Winners Circle- Persistence in Doctoral Programs: Latinas’ Experiences in Higher Education

Rose Anna Santos, PH.D.
Texas A&M University

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The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the experiences of Latina graduate students as they pursue, navigate, and persist in Ph.D. programs in higher education administration at five universities in Texas.

Because Latina graduate students incur many challenges culturally and academically throughout their higher education pursuits, the conceptual framework for this study included (a) persistence theory (Tinto, 1975, 1993), and (b) validation theory (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Each part of the conceptual framework is equally important when exploring issues concerning persistence of Latina doctoral students.

Criteria for eligible participants were (a) women who self-identify as Latina, Hispanic, or Chicana; (b) students enrolled in or recent graduates (within one or two years at the time of this study) of higher education administration doctoral programs at one of five universities; and (c) being at the doctoral candidacy stage or having graduated within the past two years (at the time of the study). Once I had determined one potential participant at each university by utilizing a gatekeeper (a faculty, staff, or student member of the program who aided in identifying the initial participant), I used the snowball technique to identify additional eligible participants (Merriam, 2002). I collected data through face-to-face, semistructured, open-ended interviews (60-90 minutes) followed by telephone interviews (no more than 30 minutes).

I used a constructivist grounded theory approach to data analysis. This approach involves researchers constructing theories and concepts from the viewpoint of the participants without necessarily resulting in the outcome of a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Charmaz (2006) noted, a “constructivist would emphasize eliciting the participant’s definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules” (p. 32). According to Charmaz (2005), this approach places emphasis on the studied phenomenon rather than the methods of studying it.

Key themes emerged through analysis and I developed a conceptual model. The context of the pursuit of the doctorate served as the background of the model with the

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identified phenomenon being persistence to complete the dissertation. The starting factors, causal conditions, or the events that lead to the occurrence of the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were determined as internal and external motivation and commitment to service that involved a responsibility to pay it forward to other students as future leaders in education. The categories of support from family, friends, and faculty members, and stress, resulting from the limited time to accomplish dissertation goals were found to be intervening conditions, or the variables that mediate or moderate the context (Strauss & Corbin). Strauss and Corbin defined action strategies as goal-oriented activities that participants choose in response to the phenomenon and intervening conditions. Action strategies discovered in this study were coping skills such as exercise and relaxation. The consequence—the intended and unintended results of the action strategies (Strauss and Corbin)—discovered in this study was achievement, which included progressing through the degree program, completing the dissertation, and graduating.

References