizational theory and apex-level leadership.

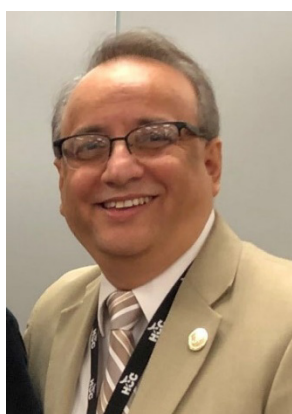
Gene received his Doctor of Jurisprudence from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where he was the President of the Student Bar Association and an Articles Editor for the SMU Law Review. Thereafter, Gene was engaged in the private practice of law for several years.

He has held professional leadership roles in a number of organizations, including chair of the Alternative Dispute Resolution Section for the Dallas Bar Association, President of the Dallas Chapter of the Association for Conflict Resolution, President of the Texas Association of Mediators, Vice-Chair of the Walker County Bar Association, member of the Board of Directors for the Montgomery County Dispute Resolution Center, member of the Board of Trustees for the Robert A. Josey Lodge, Inc., Vice-President of the University Student Legal Services Association-Western Region, and most recently, chair-elect of the Alternative Dispute Resolution Section of the State Bar of Texas. He is a sought-after author and speaker in the area of conflict resolution. Gene also holds a certificate from NASPA's Program in Student Affairs Law and Policy (with high competency). At Sam Houston State University, Gene has chaired or served on committees overseeing student health insurance, free speech preparedness, divisional mission and values, and staff development. He has served as an external examiner for programs at two universities, and has taught classes in Legal Writing and Research, American Government, Texas Government, and Constitutional Law, and the First-Year Experience (pre-law cohort).



**Melissa R. Fadler** is a 3rd-year doctoral student in the Higher Education Leadership program at Sam Houston State University. She obtained her B.S. from Truman State University in Exercise Science and her M.S. in Recreation and Sport Management from Purdue University.

Melissa currently serves as an Associate Director of Recreational Sports at Sam Houston State University with over 15 years of experience in higher education. In her current role, Melissa coordinates all marketing, promotions, and special events for the Department of Recreational Sports. Previous positions include the Assistant Director of Aquatics and Shared Facilities at Washington State University, Adjunct Instructor for the Washington State University College of Education, and various coaching and aquatics positions. Her current research interests are the usage of big data within higher education as related to student success. In Melissa's free time, she is a Regional USA and TASO State Volleyball Referee.



**Matias M. Garza** is a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership program at Sam Houston State University. He earned his B.S. in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Houston, and his M.S. in instructional design and technology from the University of Houston Clear Lake. Matias Garza has served as Dean of Student Success for Houston Community College since September 2016. Affectionately called “Dean Garza” by his students, he has been a member of Houston Community College since 2001. Under his leadership, Houston Community College Southwest has developed a student-centered strategic plan and launched a redesign project for the college's student services welcome center, the first campaign devoted exclusively to Houston Community College's commitment to developing a true One-Stop Student Success Center.

As the Dean of Student Success, Dean Garza's central focus is to support and develop the College's Student Services Division so that students have the greatest possible experience. The dean oversees student services, which include admissions, advising, counseling, testing, student life, career, and recruitment services, along with policies that contribute to the student's experiences beyond the classroom. He frequently attends campus events and hosts meals with students to discuss their college experience.



**Clifford V. Johnson, Jr.** is a 3rd-year doctoral student in the Higher Education Leadership Program at Sam Houston State University. He obtained his A.A. in Liberal Arts, and his A.S. in Science from the Lone Star College System, his B.A. in Management from Our Lady of the Lake University, and his M.B.A. from Texas Woman's University. Prior to attending college, he honorably served a six-year commitment in the United States Navy in the field of Aviation Weapons.

Clifford Johnson serves as Campus Dean of Lone Star College-Houston North Victory with over 15 years of experience in the higher education field. In his current role, Dean Johnson leads the student support services division on campus, including student services, admissions, counseling, career services, and academic advising. Previous positions held include Assistant Dean of Student Services, Adjunct Instructor (Developmental Mathematics, Business, and First-Year Experience), and academic advisor. His current research interests are Black student persistence and graduation rates at for-profit higher education institutions and community colleges, student-focused support services, and wraparound services. He is married with four children ages: 18, 14, 12, and 10. In his free time, he enjoys spending time with his family, studying research on student support services, and gaming.



**Misty R. Rasmussen** is a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership program at Sam Houston State University. She earned a master's degree in Organizational Leadership from Boston University and a bachelor's degree in Biology with a pre-med concentration from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She serves as the Director of Accreditation at Austin Community College. Her previous higher education experience was as a Director of Planning, Research, and Institutional Effectiveness/SACSCOC Liaison for two community colleges in North Carolina. In addition, she taught Business Entrepreneurship as an Adjunct Instructor in North Carolina. She has held various positions in higher education at 2 Year public and 4 Year private institutions that include instruction, continuing education, and student services. She also serves as an Institutional Effectiveness and Academic Evaluator for SACSCOC. Prior to Misty's higher education experience, she honorably served as an active duty Marine for six years in the United States Marine Corps in the field of Air Traffic Control. Her research interests include community college completion agenda, assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and accreditation.