

WHY DID WE CHOOSE TO PURSUE A DOCTORAL DEGREE?  
INSIGHTS FROM STUDENTS OF ONE INSTRUCTIONAL  
TECHNOLOGY DOCTORAL PROGRAM

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of conducting this bounded case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology at one university located in the southeastern United States. There has been little research on factors that influence students' decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Similarly, little research exists that explored the experiences that are associated with pursuing a doctoral degree. Based on the increase of doctoral students' enrollment (McFarland et al., 2019), it is important to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence student's decision to pursue a doctoral degree and be informed of the doctoral experience. Therefore, the study explored who or what encouraged the participants to pursue a doctoral degree, the experiences in pursuit of earning a doctoral degree, and the benefits of pursuing or earning a doctoral degree. This study provided examples of the factors that influenced the participants to pursue a doctoral degree, specifically in instructional technology.

Interviews were conducted to answer the research questions. The themes that emerged provided insight into why individuals pursue a doctoral degree, the doctoral experience, and the benefits of pursuing or earning a doctoral degree. The themes that emerged from this study revealed the impact that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals have on an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree, the doctoral experience, and the benefits of a doctoral degree.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends, who have endured this journey with me. They have supported me from the very beginning. For that, I will forever be indebted to you all. I love you and thank you.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Earning a doctoral degree is not only hard work, but it is also a commitment that requires a lot of time and sacrifice. Previous studies (Breckner, 2012; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006; Longfield, Romas, & Irwin, 2006) provide evidence that individuals who choose to pursue a doctoral degree find themselves faced with many obstacles. Research has indicated that most students who pursue a doctoral degree have the ability to finish; however, other factors contribute to students not completing their program, ultimately leading to high attrition among graduate students (Cassuto, 2013; Young, Vanwyne, Schafer, Robertson, & Poore, 2019). For over a decade, attrition rates of doctoral students have been as high as 75% (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), depending on the field of study. Existing studies on doctoral experiences have shown that students face several challenges including, but not limited to, sense of self-worth, financial burden, lack of support, and anxiety developed by fear of not completing a dissertation throughout their doctoral journey (Hyun et al., 2006; Longfield et al., 2006; McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2009; Protivnak & Foss, 2011). Other factors that have been identified as a hindrance to students completing their doctoral program include fear of failure; time management and balance between work, school, and social life; difficulties in obtaining research information; self-discipline (Breckner, 2012; Dyk, 1987; Longfield et al., 2006; Protivnak & Foss, 2011); and isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999; Zavaleta, Samuel, & Mills, 2014). Additional challenges reported in the literature are lack of motivation,

exhaustion or burnout, and the experience of a scholarly community (Gardner, 2009; Pyhalto, Toom, Stubb, & Lonka, 2012).

Even with these challenges, obtaining a doctoral degree can be beneficial. Earning a doctoral degree offers numerous rewards, such as financial gain. According to Baum, Ma, and Payea (2013), the average lifetime earnings of doctoral degree holders are higher than that of any degree holder within the same industry. For example, in education occupations, a doctoral degree holder earns 24% more than a master's degree holder, whereas in some other fields, such as engineering, there is only a small difference of 7% (Baum et al., 2013). Obtaining financial gain is one of many motives as to why students seek to pursue a doctoral degree. For instance, Ng, Nik Muhd, Rahman, and Ismail (2011) investigated the influential factors for pursuing a doctoral degree and found self-satisfaction and career advancement as the two main motives. Similarly, studies indicated self-satisfaction, self-motivation, and intrinsic motivation (Guerin, Jayatilaka, & Ranasinghe, 2015; Rudd, 1986; Wiegerova, 2016), and career opportunities (Kowalczyk-Waledziak, Lopes, Menezes, & Tormenta, 2017) as motivating factors in pursuing and completing a doctoral degree.

As noted, the path to pursuing a doctoral degree comes with many challenges and benefits. Many students decide to pursue a doctoral degree for numerous reasons; one, in particular, is self-satisfaction. For others, external factors influence the decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Some students pursue doctoral degrees to position themselves for advancement opportunities. With that being said, every student has a reason(s) for deciding to pursue a doctoral degree.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Making the decision to pursue a doctoral degree can be seen as a daunting task, especially for those individuals who do not know what to expect. Data collected by the United States Census Bureau (2018) indicated that only 4.5% of the population obtain a doctoral degree. Roadblocks include the substantial amount of sacrifice, effort, and discipline that the process requires. A majority of students who begin their doctoral journey do not reach graduation (Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008); in fact, many drop out within the 1st year (Golde, 1998). Due to the low percentage of graduation rates among doctoral students, factors surrounding doctoral attrition have become the focus of many studies (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Attrition has been a consistent problem. For example, many researchers have conducted a series of research studies to find out what could be responsible for the problem (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Pauley et al., 1999; Protivnak & Foss, 2011; Zavaleta et al., 2014). Factors such as finances, lack of motivation, lack of support, and self-discipline have been identified as major causes of attrition of doctoral students (Gardner, 2009; Pyhalto et al., 2012).

Despite all these efforts of research and findings, the attrition of doctoral students is still problematic. While understanding the factors that contribute to attrition is necessary, it is also important to understand why students want to earn a doctoral degree. There has been little emphasis on why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in the first place. Almost all research studies regarding doctoral education concentrate on the challenges students face while pursuing a doctoral degree. There is little research about the factors that influence students in their decision to pursue a doctoral degree, specifically, in the field of instructional technology. Previous studies have almost exclusively focused on doctoral students' experiences in other

fields, such as Counselor Education and Nursing (Protivnak & Foss, 2011; Quinn, 2017; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Therefore, little research is available to inform prospective students about the pros and cons of pursuing a degree in instructional technology.

One particular study conducted by Golde and Dore (2001), sought to examine the experiences of doctoral students, their decision to pursue a doctoral degree, the effectiveness of the chosen doctoral program, and their knowledge and expectation(s) of a doctoral program. Golde and Dore's (2001) study findings are relevant to this research topic. The participants of the Golde and Dore (2001) study were Arts and Sciences doctoral students. They found that there are positive and negative factors that influence students' decisions to pursue a doctoral degree. Findings of the Golde and Dore (2001) study concluded that students are positively influenced through the enjoyment of teaching and research, faculty encouragement, and career exposure. In contrast, fear of not obtaining tenure, job market, salary, and workload expectations are some factors that negatively influence students' decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Golde and Dore (2001) also found the inability to maintain a balanced work and family life to be a prominent factor that influences students' decision to pursue a doctoral degree. This study coincides with other research that indicates how a number of factors can influence an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree (Ng et al., 2011; Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018).

Golde and Dore (2001) presented evidence that college students do not clearly understand what the doctoral process entails, nor how the process works in order to navigate through it effectively. Research has suggested that focusing on student experiences in a doctoral program could give insight into whether students deem the benefits of obtaining a doctoral degree worth it (Tuttle, 2012); therefore, research on students' pursuit of a doctoral degree is needed. The personal experiences of students can provide information and offer suggestions to potential

doctoral students who are considering a doctoral degree. This study will describe implied perspectives regarding the factors that influence instructional technology doctoral students' decisions to pursue the degree or leave the program. Without knowing these influential factors or experiences, it is difficult to understand why students choose to pursue a doctoral degree in a specific field, specifically in instructional technology.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative bounded case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, the study's intent was to explore the experiences that are associated with the process of pursuing a doctoral degree.

### **Significance of the Study**

With an increase in doctoral students' enrollment (McFarland et al., 2019) of 2.5% between 2000 and 2018 (United States Census Bureau, 2018), more research is needed to better assist faculty, administrators, and policymakers in understanding the needs of doctoral students. Being that no research has been published about doctoral students' experiences in an Instructional Technology program, results from this study can help graduate programs improve their recruiting strategies by understanding what is important to individuals in choosing to pursue a degree in instructional technology. In addition, faculty and staff can utilize the results in re-working programs to better meet the needs of students. Also, this study could be of interest to prospective students who are interested in pursuing a doctoral degree in the field of instructional technology. Potential students may wonder if students thrive in an Instructional Technology program and if the program effectively supports doctoral students' career plans. Potential students can be informed through first-hand experiences of what difficulties students faced

during their doctoral journey, and, consequently, how they overcame difficult situations by implementing strategies, whether personal or academic.

The field of instructional technology is a unique entity even though the profession shares similarities to other fields such as educational technology and instructional design. This study provides insights into why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree within the discipline of instructional technology. Also, this study was able to gain an understanding of what students experience during their doctoral journey. In addition, this study adds to the research on doctoral students' experience.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) provided the theoretical framework for this study. The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) is derived from Albert Bandura's general social cognitive theory (see Figure 1). SCCT explores how educational and career interests mature, how career-related choices develop, and how these choices are turned into action. More specifically, SCCT focuses on the personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influencing the interrelated aspects of career development: (1) how basic academic and career interests develop, (2) how educational and career choices are made, and (3) how academic and career success is obtained (Lent et al., 2002). This is accomplished by focusing on three constructs: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals.

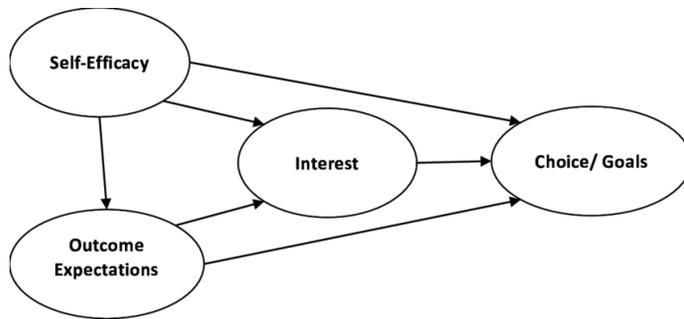


Figure 1. The social cognitive career theory by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2002).

Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs people have about their ability to complete a task. However, these beliefs are not concrete but can change over time based on interactions with other people, the environment, and one's own behaviors. Bandura's (1994) concept of self-efficacy proposes four sources of efficacy beliefs: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and psychological and emotional states. Mastery experiences provide individuals with real-life evidence from a personal accomplishment that they have the capability to succeed. Vicarious experiences, learning through observations, increases individuals' belief that they have the capabilities to accomplish similar, if not, the same task. Through social interactions with other individuals, people can gain the confidence that they have the necessary skills and abilities to master a specific task. An individual's own beliefs and past accomplishments influence how they feel about their capabilities in producing an expected outcome.

Outcome expectations are individual beliefs related to the consequences of performing a particular behavior. It is the individual's assumption as to what could happen if they pursue a particular opportunity or task. Whereas, self-efficacy causes an individual to examine whether or not they will succeed in completing a task. For example, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be tied to outcome expectations. An individual can be intrinsically motivated to complete a task

because of self-satisfaction and self-accomplishment, personal enjoyment. In contrast, an individual can be extrinsically motivated to complete a task with the expectations of receiving a reward, external enjoyment. In other words, both expectations and motivations can affect the goals that individuals set for themselves (Lent et al., 2002).

Lastly, goals are important in SCCT. A goal is defined as something you hope to achieve in the future (Goal, 2019). In the SCCT, there are two primary types of goals: (a) choice-content goals, career an individual chooses to pursue, and (b) performance goals, expected level of performance to achieve a goal (Lent et al., 2002). SCCT proposes that goals are tied to self-efficacy and outcome expectations because “people tend to set goals that are consistent with their views of their personal capabilities and of the outcomes they expect to attain from pursuing a particular course of action” (Lent et al., 2002, p. 751). In other words, SCCT views self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals as related entities of career choice and academic development (Lent et al., 2002). Specifically, SCCT suggests that past experiences influence self-efficacy and outcome expectations, which in part influences desired goals.

In their study of graduate studies, McCulloch, Guerin, Jayatilaka, Calder, and Ranasinghe (2017) used SCCT as the basis of their focus on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and perceived barriers and supports. For example, Gibbons and Shoffner’s (2004) study examined how school and career counselors can help students through the use of Social Cognitive Career Theory. Results indicated that support and guidance throughout one’s academic process have a significant influence on the career and academic outcome of students (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Studies conducted by Tate et al. (2015) also used elements of the Social Cognitive Career Theory, such as career attainment, self-efficacy experiences, and the influence of others on career decisions.

These studies (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; McCulloch et al., 2017; Tate et al., 2015) suggest that SCCT is a useful framework to guide research on graduate study. This theory has proven helpful in understanding career interest among social cognitive variables (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals) and influences of individual and social contextual factors in graduate studies. Using the SCCT framework helped guide the researcher to explore the influential factors that contributed to students of the Instructional Technology doctoral program decision to pursue a doctoral degree, the challenges and successes they experienced throughout their doctoral journey, and their expected career plan.

### **Research Questions**

In order to understand why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in Instructional Technology at one university located in the southeastern United States, the following questions guided the research study:

1. How do current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program describe their decision to pursue a doctoral degree?
2. How do current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program describe their experiences in pursuit of a doctoral degree?
3. What is the benefit(s) for current students and alumni who pursue a doctoral degree?

### **Methods**

This qualitative study employed a bounded case study research design to explore the factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctoral degree. Qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding” where the researcher develops a “complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting”

(Creswell, 1994, p. 15). As defined by Rallis and Rossman (2003), qualitative research “is emergent rather than tightly prefigured” (p. 3), meaning not everything is structured or planned.

Qualitative research was chosen for this study because of its intent to understand insights of real-life events as the participants experience them. According to Merriam (2009), researchers engaging in qualitative research are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences. Additionally, qualitative analysis “produces an understanding of the problem based on multiple contextual factors” (Stake, 1995, p. 37). Lastly, Leedy and Ormrod (2001) stated that qualitative research is less structured in the description because it formulates and builds new theories. Therefore, a qualitative approach served this study best.

Data were collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with alumni and current students of the Instructional Technology doctoral program at one university located in the southeastern United States. The interview included questions focusing on the factors that influenced the decision to pursue a doctoral degree, doctoral experience, and the benefits and goals of earning or pursuing a doctorate. The interviews allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the influential factors and experiences of individuals that pursue a doctoral degree.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

This study is based on the assumption that all participants answered each question truthfully. The encouragement of transparency and honesty of all interview questions was fostered by an informed consent form. The form was completed before the interview to ensure confidentiality.

### **Limitations**

This study investigated the factors that influenced individuals to pursue a doctoral degree. A limitation of this study was the possibility of participants withholding information that could

impact the outcome of the study. When participants were asked personal questions, they might have refrained from providing valuable feedback because of fear of confidentiality or not being comfortable with the topic. Another limitation of the study was that the collected data may only be useful or relevant to the selected university; however, the findings may be useful to prospective doctoral students.

### **Delimitations**

This study took place at a university located in the southeast United States. The study was further delimited to students of an Instructional Technology doctoral program at that university.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Educational Technology* “is a field involved in the facilitation of human learning through the systematic identification, development, organization, and utilization of a full range of learning resources and through the management of these processes” (Seels & Richey, 1994, p.19).

*Imposter Syndrome* “an internal experience of believing that you are not as competent as others perceive you to be” (Cuncic, 2021, p.1).

*Instructional Design* “is a system of procedures for developing education and training curricula in a consistent and reliable fashion” (Reiser & Dempsey, 2007, p.8).

#### *Instructional Technology*

encompasses the analysis of learning and performance problems, and the design, development, implementation, evaluation, and management of instructional and non-instructional processes and resources intended to improve learning and performance in a variety of settings, particularly educational institutions, and the workplace. (Reiser, 2001, p. 53)

*Self-efficacy* is the beliefs people have about their ability to complete a task (Bandura, 1994).

## Summary

This study was intended to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, the study explored the experiences that are associated with the process of pursuing a doctoral degree. This study is organized into five chapters.

Chapter I presents an introduction to the topic and the reasoning behind the study. It also states the problem being investigated as well as the purpose and the significance of the study. Lastly, it addresses the theoretical framework, research questions, research design overview, definition of terms, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Chapter II reviews the available literature concerning the topic. The first section addresses the history of instructional technology. The available data concerning the job market in the field of instructional technology are discussed in section two. In section two, the social cognitive career theory is discussed. In sections three and four, internal and external factors that contribute to students' pursuit of a doctoral degree and the challenges students encounter during their doctoral journey are addressed. Section five includes research about the benefits of earning a doctoral degree.

The methodology is discussed in Chapter III. This chapter explains the research design and the importance of a case study for this topic. This chapter also includes the methodology used in this study and how the participants were selected to participate. It also includes how the data were analyzed. Chapter IV presents the data collected and analyzes the findings of the research organized according to the emerging themes. Last, Chapter V summarizes the dissertation. Included in this chapter are the discussions, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research on doctoral students' experiences.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As discussed earlier, current literature lacks research on the factors that influence a student's decision to pursue a doctoral degree, specifically in the field of instructional technology. Elaborating on internal and external factors, through the use of social cognitive career theory, can enhance the researcher's understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree. Therefore, this literature review chapter will provide (a) an overview of the field of instructional technology, (b) a break-down of the social cognitive career theory, (c) introduction to internal and external factors that contribute to students pursuit of a doctoral degree, (d) presentation of challenges that students encounter during doctoral studies, and (e) determination of the benefits of pursuing a doctoral degree.

#### **Overview of Instructional Technology**

##### **History of Instructional Technology**

The history of instruction began over a century ago and has grown the field of instructional technology (Reiser, 2001). To understand the emergence of the field, a timeline of the history of instructional technology is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

*History of Instructional Technology*

Era	Period	Events
1900s – 1940s	Birth of the audiovisual movement	During this era, the first school museums were created (Reiser, 2001). Also, this was the era when the term “audiovisual instruction” was introduced.
	World War II	Materials such as overhead projectors, silent films, and television programs were used for military training (Rao, 2008). Despite some mishaps of audiovisual media usage, the overall success of the films during the war gained the interest of schools.
1950s - 1960s:	Programmed television and instructional materials	B.F. Skinner reintroduced programmed instruction (Harran, 2015).
1970s - 1980s:	Instructional Systems Design and Microcomputer	Microcomputers became popular in schools and businesses (Rao, 2008).
1990s - 2000s	Evolution of Technology	World Wide Web, what we know as the “Internet” became popularized (Reiser, 2001).

Since its founding, the Internet has become one of the most powerful and rewarding instructional resources to date in education. It has been used to improve learning. According to Jonassen (2000), both computers and the Internet have been widely used tools to facilitate students’ learning in the classroom (Johnson, 2018). Jurist (1999) indicated that the incorporation

of these technological tools changed the practices in teaching and learning. The classroom became more student-centered rather than teacher-centered (Johnson, 2018), which promoted more active learning (Jurist, 1999) The integration of technology is the result of many factors, but one of the most important factors for teachers has been the ability to meet students' needs with the use of instructional technology activities.

### **What is Instructional Technology?**

Instructional technology is often used interchangeably with “educational technology” and “instructional design” all of which share a common interest in the processes of learning and teaching. Although there is still debate about the distinctions between “educational technology”, “instructional design” and “instructional technology”, the researcher will use “instructional technology” as the primary focus for this study. This term best represents the study because the study’s data will be provided by students of an Instructional Technology doctoral program.

Instructional technology may best be understood by citing different variations of the definition cited from scholars in the field. Within the literature, authors (Ely, 1963; Reiser, 2001; Seels & Richey, 1994; Tickton, 1970) shared similar definitions of the term *instructional technology*. The term was first introduced to describe the process in which instruction is delivered to facilitate learning (Ely, 1963). In 1970, the U.S. Commission on Instructional Technology (1970) and Tickton (1970) both re-defined the field of instructional technology to include the phases of the learning process to ensure the effectiveness of instruction. The most widely used definition of the field was later revised in 1994 by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). The definition included the five domains of the field: design, development, utilization, management, and evaluation of processes and resources of

learning (Seels & Richey, 1994). The latest revision of the definition was composed in 2001 by Reiser. Reiser (2001) stated that instructional technology

encompasses the analysis of learning and performance problems, and the design, development, implementation, evaluation, and management of instructional and non-instructional processes and resources intended to improve learning and performance in a variety of settings, particularly educational institutions and the workplace. (p. 53)

Like the 1994 AECT definition, this definition introduced the five domains associated with the field of instructional technology. Moreover, the recent definition provides a detailed description of the concepts associated with the field (i.e., analyzing learning through instructional processes and solving problems).

### **Domains of Instructional Technology**

The definitions cited from the literature demonstrate the growth in the field of instructional technology. Seels and Richey (1994) and Reiser's (2001) definitions provide a list of roles and components that an instructional technologist would assume. Each of these roles and components is divided into the following domains: design, development, utilization (implementation), management, and evaluation. To better understand the different domains of the field, an overview of the domains will be discussed separately.

### **Overview of Instructional Technology Domains**

Professions in this field must possess a variety of skill sets in order to create effective learning materials to meet expected goals. As a professional in the field, one must know how to design and establish a plan. The 3 Ws and the H must be answered in this field to ensure effectiveness: *where*, *what*, *how*, and *when*. This helps the designer to determine the approach and expected outcome (Branch & Kopcha, 2014; Brown & Green, 2015). Development is one domain that can be found in almost every industry. Responsibilities for developers could range from the decision-making of design, communicating with leaders, implementing instruction,

creating policies, and producing and delivering material or developing applications, depending on the career chosen in the field. Utilization, which can also be identified as implementation, is another domain that can be found in the majority of industries. Employers want to know how to improve efficiency in the workplace. This can be done by implementing material(s) as a source of training (Seels & Richey, 1994), or other mechanisms based upon the employer's need. Policies and regulations also fall under the domain of utilization to ensure that designers and developers are abiding by copyright laws that pertain to implementation.

Management is an important aspect in the field of instructional technology (Hoy & Hoy, 2013). The management roles of instructional technologists include, but are not limited to, "planning and organizing" (Seels & Richey, 1994, p. 48). In addition, ensuring that the proper resources are available to allow for learning to take place. Moreover, there are four subcategories of management that are important in instructional technology: project management, resource management, delivery system management, and information management (Glanz, 2006; Seels & Richey, 1994), which include some elements of planning, monitoring, and controlling instruction. Last, the skillset of evaluation is needed throughout all sectors. Within this domain, evaluation is defined as "the process of determining the adequacy of instruction and learning" (Seels & Richey, 1994, p. 54). In other words, ensuring that materials meet the needs of the individuals. There are subcategories of evaluation as it relates to instructional technology: problem analysis and formative and summative evaluation. In addition, not every profession of the field performs all of these tasks, as some tasks vary depending on the field. The domains of the field are represented graphically in Figure 2.

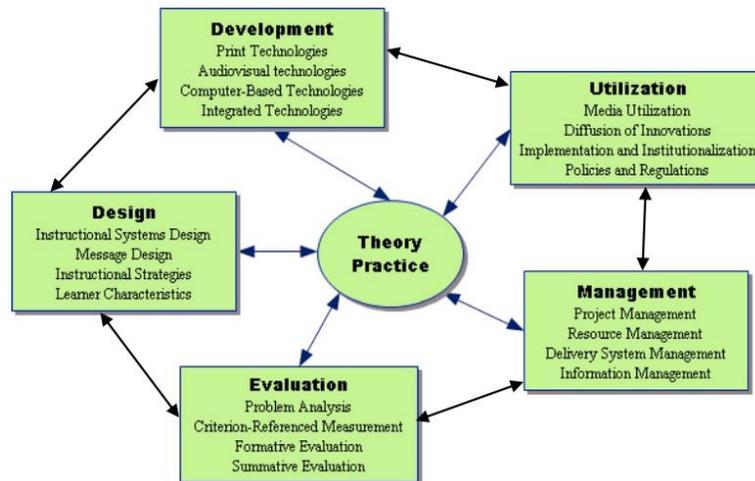


Figure 2. The domains of instructional technology by Seels and Richey (1994).

As previously discussed, each domain entails a variety of skill sets and knowledge that a professional in the field of instructional technology needs to encompass to be proficient in the field. A degree in this field or a related field can provide opportunities for a number of career options.

### What Can You do With an Instructional Technology Degree?

Earning a doctoral degree in instructional technology or a related field helps provide different career opportunities. The degree may open doors to many career opportunities because it is a diverse field. For example, with a degree in instructional technology, or related fields, individuals may be qualified for several different occupational positions. Possible occupational positions for this field include an instructional coordinator, educational administrator, chief learning officer, postsecondary teacher, survey researcher, or an instructional designer. Those are only a few positions of the many that an individual with the education, the skillset, and relevant experience within the field can obtain (Chen, Dong, Tomita, & Eunkyung, 2016). Even though these positions are titled differently, the responsibilities of each are similar. For example, an

instructional technologist is similar to that of an educational specialist, instructional designer, application developer, computer programmer, and instructional trainer.

The demand for instructional technologists is expected to grow much faster than average. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) indicated an employment growth of 11% from 2016 to 2026 for employment in instructional coordinators occupations. Additional occupations in this field with similar roles, such as developers and trainers, are expected to grow 10% from 2016 to 2026 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Being that this field works in different sectors, such as corporate or education, there is no average salary for this field. Although there is not a reported average annual salary for this field, it has been noted that individuals who hold a doctoral degree make the highest salaries. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2017, average salaries for jobs in the instructional technology field with a doctoral degree ranged from \$45,000 to \$85,000 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). As these are only estimates, the salaries could be substantially higher.

The demand for the field of instructional technology and the expected increase in demand cited earlier makes this field an attractive market, not only because of the high salaries but also because of the increase in expected employment over the next few years. As cited earlier, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) projected a growth of at least 10% in the field and related fields of instructional technology. Studies have shown that IT positions are advertised under various job titles (Chen et al., 2016; Surry & Robinson, 2001). Surry and Robinson (2001) conducted a study on 449 IT position job announcements. Of the 449 job announcements, 193 were in the field of instructional technology. Others listed were instructional designer, coordinator, manager/administrator, support specialist, and miscellaneous. Because of the

different types of jobs in IT, there is an opportunity to choose from different career options. These factors make pursuing a doctoral degree in instructional technology a desirable option.

### **SCCT as Theoretical Framework**

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is derived from Albert Bandura's general social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). The social cognitive theory (SCT) that was originally defined by Bandura (1986), states that cognitive and behavior play a significant role in an individual's ability to learn new things as well as obtain new skills. The SCT posits that people learn through observation, initiation, and modeling of behavior (Bandura, 1986, 2011). This theory gave existence to the Social Cognitive Career Theory, which was created to aid in the understanding of how individuals form career interests, make educational and vocational choices, and proceed in academic and/or occupational ventures (Malone, 2012). It was designed to provide a framework for academic and career decisions.

In short, the SCCT examines the goals of an individual and the factors that influence their career decision. As indicated by a study conducted by Borrego, Knight, Gibbs, and Crede (2018), SCCT provides a useful structure for understanding the factors that contribute to students' decision to pursue a graduate degree. SCCT (see Figure 1) uses three primary constructs: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. These constructs are seen as building blocks for career development.

#### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy beliefs are also related to the expansion of satisfying social relations which bring satisfaction to an individual's life (Bandura, 1997). Thus, satisfaction should be high in self-efficacious individuals. Self-efficacy beliefs are considered to be at the center of the development of an individual's career process. Self-efficacy is an individual's beliefs about

his/her capabilities to complete a task (Lent et al., 2002). It can influence individuals' behaviors either positively or negatively, based on their perception of their abilities regarding a particular task. Self-efficacy influences the choices people make, the effort they put forth, and how long they persist when facing challenging situations, obstacles, and failure (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy beliefs are also related to the expansion of satisfying social relations which bring satisfaction to an individual's life (Bandura, 1994). Bandura (1994) proposed that self-efficacy beliefs are formed from four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and psychological and emotional states.

Mastery experiences are said to be the most influential source as it relates to career decision making. People are often inspired to pursue a task based on their own accomplishments and skillsets. The second source of self-efficacy beliefs is vicarious experiences. Individuals develop confidence and self-esteem in their own abilities as they observe the accomplishments of others. Third, individuals develop self-efficacy through social persuasion. Encouragement and support from peers can contribute to building an individual's self-belief. Last, self-efficacy beliefs are formed during psychological and emotional states; it can intensify a sense of accomplishment (Bandura, 1994). These four sources of self-efficacy can influence how individuals make judgments about their own capabilities.

The success of students who pursue a doctoral degree has been found to be related to the students' self-efficacy and interest. Williams's (2005) study on graduate studies proposed three domains that correlate with the pursuit of a degree: academic, research, and social self-efficacy. Academic self-efficacy refers to a student's belief in his or her ability to successfully complete coursework (Schunk, 1991). On the other hand, research self-efficacy is a student's belief about his or her knowledge or expertise to conduct research (Zimmerman, 1996). Last, social self-

efficacy refers to an individual's belief in building supportive peer relationships (Ahmad, Yasien, & Ahmad, 2014).

Being that the pursuit of a doctoral degree corresponds with developing a particular career path, these self-efficacy beliefs will likely have an impact on an individual's doctoral journey. As indicated by SCCT, one's personal self-efficacy experiences give one confidence to accomplish a task in order to produce the desired outcome.

### **Outcome Expectations**

Outcome expectations influence one's behavior. Furthermore, combined with self-efficacy, outcome expectations can determine the consequence of behavior (Maddux, Sherer, & Rogers, 1982). It is the consequences that could occur as a result of performing a behavior (Bandura, 1994). It is presumed that outcome expectations can be determined by similar sources that influence self-efficacy: social engagement and vicarious learning. Bandura (1994) proposed three forms of outcome expectations: physical, social, and self-evaluations. Physical includes tangible reinforcement that is awarded as a result of the behavior, for example, pursuing a doctoral degree can result in receiving monetary incentives. Social reactions are the second form of outcomes expected from behavior. Social reactions can be categorized into positive or negative. For instance, positive social reactions include approval and recognition, whereas negative social reactions can be shame or social rejection. The third form of outcome is self-evaluations, both positive and negative. Self-evaluation can be self-satisfaction or self-criticism. In addition, self-evaluation has been identified as being impactful to goal-attractiveness (Israel, 1960).

Consequences that occur as a result of a change in behavior can either be positive or negative. More than likely individuals are expecting a positive outcome or they would not

attempt a task. According to Lent et al. (2002), individuals are more likely to attempt what they think they can accomplish and less likely to attempt what they believe they will fail. For individuals who pursue a doctoral degree, their expected outcome is to graduate and continue on their career path; not dropping out or never finishing. SCCT suggests that outcome expectations are important factors of career interests and choice goals.

## **Goals**

Simply put, a goal is something you are trying to do or achieve. In SCCT, there are two types of goals: choice goals and performance goals. Choice goals are tasks someone chooses to pursue (Lent et al., 1994). For example, a person chooses to pursue a doctoral degree for the purpose of receiving financial gains. Performance goals are the performances which an individual sets in order to achieve a goal (Lent et al., 1994). For example, an individual generally needs to maintain a GPA of 3.0 or higher to graduate in a doctoral program. Lent et al. (1994) stated that there is a connection between past performance, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in determining performance outcomes. People tend to set goals based on their capabilities and the outcomes they expect to attain from pursuing a particular course of action (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). However, in a study conducted by Carrico and Tendhar (2012), their findings indicated that outcome expectations do not dictate goals.

Self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals play an enormous role in SCCT's model of career decision. By using the SCCT as a theoretical framework, the researcher will be able to better understand how internal factors (self-efficacy experiences) and external factors (career advancements) impact students' pursuit of a doctoral degree.

## **Choosing to Pursue a Doctoral Degree**

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), around 3.0 million students were enrolled in postbaccalaureate degree programs, which included masters and doctoral programs. Post-baccalaureate enrollment increased between 2000 to 2010 by 36%. The report also indicated that post-baccalaureate enrollment had grown 2% between 2010 to 2017. By 2028, postbaccalaureate enrollment is projected to increase by 3% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In addition, the Council of Graduate Schools reported a 4.1% increase in admissions' applications for doctoral between Fall 2017 and Fall 2018 (Okahana & Zhou, 2019). As a result, researchers have emphasized the need to not only understand doctoral experiences but what influences students to pursue a doctoral degree (Hyun et al., 2006; Longfield et al., 2006; McAlpine et al., 2009; Protivnak & Foss, 2011). The following section will focus on intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence individuals' decisions to pursue a doctorate. These influential factors will help facilitate the understanding of the role of internal and external factors in deciding to pursue a doctorate as well as fill in gaps of literature on reasons why individuals decide to pursue a doctorate.

Given the substantial amount of information on doctoral experience, there is a limited amount of previous research on the reasons students decide to pursue a doctoral degree. Studies show that students are influenced by several factors in their decision to pursue a doctoral degree (Guerin et al., 2015; Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al, 2017; Ng et al., 2011; Rudd, 1986; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Various factors for pursuing a doctoral degree have been investigated in the literature on doctoral experience. Rudd (1986) and Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al. (2017) reported that personal attributes were related to pursuing a doctoral degree. Additionally, the influence of others was associated with the desire to pursue a doctoral degree (Brailsford, 2010). Ng et al.

(2011) identified six main factors that influence an individual decision: (a) opportunity, (b) personal attributes, (c) working relevant knowledge, (d) financial support, (e) program structures, and (f) social support. These factors can be categorized as either external or internal.

## **Internal Factors**

### ***Personal Satisfaction***

Intellectual and self-satisfaction are internal factors that were identified as reasoning for pursuing a doctoral degree (Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al., 2017). Also, previous studies reported that factors such as self-motivation, sense of accomplishment, and self-achievement influenced individuals to pursue a doctoral degree (Rudd, 1986). While there are many factors that influence an individual's decision to pursue a particular career, a sense of accomplishment can be one of the most satisfying benefits of receiving a doctoral degree (Rudd, 1986).

As previously stated, there is extensive literature on the experiences of doctoral students but less is known about the reason or motive for individuals pursuing a doctoral degree. Internal factors, such as self-satisfaction, seem to increase an individual's interest in pursuing a doctoral degree. Ng et al. (2011) investigated factors influencing doctoral students' completion, achievement, and well-being in doctoral studies. Findings indicated that personal attributes are one of the highest internal factors in pursuing a doctorate. A limitation of Ng et al.'s study was the lack of discussion on self-efficacy as it related to internal factors, which has been found to be an important factor in previous studies about pursuing a doctoral degree (Borrego et al., 2018; Guerin et al., 2015; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Similarly, Rudd (1986) and Tzanakou (2014) found that personal satisfaction is a reason why individuals pursue a doctoral degree. Findings indicated that individuals pursue a doctorate because of individual attributes such as self-satisfaction.

More recently, Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al. (2017) focused on teachers' motivations for pursuing a doctoral degree. Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al. concluded that personal motives had a positive influence on individuals who choose to pursue a doctoral degree. Examples include passion to do research and personal fulfillment. In addition to personal attributes, recent research presented that intrinsic motivation influences an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree (Guerin et al., 2015).

### ***Intrinsic Motivation***

Motivation can be viewed as an influential factor when deciding to pursue a doctoral degree. Motivation is an internal factor that influences individuals to pursue a doctorate (Brailsford, 2010; Guerin et al., 2015; London et al., 2014; Wiegerova, 2016). Research on motivation to pursue a doctorate is limited, though the existing research seems to suggest that research interest plays a significant role in deciding to pursue a doctoral degree (Wiegerova, 2016). Wiegerova (2016), in her qualitative study of 10 doctoral graduates, found that students decide to pursue a doctoral degree because of their desire to do research, while others did so to continue student life. She reported no significant difference in motivation to pursue a doctoral degree in the field of educational studies.

Based on their study of motivations for pursuing an engineering doctoral degree, London et al. (2014) reported prior success of graduate studies, interest in the field, and personal interest as the top three motivations for pursuing a doctoral degree. Their study also indicated findings consistent with what motivates individuals in other disciplines to pursue a doctoral degree. They concluded that the motivation to pursue a doctoral degree differs based on experience (London et al., 2014).

Among other characteristics, Brailsford (2010) found that the influence of others was associated with the desire to pursue a doctoral degree. Brailsford conducted a qualitative study that interviewed 11 doctoral students of an Australian university on their reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree. The study revealed that individuals are motivated and encouraged to pursue a doctorate through social encounters with friends, colleagues, family members, and academics. The experience and motivation of others play a role in an individual's decision to pursue a doctorate. This approach aligned with previous research in determining internal factors for pursuing a doctoral degree (e.g., Wiegerova, 2016).

The next section will focus on external factors that contribute to students' decision or motivations to pursue a doctorate. Researchers have found that intrinsic interest impacted pursuing graduate studies; however, individuals are also persuaded by extrinsic factors. Studies have also indicated that the majority of students pursuing a doctorate are motivated to do so because of external factors (Hinkle, Iarussi, Schermer, & Yensel, 2014; Tennant, 2004). This is important to note when reviewing the influences of individuals in their decision to pursue a doctorate.

### **External Factors**

Doctoral experiences studies on influential factors have been beneficial in providing reasons as to why individuals pursue a doctorate (Hinkle et al., 2014; Kirk & Wysocki, 1991). In most cases, recent studies have identified career and financial opportunities as external factors for pursuing a doctoral degree (Rudd, 1986; Sverdlik et al., 2018). For example, Sverdlik et al. (2018) defined external factors as related to doctoral students pursuit of a degree "are conceptualized as representing all relationships and structures that involve individuals, resources, and institutions outside the student that may either directly or indirectly impact doctoral

progress” (p. 364). They suggested that external factors can influence one’s decision in pursuing a doctorate.

### ***Career Opportunities***

Existing research on doctoral students’ influential factors for pursuing a doctoral degree found career advancement (Golde & Dore, 2001; Hinkle et al., 2014) and professional development (Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al., 2017; Tennant, 2004) as external factors reported by students. Moreover, studies that explored the doctoral experience reported career opportunities as a positive motivating factor for pursuing a doctorate (Hinkle et al., 2014). A study on motivational factors of graduate students found career enhancement opportunities as a factor that influences individuals to decide to pursue a doctoral degree (Hinkle et al., 2014). The goal of the study was to identify motivations in pursuing a doctoral degree in Counselor Education and Supervision (CES). The study suggested professional goals were the common motivation in earning a doctoral degree in CES or any other discipline. The study concluded that the majority of participants indicated that career and professional opportunities were the motivation factors for becoming a Counselor Educator, which aligned with previous literature on reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree (Sverdlik et al., 2018).

Guerin et al.’s (2015) exploratory factor analysis study found through their survey of 405 doctoral students that a number of motivations influence the decision of individuals to pursue a doctorate. Five factors emerged from their analysis, in which career progression was listed as a factor that influences individuals to pursue a doctorate.

The researchers also found that pursuing a doctoral degree has strong links between teaching and research. Studies such as Guerin et al. (2015) are important to doctoral studies as it is important to understand the motivation factors for undertaking a doctorate. Similarly, the

findings of Tennant (2004) support that individuals are less hesitant to pursue a degree if it is for their profession and/or career development.

Additionally, these individuals hope that a graduate degree will provide the opportunity for more career options in the future as well as employment opportunities within the department (Golde & Dore, 2001; Teowkul et al., 2009). According to Teowkul et al. (2009), research has emphasized that career enhancement plays an important role in pursuing a graduate degree. The main purpose of Teowkul et al.'s (2009) exploratory study was to explore why individuals decide to pursue higher education, especially master and doctoral degrees. Their quantitative data were analyzed and they discovered that the motivational factors of individuals pursuing a master's degree were different from those pursuing a doctoral degree. In contrast to other studies, their results revealed a new category, which was "gain respect from others" (Teowkul et al., 2009). According to the authors, the need for respect was more evident for doctoral students than for master's level students. The study recommended a qualitative study in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the results.

Based on their study of doctoral influences, Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al. (2017) reported that earning a doctoral degree improves work knowledge. The purpose of the study was to explore the motivations and professional impact that pursuing a doctoral degree had on Polish and Portuguese teachers. The study concluded that professional development was a dominant factor in teachers' decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Teachers agreed that earning a doctoral degree has a positive impact on their working environment. The findings were consistent with Ng et al. (2011), which indicated that work-related knowledge is an influential factor for individuals to pursue a doctoral degree. The difference, however, was the emphasis on influential factors that contribute to attracting individuals to pursue a doctoral degree and they used both

quantitative and qualitative as a source of data collection. This is congruent with previous studies on influential factors for pursuing a doctoral degree (Golde & Dore, 2001; Tennant, 2004).

### *Financial Opportunities*

Research has shown that many students who pursue a doctoral degree do so to further their career (Hinkle et al., 2014; Rudd, 1986; Sverdlik et al., 2018). However, Kirk and Wysocki (1991) found that students see their terminal degree as an opportunity to advance in their careers and receive financial compensations. In a survey of 149 doctoral students, Kirk and Wysocki reported that students who pursue a doctoral degree are strongly influenced by higher salaries, and as a result, students indicated they select graduate programs based on two factors: opportunity and quality. Along the same line, Ng et al. (2011) found that an increase in salaries is attractive to influencing people to pursue a doctoral degree. Individuals will pursue doctoral studies if they perceive that earning a doctoral degree will offer them financial opportunities or rewards. Nonetheless, findings from Golde and Dore (2001) indicated that several students do not understand the financial significance of earning a doctorate at the time of enrollment.

Adams (2011) indicated several factors that influenced individuals to pursue a doctoral degree; the potential for an increased salary was included in these factors. The majority of the participants in this study felt that obtaining a doctoral degree would help them achieve financial stability. The results of this study were consistent with previous literature (Kirk & Wysocki, 1991; Ng et al., 2011).

Previous research on influences and motivators to pursue a doctoral degree provides possible recommendations for future research. Moreover, researchers identified both internal and external factors as influences for pursuing a doctorate (Guerin et al., 2015; Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2011; Rudd, 1986; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Given the importance

of doctoral education, it is necessary to consider factors that influence an individual decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Moreover, there are significant obstacles associated with this degree path (Ali & Kohun, 2006; National Science Foundation, 2018).

### **Challenges That Students Face While Pursuing a Doctoral Degree**

The previous section of this chapter focused on the influential factors that contribute to an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree. This section, however, focuses specifically on challenges individuals encounter throughout their doctoral journey, which provides insight into the issues previously discussed in the literature. There have been extensive doctoral experience studies regarding challenges students face at the doctoral level (Hyun et al., 2006; Longfield et al., 2006; McAlpine et al., 2009; Protivnak & Foss, 2011). Study findings, based on doctoral experiences, associated the following challenges students face in pursuit of a doctoral degree: a sense of self-worth, financial burden, isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hyun et al., 2006; Longfield et al., 2006; McAlpine et al., 2009; Protivnak & Foss, 2011). Recent studies also revealed that these challenges are related to attrition among doctoral programs (Cassuto, 2013; Young et al., 2019).

Doctoral attrition has been the topic of numerous studies on doctoral experiences (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). As reported by the Council of Graduate Schools (2004), attrition doctoral rates have been as high as 75% for doctoral programs. Rigler, Bowlin, Sweat, Watts, and Throne (2017) found four constructs by analyzing 79 studies on doctoral attrition. The four constructs that were identified were: (a) chair agency and chair-candidate relationship; (b) candidate socialization and support systems; (c) candidate preparedness; and (d) financial considerations. These constructs were consistent with previous literature. The study findings indicated internal

rather than external program-related issues influenced high attrition rates. Additional studies that focused primarily on the issues that contribute to individuals dropping out identified that the feeling of social isolation and financial issues are critical factors in the completion of a doctorate (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hyun et al., 2006; Longfield et al., 2006, McAlpine et al., 2009; Protivnak & Foss, 2011). Because challenges concerning attrition differ between graduate levels (Willis & Carmichael, 2011), challenges related to doctoral experiences should be identified.

### **Isolation**

Hyun et al. (2006) have suggested that the doctoral process is a mental and emotional experience. Previous research on doctoral education has identified several challenges that contribute to the doctoral experience. For instance, feelings of isolation are highest among the factors that influence students to drop out of a doctoral program (Ali & Kohun, 2006). Ali and Kohun (2006) stated that two issues contribute to isolation among doctoral students: adaptation and social communication. Similar findings have been reported in a study conducted by Hortulanus, Machielse, and Meeuwesen (2006) on social isolation. Ali and Kohun (2006) cited the following as it relates to the research study conducted by Hortulanus and colleagues.

According to Ali and Kohun (2006), in their study about social isolation, Hortulanus et al. (2006) identified four categories in how people handle social contacts and social isolation: socially competent, socially inhibited, lonely, and socially isolated. Their study noted that the first group of people have less trouble establishing social contacts, thus, they adjust easier to new life situations. The lonely and socially isolated have fewer contacts and their adjustment to the new norms and values of different cultures may be delayed further. This paper references the two categories of *socially competent* and *socially isolated* when describing the adjustment into the various stages of life of doctoral studies. This paper also groups the other two categories of

*socially inhibited* and *lonely* within the first two categories of *socially competent* and *socially isolated* (Hortulanus et al., 2006, p. 37).

Consistent with Ali and Kohun (2006), the results from Young et al.'s (2019) study found that social isolation is a contributing factor to students leaving doctoral programs. Furthermore, Ali and Kohun (2006) found that a lack of student-advisor communication can develop feelings of isolation. This is in agreement with additional studies that found that isolation (Gardner, 2009; Pyhalto et al., 2012) and negative communication between student and advisor (Jairam & Kahl, 2012) influence the completion of doctoral studies. These results were similar in other studies regarding the impact that advisors have on students' doctoral experience (Pyhalto et al., 2012).

Additionally, in a study by Jairam and Kahl (2012), the authors found that support plays a big role in completing doctoral studies. In this study, 31 doctorate students from multiple universities within the United States were surveyed about social support during their doctoral education. This study found that social networks consisted of three groups: friends in academia, family, and doctoral advisors. This was also supported by a quantitative study of Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2010) in which students completing a doctoral degree in industrial engineering and management were surveyed to determine how personal commitment and various forms of support impact students' doctoral progression. The study found that commitment, peer support, and supervisor support have a positive impact on students' doctoral studies. Moreover, reports have suggested that lack of personal communication contributes to isolation during the doctoral experience (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

In addition, the findings from Jairam and Kahl (2012) recommended ways for coping with isolation, including surrounding themselves with peers, seeking assistance from individuals

with doctoral student experience, and building a rapport with doctoral advisors or instructors.

The study further suggested recommendations for future doctoral students:

- a) aligning themselves with a small group of academic friends and preparing for the inevitable peer competition, b) seeking assistance from family members on certain tasks and educating family members on the doctoral student experience, and c) establishing a good rapport with a doctoral advisor who is professionally active. (p. 311)

## **Funding**

The literature on graduate school funding focuses on several areas, but two areas, in particular, seem to contribute to degree completion. Financial support has been a concern for doctoral students. In regard to doctoral experience, there is extensive literature on the role that financial support plays in pursuing a doctoral degree. These studies indicate that without financial support it would be difficult for students to earn a doctoral degree (Gluszynski & Peters, 2005; Munoz-Dunbar & Stanton, 1999). Recent data by Baum and Steele (2017) revealed that the average cost of tuition, including additional fees, for in-state students has increased by 15% from 2009 to 2015, the percentage is almost double for out-of-state tuition. Although it is true that individuals with doctoral degrees are more likely to have higher earnings in comparison to other degrees (Baum et al., 2013), financing for a doctoral degree is a difficult task for the majority of students. It is noteworthy that doctoral students' average loan debt is substantially higher than any other degree (National Science Foundation, 2018). According to the National Science Foundation (NSF, 2018), a doctoral student would have accumulated over \$30,000 in debt by graduation. The NSF (2018) found that more than 65% of students who have graduated within the last 2 years left college with loan debt. For instance, the average cost of attending a doctoral program is around \$49,000 a year for a full-time student (National Science Foundation, 2018), which a majority of students have to pay with little to no financial assistance.

The literature identifies the following funding sources available for doctoral students: scholarships, fellowships, assistantships, loans, employer tuition benefits, and personal savings (Gluszynski & Peters, 2005). Although these sources are available to doctoral students, the literature reported less than half of doctoral students use more than two of these sources, with the most frequently used sources being scholarships and assistantships (Gluszynski & Peters, 2005). The funding source varied by individual. Gluszynski and Peters (2005) reported more than 50% of doctoral students relied on fellowships and scholarships to fund their studies, while 20% depended on assistantships. The other 30% depended on personal savings, employment benefits, loans, and other funding sources.

Munoz-Dunbar and Stanton (1999) conducted a study on factors that contribute to graduate recruitment. In the study, 72 graduate admissions directors participated in a questionnaire regarding recruitment questions. The study identified funding to be a hindrance to the recruiting process for doctoral programs. Mwenda (2010), however, in her study distinguished between the influence funding has on an advisor-student relationship as well as degree completion. She suggested that fellowships and assistantships allow students to interact more closely with faculty. Last, the study reported that students deemed funding to be beneficial during three times periods: (a) successful transition into the doctoral program, (b) development of academic and professional competencies during the middle years, and (c) successful doctoral completion during the final year (Mwenda, 2010).

Despite the known challenges, individuals still consider pursuing a doctoral degree. Most of those challenges impact the success of students in pursuit of their doctoral degrees. Reviewing the literature on the challenges of pursuing a doctoral degree leads to the question: Is pursuing a doctoral degree beneficial?

## Perceived Outcomes

Students want to continue their education, but they may not know how an additional degree will benefit their lives. When considering a doctoral degree, Kirk and Wysocki (1991) indicated that students select their graduate programs mainly on the basis of two factors: opportunity and quality. Research findings indicated the training that doctoral students receive is not what they want, nor does it prepare them for future occupations (Tuttle, 2012). However, findings on doctoral education (Golde & Dore, 2001; Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al., 2017; Teowkul et al., 2009) argued that although pursuing a doctoral degree is time-consuming, it is worth the time.

While there are few studies on factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctoral degree, there are even fewer studies on the benefits of earning a doctorate. In a qualitative study on the value of the doctoral degree, Bryan and Guccione (2018) interviewed 22 doctoral graduates from a UK institution. Researchers explored topics on doctoral experiences, doctorate benefits, and value perceptions of a doctoral degree over time. The results of the study identified four domains of a doctoral degree value: (a) career value, (b) skills value, (c) social value, (d) personal value. Further benefits of earning a doctoral degree were identified in a study conducted in 2014 by Tzanakou, although previous research has focused more on financial gains. In a 2014 paper, "The Wider Benefits of a Ph.D.," Tzanakou conducted a mixed-method study on the benefits and impacts of receiving a doctorate. The study consisted of 244 participants who completed a survey and 26 who were selected for a semi-structured interview. The study identified transferable skills, social impact, and personal development as the benefits of earning a doctorate. For example, respondents felt that they provided value to their employer through their problem-solving skills. Furthermore, participants felt that their involvement in conferences and

presentations enhanced their interpersonal and communication skills. Personal development was identified as maturity and independence (Tzanakou, 2014).

For London et al. (2014), four themes merged from their study on the value of obtaining a doctorate. In their study, London et al. conducted 40 interviews on engineering doctorates. The results indicated that obtaining a doctorate added value in career-related outcomes, improved skills, praises from others, and little to no value at all. Of the 40 participants, one deemed earning a doctorate as “no added value”. Although the findings of this study emerged from engineering doctorate holders, the results can be of benefit to future doctoral students. All of these benefits have been common in the literature on the value of obtaining a doctorate (Bryan & Guccione, 2018; Tzanakou, 2014).

### **Summary**

The literature on doctoral studies is extensive and provides insights into concerns about the attrition rates of doctoral studies, achievement outcomes, doctoral experiences, and challenges students face during the pursuit of a doctorate. Doctoral studies comprise only 4.5% of college degrees. The concern around doctoral studies is the graduation rates of doctoral studies compared to other college degrees. The literature also revealed that doctoral students experience several challenges in pursuit of a doctorate (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hyun et al., 2006; Longfield et al., 2006, McAlpine et al., 2009; Protivnak & Foss, 2011). The challenges experienced can be emotional, academical, and financial (Hyun et al., 2006; Longfield et al., 2006 McAlpine et al., 2009; Protivnak & Foss) alongside the benefits or value of obtaining a doctorate (Bryan and Guccione, 2018; London et al., 2014; Tzanakou, 2014).

What is missing from the literature is research related to what influences students to pursue a doctoral degree. Information about the factors that influence individuals to pursue a

doctoral degree will add valuable knowledge toward understanding why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree, specifically in the field of instructional technology. Research on influential factors related to doctoral studies is limited. As such, there is a need for more research that addresses influential factors for pursuing a doctorate. This study addresses that need by interviewing instructional technology doctoral students at a southeastern research institution. In the next chapter, the researcher provides details about the methodology that was used in this study. The following sections are discussed in detail: method, setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis.

## CHAPTER III:

### METHODS

This chapter discusses the methodology for this research study. The study explored the factors that influence the decision to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. This study employed a bounded case study research design. With this research design, the researcher collected and analyzed qualitative interview questions. This approach was chosen because the goal was to obtain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2003); specifically, why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. This chapter focuses on the study setting, research design, study sample, procedures, data collection process, and data analysis.

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How do current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program describe their decision to pursue a doctoral degree?
2. How do current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program describe their experiences in pursuit of a doctoral degree?
3. What is the benefit(s) for current students and alumni who pursue a doctoral degree?

#### **Research Design**

A bounded case study design was chosen for this study. Merriam (2009) defined a case study “as an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social units such as an individual group, institution, or community” (p. 8). Additionally, Yin (2003) explained that case studies are an appropriate research approach or design that are used to generate an in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. Yin (1984) defined

the case study research method as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23).

The purpose of a case study is to examine individuals or groups in hopes of deducing certain conclusions about those participants in general. Merriam (2009) described a bounded system as a single entity of focus, a unit around which there are no boundaries. This case study focused on a particular southeast university and a particular group of individuals within that university.

In addition, Stake (1995) described a case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). The single case in this study is the sample of past and current students of an Instructional Technology doctoral program at a southeastern university. Stake (1995), also described a case study as an interest in education centered on people and programs. This study attempted to understand why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology and the experiences they encounter during their pursuit.

Through the bounded case study design, interviews were used as a form of data collection. The interviews were transcribed and then organized into themes using holistic and InVivo coding. Through this particular design, not only were factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctorate identified but an exploration was conducted into how and why obtaining or pursuing a doctorate benefits individuals. According to Yin (2003), when the investigator is interested in answering how and why questions, a case study design is the preferred method of research.

## Setting

The study site was a southeastern research university, with an enrollment of 37,842 undergraduate and graduate students as of Fall 2020. Of the 37,842 students enrolled, 6,170 (16.3%) of those students were either graduates or professionals (Office of Institutional Research & Assessment at a Southeastern Research University, 2020). The university is divided into 13 academic colleges. Of those 13 academic colleges, 10 of the colleges offer graduate programs.

The doctoral program chosen for this research resides in the College of Education. According to the school's research office there are a total of 887 graduate students enrolled in the College of Education. In the 1830s, the college was first established as a normal school and was known as the Normal Department which provided and assisted individuals who wished to prepare for teaching careers. Later the college changed its name in the 1890s and again in the early 1900s. In 1928, the school changed its name to what is now called the College of Education. Currently named the College of Education, it is divided into six departments. In the 1920s, the first graduate program started at the college. In the 1950s, the college started its first doctoral program.

The doctoral program chosen for this study offers a Doctor of Philosophy degree. It specializes in preparing practitioners and educators in the area of instructional technology. At the time of this study, admission requirements included a Master's degree, maintaining a graduate grade point average of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale, and a score on or above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile on either the GRE or MAT. Other requirements include a departmental information sheet, a curriculum vitae or resume, a statement of purpose, three recommendations, and a writing sample. The program requirements include 60 course hours plus 24 dissertation hours. Students must complete a comprehensive exam, in the form of an electronic portfolio. Students are also required to do a

prospectus, a proposal, and defend an approved dissertation on a research topic that contributes to the field of instructional leadership and technology.

This site was selected for ease of access and convenience in location, as well as hosting a program in the area of instructional technology, the researcher's interest area. The researcher discusses positionality next.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The researcher's qualifications, experience, and reflexivity are relevant in establishing confidence in findings (Polit & Beck, 2012). As the researcher in this study, it is my responsibility to disclose my positionality in this study. At the time that I conducted this qualitative case study, I was a doctoral student of the Instructional Technology program at the chosen university. As a doctoral student and a professional in the field of technology, I came to learn more about myself as a student and professional during my pursuit of a doctoral degree.

I am a computer programmer at the university where the study was conducted. In the role of a computer programmer, I work with customers to design, develop, and implement enterprise applications for the university. I also previously worked as an instructional designer where I worked closely with faculty, media developers, and graphic designers to develop online courses. As the researcher of the study, I acknowledge that my personal and professional background did not influence my interpretation of data. To minimize any personal bias on the results of the study, member checks were utilized after interviews to increase the credibility of the study results. After the transcriptions of the interviews, I asked one person from each listserv to confirm the accuracy of my transcription. Creswell (2005) stated that member checking is the process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the transcripts.

My interest in this study originated from my own experiences as a student enrolled in an Instructional Technology doctoral program at a southeastern university. My role as a doctoral student in instructional technology has given me insight into some of the accomplishments and challenges that individuals encounter when pursuing a doctoral degree. Because of my experience as a doctoral student, I have sought to find students and alumni who have also pursued the same doctoral program in the discipline of instructional technology. I intended to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, I explored the experiences that were associated with pursuing a doctoral degree. Participants were informed that the study would contribute to the research on doctoral students' experience.

Within the study, I served as an interviewer and researcher. Before conducting research, I wrote notes in a personal journal about what I observed, experienced, and learned throughout my own doctoral journey. My journal and notes allowed me to unpack my own thoughts and biases so that I could analyze the data through the lenses of the participants (Janesick, 1998).

### **Participants**

The participants were instructional technology doctoral students at a southeastern university. As suggested by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), 10-20 interviews is an adequate sample size for a qualitative study. The researcher used both purposive and criterion sampling for seeking participation from students of the Instructional Technology doctoral program. Purposeful sampling ensures the researcher chooses participants based on criteria that align with the research questions of the study (Ezzy, 2002). "Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 2002, p. 238). The researcher provided the program coordinator with a write-up of a recruitment email, found in Appendix A,

to send to the two departmental listservs, which consist of current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program. The email (see Appendix B) informed students of the study and requested their participation. Participants that did not meet the study’s criteria were sent an email, found in Appendix C, indicating the reason for not being chosen for the study. Overall, there were 16 respondents.

Participant recruitment was restricted to alumni and current students who were pursuing a doctoral degree from the Instructional Technology program at the selected southeastern university. Upon volunteering to participate in the study, participants were emailed a consent form and suggested interview times. A summary of the 16 participants, using pseudonyms, who participated in the interviews is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

*Bio of Participants*

<i>Participants (by pseudonyms)</i>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Interview Method</b>	<b>Status</b>
<i>Mason</i>	Male	Phone	Current
<i>Arnold</i>	Male	Face-to-Face	Alumni
<i>Corey</i>	Male	Face-to-Face	Alumni
<i>Amy</i>	Female	Face-to-Face	Current
<i>Denise</i>	Female	Phone	Current
<i>Joshua</i>	Male	Phone	Alumni
<i>Jackie</i>	Female	Phone	Alumni
<i>Heather</i>	Female	Phone	Current
<i>Kandace</i>	Female	Phone	Alumni
<i>Kelsey</i>	Female	Phone	Alumni
<i>Michael</i>	Male	Phone	Current
<i>Wilson</i>	Male	Phone	Alumni
<i>Samantha</i>	Female	Phone	Current
<i>Sara</i>	Female	Phone	Current
<i>Sally</i>	Female	Phone	Current
<i>Tori</i>	Female	Phone	Alumni

## **Data Collection**

Data collection for this case study used an interviewing protocol, found in Appendix D. The interview consisted of 21 questions. Data collection started after the researcher received approval from The Institutional Review Board (Office of Institutional Research & Assessment at a Southeastern Research University, 2020; Appendix E). The interviews were guided by other researchers (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; McCulloch et al., 2017; Tate et al., 2015) that reflected similar interview techniques in their studies. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data-gathering tool to allow the participants to guide the outcome of the interview, found in Table 3. Memos were used to capture any research thoughts during and after each interview (Birks, Chapman, Francis, 2008). Interviews were conducted via phone and face-to-face. The interviews were recorded electronically using a voice recorder. The interviews began with open-ended questions about the participants' background and reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree. More intensive questions followed, with the intent to gather data on doctoral experiences. The interview concluded with more open-ended questions, to gather a more in-depth understanding of what were the benefits of earning and pursuing a doctoral degree.

Table 3

*Interview Guide*

	Source	Findings	Interview Question
<i>Self-efficacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• McCulloch, Guerin, Jayatilaka, Calder &amp; Ranasinghe, D., 2017</li> <li>• Tate, Fouad, Marks, Young, Guzman, &amp; Williams, 2015</li> <li>• Gibbons, &amp; Shoffner, 2004</li> </ul>	People pursue tasks that they feel they can succeed in.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me about yourself.</li> <li>2. How did you hear about this program?</li> <li>3. What attracted you to this program?</li> <li>4. What made you decide to pursue a doctorate in this specific field?</li> <li>5. Tell me what it was like to make the decision to pursue a doctorate?</li> <li>6. What was your biggest concern(s) for pursuing a doctorate?</li> <li>7. What would you say was the most influential factor in your decision to pursue a doctorate?</li> </ol>
<i>Outcome Expectations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Borrego, Knight, Gibbs, &amp; Crede, 2018</li> <li>• Gibbons, &amp; Shoffner, 2004</li> </ul>	Outcome expectations are a significant predictor for pursuing a task.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me about your overall experience in the program.</li> <li>2. What skills did you gain throughout the program?</li> <li>3. Give me an example of a time that you had doubts throughout the program. How did you deal with it?</li> <li>4. What was your biggest challenge in pursuing a doctorate?</li> <li>5. What was your least favorite thing about pursuing a doctorate?</li> <li>6. What was your most favorite thing about pursuing a doctorate?</li> <li>7. Are there any changes you would like to see in the program?</li> <li>8. How did you balance work, family, and being a student?</li> <li>9. What advice would you give to future scholars?</li> </ol>
<i>Goals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carrico &amp; Tendhar, 2012</li> <li>• Gibbons &amp; Shoffner, 2004</li> </ul>	People tend to set goals based on their capabilities and the outcomes they expect to attain from pursuing a particular course of action.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was/is your plan after the completion of your doctorate?</li> <li>2. What is your end goal in your career?</li> </ol>
<i>Benefits</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Golde &amp; Dore, 2001</li> <li>• Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al., 2017</li> <li>• Teowkul et al., 2008</li> </ul>	Career opportunities, financial gain, and self-accomplishment are benefits of receiving a doctorate.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did earning/pursuing a doctorate open the door for your future goals?</li> <li>2. What was/is the benefit(s) of pursuing a doctorate?</li> <li>3. What did you take away from pursuing/completing a doctorate?</li> </ol>

Each participant signed a written informed consent form, found in Appendix F, before the interview. Each participant interview took place in a single interview session. The researcher interviewed 16 participants. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes to 1 hour. Each interview was transcribed verbatim.

Upon completion of the transcribing process, the researcher sent transcribed interviews to two interviewees for review. They were asked to review the transcript for accuracy of the information they provided. “Member checking is the process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (Creswell, 2005, p. 252). While each interviewee had the right to remove any interview content, this practice was not encouraged. The interviewee was also asked if there was anything they would like to add upon reflection. Following the feedback of the participants, edits were made as necessary to the transcription. Participants were not part of the writing or editing of the actual analysis and results, as no one participant had access to any other interview.

Protecting participants’ rights and privacy is one of the ethical issues in research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2012). In this regard, the current study did not collect participants’ identifiable information. Therefore, there was no threat of personal information being compromised. A pseudonym was developed for each participant and any data connected to the participant was held in a file under that pseudonym. The researcher kept the data on UA+Box behind the researcher's personal, password-protected account to ensure confidentiality. Only the researcher had access to the interview responses and memo notes. Shortly after the successful completion of the dissertation, all personal data will be destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

This study employed a two-phase approach to data analysis (Saldana, 2012). Once an interview was completed, transcription occurred shortly afterward. The first phase of data analysis consisted of holistic coding. Holistic coding’s (Saldana, 2012) intent is to identify themes and issues within the data. Holistic coding gave the researcher the ability to break down

sections of the interview text and put them in categories and themes that answered the study's research questions (Saldana, 2012).

The second phase of data analysis consisted of In vivo coding. In vivo coding (Creswell, 2015; Saldana, 2012) is the exact words of the participants. Given (2008) defined In vivo coding as “the practice of assigning a label to a section of data, such as an interview transcript, using a word or short phrase taken from that section of the data” (p. 2). Last, In vivo coding helps the researcher to “build codes and later themes that resonate with your participants” (Creswell, 2015, p. 160).

The actual analysis of the data was accomplished by adhering to Creswell's (2009) six-step linear qualitative data analysis process. The initial step involved a thorough reading of each transcript to become familiar with the data. A member checking process was also performed via email to two participants during this step to ensure accuracy and credibility. The second step consisted of holistic coding. Each transcript was printed in a word document. Each holistic code was written as a comment and the coded text was highlighted. A holistic code consisted of one to seven words. The coded data were then extracted to a new document via a Visual Basic for Applications macro created in Microsoft Word.

The third step in data analysis consisted of combining all of the holistic codes. There were 160 holistic codes listed between the transcripts. All 160 codes were extracted to an Excel spreadsheet. The headings of the spreadsheet were: location, contextual data, code, coder, date, and pseudonym. This spreadsheet allowed the researcher to sort the data by either participant or code. Appendix G contains a sample from the spreadsheet.

The fourth step involved categorizing the holistic codes under themes. Once the codes were sorted and the themes were identified, the researcher was able to further condense the

themes. The themes were then sorted, analyzed, and identified based on the frequency with which they appeared across all interviews. The fifth step in data analysis was In vivo coding. The primary use for NVivo was for storing, coding, searching, and retrieving data from the interviews. This process was an attempt to develop additional ideas that may have been overlooked from the first coding attempt. Overall 11 themes emerged. Each theme corresponded to a specific research question. Research Question 1 consisted of four themes. Research Question 2 consisted of three themes. Research Question 3 consisted of four themes.

The sixth step involved the researcher developing an outline that would guide the writing of Chapter IV. The chapter was organized into three levels, with the highest level being the research questions. The second level consisted of the themes which answered the research questions. The third level consisted of the holistic and In vivo data which explained the themes.

### **Summary**

To answer the research questions, fill the gap in the literature, and fulfill the purpose statement, this research study employed a qualitative methodology. The study utilized a bounded case study research design. This research design guided the data collection process by using an interviewing method. Data were analyzed through a two-phase approach. The first phase employed holistic coding. The second phase employed In vivo coding.

## CHAPTER IV:

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree and to explore the experiences that are associated with the process, specifically in instructional technology at one southeastern university. This study focused on three aspects: factors that influenced individuals to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology, insight on the doctoral experiences, and benefits of pursuing and earning a doctoral degree. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were provided for each participant. Interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of why individuals decide to pursue a doctoral degree.

This chapter will provide results from an analysis of data collected from interviews of eight alumni and eight current students of an Instructional Technology doctoral program. The chapter is broken down into headings. First, the major headings correspond to the three research questions. Second, the sub-headings correspond to the themes which emerged during the interview and coding process. Last, responses from the participants to support the themes are included. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings and how they align with the SCCT constructs that are used as the framework for this study.

#### **Data Analysis**

The study consisted of a bounded case study research design, where the researcher conducted interviews with the participants. The researcher interviewed 16 participants. The

interview consisted of 21 questions lasting between 20 minutes to 1 hour. Each interview was transcribed verbatim.

This study employed a two-phase approach to data analysis. The first phase consisted of holistic coding. Each holistic code was written as a comment and the coded text was highlighted. The coded data were then extracted to a new document via a VBA macro created in Microsoft Word. There were 160 holistic codes listed between the transcripts. The second phase consisted of In vivo coding. The purpose of the second phase was an attempt to develop additional ideas that may have been overlooked from the first coding attempt. Once all codes were extracted to an Excel spreadsheet, the researcher reviewed and determined overall themes.

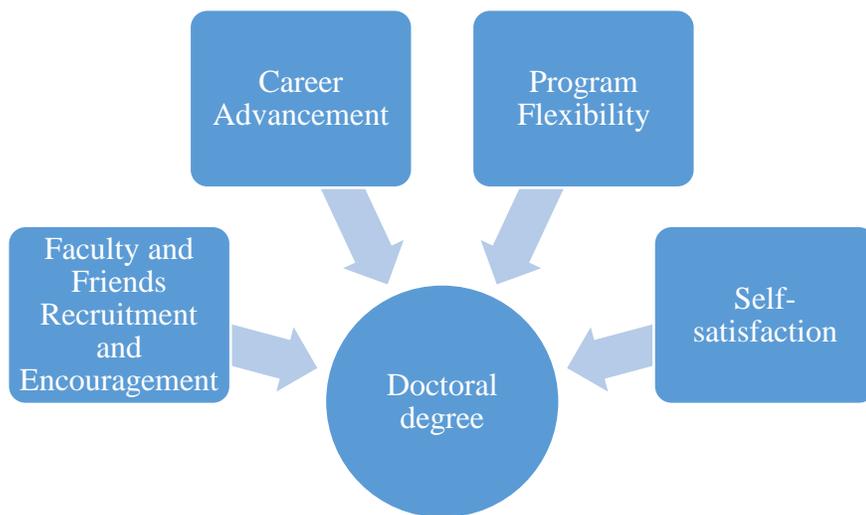
Upon coding of the data, four themes emerged as relevant to why participants decide to pursue a doctoral degree. Three themes emerged in regard to doctoral experiences. Last, there were four themes mentioned regarding the benefits of a doctoral degree. Specifically, the following 11 themes developed as the result of the data analysis: faculty and friends' recruitment and encouragement, career advancement, program flexibility, self-satisfaction, time commitment, imposter syndrome, support, transferable skills, career opportunities, sense of accomplishment, and confidence.

To collect the data for the two phases, the researcher conducted interviews with eight alumni and eight current students of an Instructional Technology doctoral program at a southeastern university.

### **Research Question One**

*How do current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program describe their decision to pursue a doctoral degree?* This research question was intended to identify the factors that influenced individuals to pursue a doctoral degree, specifically in

instructional technology. Questions 1-7 were used to answer Research Question 1. Within this set of questions, participants were asked what attracted them to the Instructional Technology doctoral program and what influenced them to pursue a doctoral degree. Factors, both internal and external, were identified through a two-phase coding process of the transcripts. The themes were identified based on the common factors that were shared by the participants. As a result, four themes emerged to answer Research Question 1. These four themes are faculty and friends recruitment and encouragement, career advancement, program flexibility, and self-satisfaction (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Factors influencing the decision to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology.

### **Faculty and Friends Recruitment and Encouragement**

Kandace talked about how she was hesitant to go back to school due to her age. Kandace thought to herself, “I’m in my 40s, there’s no way I can go back to school. I will not, it’s just not going to happen. I can’t do that.” After being invited to sit in one of the professor’s class meetings, Kandace felt motivated to pursue her doctoral degree. She went on to say, “I’m happy

I decided to go back to school; I don't regret my decision." Mason had a similar story to Kandace where he was recruited by a faculty member. Mason stated that the professor "had been encouraging me to join her program for a while. I agreed to meet with her. And she explained the whole program."

Interactions with professors further influenced individuals' decisions to pursue a doctoral degree. Students like Jackie, Corey, and Arnold also described their recruitment experiences with the professors of the doctoral program. These students suggested that the recruitment effort on the part of the professor attracted their interest in the program. According to Jackie, conversations with peers and an outing at a professor's house further sparked her interest in the program. She stated,

I think I enjoyed the cohort that I had in my EDS program. We were all so close. The intellectual conversations made us become very close to a professor. She invited us to her house and I began to see different perspectives on things and realize that the doctoral program would be a good fit.

Other graduates of the Educational Leadership (EdS) program shared how they were recruited by professors. Samantha expressed how the master's program chair pushed her to pursue a doctoral degree. She stated, "It just so happened that my program chair in my master's program was also a part of the doctoral program as well. She discussed the program with me as well as answered all the questions I had regarding a doctoral degree." Sara recalled learning about the program when she was stopped in the hall on her way to one of her classes while in the EdS program.

Joshua talked about how he was familiar with the program because he had a master's degree in the field: "I had already had a master's degree in the same field." Heather also implied that she learned about the doctoral program while in the EdS program. She replied, " You can say I heard about it because I was in the EdS program."

Several other students mentioned how family and friends contributed to their decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Kelsey, for example, expressed how she was encouraged by her best friend and how “it was a great comfort to know that my friend had faith in me to pursue my educational goals.” Denise also talked about how she was inspired to pursue a doctoral degree. She was very appreciative of her spouse who contributed to her pursuing her doctoral degree. She stated, “My significant other inspired me to pursue my academic goals. He is very supportive of my dreams and aspirations.” In another example, Joshua talked about how he was inspired by his wife and best friend to pursue a doctoral degree. He was very thankful for both their encouragement and support. He said, “Had it not been for their motivation and engagement, I do not think I would have ever initiated the process and I am so sincerely thankful for their support.”

Tori decided to pursue a doctoral degree because of the encouragement of her colleague. She also touched on how she felt encouraged to pursue her doctoral degree because of the number of people who wanted to see her succeed:

My colleague at the time was finishing up her Ph.D. She was pushing me. My boss was pushing me. And then again remembering all the people I was seeing in the department with a Ph.D. And just remembering all the people that I inspire. I felt led to do it. And so that's what caused me to do. It wasn't a dream of mine.

Wilson mentioned that his wife encouraged him to pursue his doctoral degree and that he was “doing this for her as well as our children so they would have someone to look to as they go through school.” He also shared, “I was the first person in my family and my wife’s family to receive a doctorate.”

### **Career Advancement**

Participants cited career mobility as an influential factor for pursuing a doctoral degree. Amy stated, “My goal has always been for promotion of some sort. And that was my reason for

this.” Sally knew she wanted to advance in her current position so “I needed to complete a doctorate to be eligible for a promotion.” Jackie also mentioned that earning a doctoral degree was a way “to gain knowledge in my area of expertise and enhance my earning potential.”

Corey shared his love for technology and education. He acknowledged that his love for teaching developed from his mother. He said, “I enjoy watching my mom teach.” Corey went on to say that one day he desires to be a professor in the field of technology. Corey responded, “I knew I wanted to stay in higher ed. And so one of the main reasons for choosing this program was that it was beneficial to my career path. So I knew that a terminal degree would help improve my career possibilities and help me reach my career goals.” Denise expressed how earning her doctoral degree will help her to reach her long-term goal:

One of the reasons I'm pursuing it is for career advancement. Well, I would ultimately like to be a director of a distance learning center. Right now, I'm a program manager over a few programs, but my ultimate goal is to be a director. You know, I think it will benefit me long-term career-wise to get a Ph.D.

Other participants felt that earning or pursuing a doctoral degree made them more marketable. Arnold stated, “I wanted to further diversify myself. So I thought it would be beneficial to have a doctorate. By having the terminal degree, I knew it would make me more marketable.” Samantha shared the following story regarding promotion in her department:

There are a lot of positions in higher ed where you're not under consideration unless you have a Ph.D. We had to promote someone in our department. And one of the considerations was you have to have a terminal degree. Um, if you look at a lot of faculty lines, whether they're teaching or research track, they're gonna give preference to those with a Ph.D. because not only did they work harder for it, but it takes a lot of time to finish a Ph.D. So a terminal degree makes you marketable and considered.

When asked about what led him to pursue a doctoral degree, Michael shared,

Honestly, I didn't want anything to hold me back when I applied for a job or a promotion in my current job. I wanted to make sure all the boxes were checked. Those boxes for me are experience, longevity in the career, and degrees. At the time, I knew I had a goal of what I wanted and what it was going to take to get it. And a doctorate was on that list of

things. So to answer your question, I pursued a doctoral degree because it would help in furthering my career.

### **Program Flexibility**

One of the major factors expressed by the participants that influenced their decision to pursue a doctoral degree was to become an expert in their field of interest, which was education and technology. The program design and structure are what led them to apply for enrollment, specifically in the Instructional Technology doctoral program at one southeastern university. Mason has a very demanding job that requires working 60 plus hours a week. He said that the hybrid course layout was helpful because it allowed him to work long hours as well as spend time with his family. Mason stated, “I wanted a program that was centered around education and technology. Not only did the program fit my academic need but the program was designed in a way that I could manage my course work while working full-time.” Taking hybrid classes provided him with the convenience to manage both family and work responsibilities. Students identified convenience and program flexibility as a factor in their decision to pursue a doctoral degree, specifically in the Instructional Technology program.

Kelsey expressed her appreciation for the hybrid design. She talked about how she was still able to earn her degree while staying hours away from campus. She stated,

So at the time, I was looking for a program I can complete while working full time. You know, some programs had residency requirements that I didn't think I could meet. The residency structure and the combination of education and technology courses were right on time. It aligned with my career goals. So I was all in.

The hybrid and residency format allowed her to earn her doctoral degree while working full-time and living hours away from campus. Heather explained her perspective on the program's hybrid model:

I wanted to get my doctorate but wasn't sure which program I wanted to apply for. I knew that whichever program I decided upon, I wanted it to be in education. Long story

short, I stumbled upon the Instructional Leadership program that had a concentration in instructional technology. One thing I like about this specific program is its hybrid model. So it doesn't necessarily require a whole lot of structure time. I can work at my own pace. I really like the way this program is structured. It allows me to, you know, have flexibility and kind of wear lots of different hats.

Wilson made the point that convenience played a factor in pursuing his doctoral degree.

He started by mentioning the program design format is what attracted him to the program, "the hybrid versus online mix." He went on to talk about how he only had to attend campus for a few courses, while all other courses were online. Amy explained that the hybrid course design provided flexibility with her work and family life, especially during scheduled family events.

Amy noted the significant role that family plays in her life. She stated,

Spending time with family is very important to me. I want to be at every occasion. Whether it be kids' sporting events, rehearsal, weddings, birthday dinners, or whatever. I don't want to miss anything. Unfortunately, I did miss some occasions and events but not as many. Thanks to the design of the program. Honestly, if the course was not designed the way it was, I would not have done it. Wouldn't have my Ph.D. today. No way I would have been able to pull it off.

Joshua expressed that the program design played a pivotal part in why he decided to pursue a doctoral degree specifically in the Instructional Technology program. He went on to say,

I always wanted to get my Ph.D., preferably in education but never could find the time to fit it into my schedule. I started doing some research on Ph.D. education programs and ran upon the Instructional Technology program. Was pleased with the program's course layout. The rest is history.

### **Self-Satisfaction**

Participants reported self-satisfaction as another reason for pursuing a doctoral degree.

One participant, Jackie, who was already happy and satisfied in her current career shared that "it was more of a personal goal." Kandace, who was also content in her current position, said, "It was just a goal of mine that I wanted to achieve. I had no intention of what I wanted to do with it." Samantha spoke about how she knew very little about the process of getting a Ph.D. but she

knew she wanted to get one. She stated, “I wasn’t sure what all went into getting a Ph.D. but I wanted it. The sound of doctor in the front of my name just sounded cool.”

Several other participants also shared that they wanted to earn a doctoral degree for self-satisfaction. For instance, Wilson described himself as an older student, as he was over 40. He talked about being well-established in his career, but for some reason, he “wanted to get a Ph.D.” He went on to say that it was a personal goal and that he “just wanted to start it and finish it.”

Wilson shared an interesting story about the advice he received from colleagues and friends:

I had several coworkers and friends who had gotten their Ph.D. to tell me that this is just a phase in life that you decide to do. It will not define who you are as a scholar or where you are in your career. Nothing is set in stone. Find a topic, research it, and just think about getting it finished. It’s not about solving the world's problems or creating any kind of theory. Find a topic that you enjoy and finish. And that’s what I did. My goal was just to finish. So I didn’t have anything big in mind. You know, I just wanted to finish it. I wanted to say I got my Ph.D. and I survived it. And you know what comes in after that will be fantastic. I had a job that I was on for over ten years so I wasn’t looking for anything career-wise. I was just happy to say that I was now a doctor. That’s a feeling that only those that have been through it can relate to. It’s wonderful. If nothing ever comes from it. I am satisfied with myself to know I did it.

As Joshua reflected on his reason to pursue a doctoral degree, he shared that his decision was related “more as a personal goal.” He informed me that he had already felt accomplished in his career. He stated, “I was perfectly fine at where I was in my career and life at the time. I was in a field that I loved and enjoyed.” Joshua also explained that being employed at the university made his decision to pursue a doctoral degree that much easier. He stated,

Being employed at the university comes with a lot of benefits. One of which is tuition benefits. Earning my doctoral degree was always a personal goal of mine. The benefits helped a lot financially. So I used the opportunity to get my Ph.D. I knew it would be a challenge to me but I wanted to do it. I wanted to say I accomplished something that I set out to accomplish. Also, accomplishing something as challenging as a Ph.D. makes it that more satisfying.

When asked why she decided to pursue a doctoral degree, Sara echoed the words “it’s personal.” I asked her to elaborate more on what she meant by the statement *it’s personal*. She

shared her background of how she would be the first person in her family to get a doctorate. She continued to share,

I have both young and old individuals that look up to me. They want it just as bad as I want it. At first, it was just my goal but now it's our goal. So knowing I have people that are rooting for me just as much as I am rooting for myself, so yes "it's personal." I do not have any plans or goals for my degree other than wanting to put it on my resume. I just want to get it done, celebrate, and enjoy the moment.

### **Research Question Two**

*How do current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program describe their experiences in pursuit of a doctoral degree?* This research question sought to identify the experiences of instructional technology doctoral students at a southeastern institution. Questions 8-16 were used to answer Research Question 2. Within this set of questions, participants were asked to describe their overall doctoral experience and how they overcame challenges if they encountered any. Other interview questions focused on the participant's thoughts regarding the program. The themes associated with the doctoral experience were identified through a two-phase coding process of the transcripts. The themes were identified based on the common responses that were shared by the participants. As a result, three themes emerged to answer Research Question 2. These three themes are time management, imposter syndrome, and support (see Figure 4).

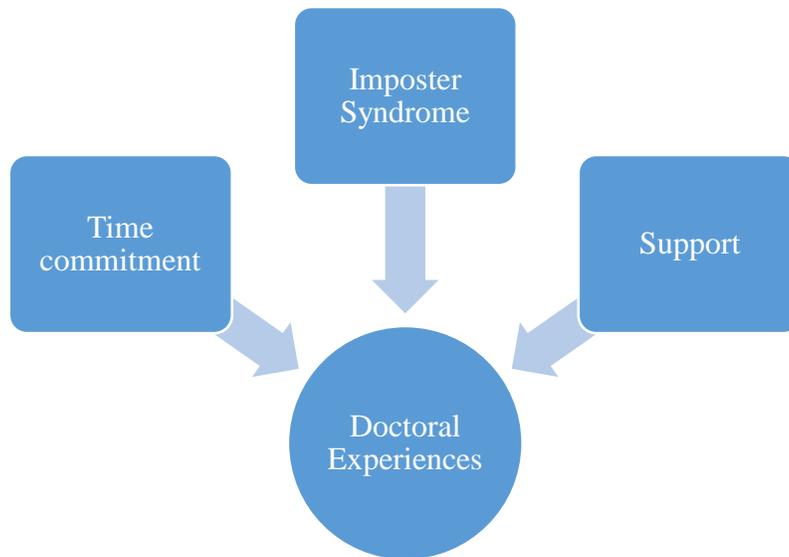


Figure 4. Experiences of pursuing a doctoral degree.

### **Time Commitment**

To best understand the participants' doctoral journey, I asked individuals to explain their doctoral experiences. The words used to describe their overall experience were *HARD* and *time-consuming*. For example, Jackie expressed how completing her doctorate was life-changing for her. She stated,

It was hard. I am thankful for God's grace. Yes, I prayed a lot. You know the number one thing I would say is that if you're not willing to commit, don't even start. Because it is a life-changing, time-consuming project. And when I say that, I mean, there were things I had to miss. There were things I had to give up. There were times that I wanted to give up. And I mean, it's just a part of your life, it is a lot of commitment. And you have to be willing to give up and sacrifice and ask yourself if it's worth it to you.

Similarly, Sara and Amy described their doctoral journey as being *hard*. Sara described it as “a full-time job.” She went on to say that “it is so hard, I honestly can't tell you how I do it.” She informed me that setting a schedule has helped out a lot in balancing work, school, and personal life.

Amy indicated that “pursuing a doctorate is one of the hardest things that I have done in my life.” She went on to say, “I have had kids with no medicine. I always say that pursuing a Ph.D. is the hardest thing I've ever done. Because it takes time and persistence.” As Amy continued to reflect on her doctoral journey, she talked about how the time spent pursuing her doctorate has caused her “to miss time from others.” She shared a story about missing out on seeing her daughter riding her bike for the first time because she was in class:

I remember sitting in a stats class one Wednesday afternoon. I had dropped my daughters off at a friend's house. I get a text in the middle of class with a video and it's my youngest daughter riding her bike for the first time. Her friend taught her how to ride her bike. And I was like, I missed that important milestone in her life. So I fully understand that to do a Ph.D. takes sacrifice and it takes time. And the mom guilt in me is the other side that says don't miss a thing. Don't miss anything, you know, right. So I would say that was the worst but a good thing. That is the thing that keeps me from quitting. When I think about quitting, I go back to watching my daughter ride the bike for the first time on my phone. And I said I can't miss that experience and not get this degree. Because then I've done all of this in vain.

Many others spoke about how they faced challenges when trying to balance family life and school. Simply put “family time suffered” is the statement that Michael and a few other participants echoed throughout the interview. Joshua mentioned that he was spending a lot of time away from family activities because he was investing a lot of time finishing up his Ph.D. He recalled one time during his dissertation phase, “I wanted to quit because I was missing a lot of time away from my kids and spouse. I felt bad, especially since I had younger kids.” Mason also expressed his struggle of being able to balance work, family, and school. He stated,

For me, the moment of doubt was mostly about the ability to carry the load. So I don't recall doubting my ability. For me, it was like, I can do this work, I just don't know how I'm supposed to get it all done. And then all the work, you know from my job and then be a halfway decent husband and father. Basically, my concern was the time commitment.

Samantha who was an empty nester stated that

the doubt I had during my doctoral journey was not program-related. It was more of just an adjustment on a personal level. You know, juggling all of the responsibilities of working full-time and going to school. I did it but it was not easy.

Heather mentioned that she was fortunate to not have to “juggle the demands of family commitment.” Even though she did not have the responsibilities of a family, she had other obligations such as a full-time job that she struggled with finding a balance. She mentioned that it “isn’t an easy balance. It’s a lot of late nights and some early mornings.” Sally also implied that balancing work and school “is a hassle.”

Tori implied that she was told by colleagues and friends that earning a Ph.D. “takes commitment and sacrifice.” She knew going in that it was not going to be an easy task. She reflected on declining friends and family invitations:

I sacrificed a lot. I missed out on a lot of time with family. I would even turn down invites from friends because I was either working on coursework or my dissertation. Trust me it was difficult to say no or not be there.

She ended her comments on her doctoral experience by saying, “I knew that working on my Ph.D. was not a permanent thing. It was just a season in my life.”

### **Imposter Syndrome**

Participants were asked about their feelings associated with their doctoral experience. Specifically, how they felt during their doctoral journey. The answers varied in delivery but a common theme of imposter syndrome was identified. Participants in this study were clear in recounting how their feelings of imposter syndrome developed throughout their doctoral journey. Students cited feelings of low self-esteem, frustration, discouragement, and lack of confidence in writing skills.

Many of the participants admitted to having difficulty with writing. Kandace shared how she was hesitant to pursue a doctoral degree because of her writing skills. She stated,

A Ph.D. is a writing degree, basically, right? It's a degree that says, you know how to conduct research, and you know how to write about it. And I'm not a gifted writer by any means, and all my professors will tell you that. So I just gave myself a pep talk. I told myself I could do it and I should give it a try.

Mason implied “imposter syndrome is a very real thing.” Mason went on to use the analogy of eating an elephant as how he dealt with his imposter syndrome:

I had to remind myself that I can accomplish anything I put my mind to. You can eat an elephant. Just take it one bite at a time. It's an analogy to accomplishing other big things in your life. A lot of people don't attempt it and people give up. Because it's very, very hard to block out the entire project and just focus on the next step of the project. But planning can help with that. Give yourself permission to ignore everything except the thing you're doing today. Then every sentence you write is one sentence more towards your goal. And that's it, eat the elephant one bite at a time. And then when you're done you look back and say wow, what an accomplishment over time.

Amy shared the story of her early stages of doubt in the program. She talked about how she lacked an understanding of some of the coursework. She recalled questioning her ability in the program:

It puts you in a place where you doubt yourself. I just couldn't get it. I asked myself, am I good enough? Am I doing this paper right? Am I answering the questions right? Am I reading this article correctly? All of that was early doubts when we were in the early phase of our Ph.D. I would tell friends and faculty about how I felt and they would say, oh that's normal. We have all felt that way at one time, it's okay to feel that way.

Amy was not alone in feeling doubtful about succeeding in the doctoral program. Jackie stated, “I kept thinking, I'm not smart enough.” Kelsey who had been out of school for over 10 years, spoke about how she was concerned that she would not be able to catch on as quickly as the other students and “not knowing what to expect.” She went on to say, “I felt like that gap in where I had not been enrolled in school was going to be a disadvantage to me.”

Sara, also, displayed her transparency when reporting how she felt discouraged and had feelings of self-doubt. She stated:

This was a challenge for me. I felt like nothing I wrote was good enough. I asked myself, am I a writer? I started to doubt myself in my career and degree. It was taking me longer

than my peers to get approval for a prospectus. I think it took about six months to get approval. I kept asking myself, do I belong here? What was I doing wrong? I felt defeated.

Tori also spoke about how she struggled with her confidence in the program. She stated,

I kept thinking these people going to find out that I'm not as smart as they think I am. I was hoping they did not take back their acceptance letter. I was struggling with imposter syndrome.

Tori also implied that “we all know that getting your Ph.D. requires dedication, sacrifice, pushing yourself to the limit, but it also requires rewarding yourself. People rarely talk about it. You have to give yourself grace.”

Alternatively, other participants mentioned the phrase *give yourself grace*. After putting in a good week of studying, Samantha rewarded herself by going shopping. She saw this as a healthy way to handle the stress of writing her dissertation. Amy indicated that periodically she and a few of her peers whom she studied with would go out to eat or attend events. Amy felt like this produced a bond with her peers as well as provided a time to step away from “the craziness of Ph.D. life.” Mason indicated that giving himself grace helped in earning his doctorate. Mason stated,

It's okay to not be your best all the time. Give yourself grace. Step away for a while. Go for a walk. Better yet, go hang around people who give you grace. Because they know it's not your best, but they also know that not your best is still pretty darn good.

## **Support**

A common theme throughout each interview, especially when asking about the doctoral experience was *support*. Supportive relationships were considered to be important in pursuing a doctoral degree. Participants had several positive experiences related to the support they received from their professors and cohort. Experiences revolved around the advice and support of professors, a family-like environment, and establishing long-lasting friendships within their cohort.

Many of the participants in the study reminisced about how supportive the faculty and the staff of the department are to others. For example, Heather described that the initial meeting with her advisor was very “welcoming” and helpful to her. She stated, “ I like that the advisor was very patient and informative when answering questions.” It showed her that her advisor was concerned about her academic life. Jackie expressed that the support from the faculty and staff gave her the confidence that she needed to complete her doctorate. She talked about how the faculty would periodically check on her to ensure that “I was okay. That meant a lot. Especially when I was struggling during the dissertation process.” Sara was very vocal in stating that the support of the faculty and staff is “significant and important in succeeding in the program.” She specifically talked about a time where the support of the faculty played a role in her doctoral journey:

There was this one particular time during my dissertation phase where I was completely drained. Honestly, I wanted to quit and go about my life. At that point, I was over the whole thing. A few days later I had a meeting with my chair to discuss my dissertation. I didn't want to go but I did. Thinking back, I am glad I went. The conversation I had that day with the professor showed me that the faculty do care. They want to see us succeed and graduate. It gave me an extra boost and motivation to get this thing done.

Wilson shared his thoughts on the professors and faculty and staff of the program. He indicated that “they all played a huge part in helping me finish.” He implied that both the professors and faculty and staff of the program “care about the students beyond the classroom.” He voiced appreciation for being a part of a program that encouraged and supported their students. He also shared,

The listserv is cool also. I like the jobs, conferences, and events updates. Even if I don't signup or apply, it's just good to get updated on what's out there. One day something might catch my eye. I like that I still get notified of these things even though I'm no longer in the program.

Participants also expressed the support of their peers, specifically the cohort, in the pursuit of their doctoral degree. Several participants touched on how their cohorts played a pivotal role in their doctoral journey. Jackie expressed, “ the encouragement of my cohort meant a lot. They encouraged me to do what I didn't have the confidence to do myself.” Amy, who has established a close bond with her cohort, discussed her connection with her cohort as a family. She talked about how well they all get along and said,

My cohort is like my second family. We’ve been on this thing together for over 4 years. We’ve seen the good, the bad, and the ugly together. It’s been a crazy and long journey that hopefully will be over soon. My cohort is the reason I am where I am in my dissertation phase today. We support and motivate each other. We hold each other accountable. Honestly, meeting my cohort has been probably the best part of my doctoral experience.

Sara, who was very clear during the interview that she had moments during her doctoral journey where she struggled academically and considered quitting, said “the support of my cohort has kept me here.” Tori recalled how her cohort became “her biggest support system.” She stated,

Pretty much everyone in my cohort worked full-time. We're all working from eight to five. So we had to balance it. We encouraged each other because we were all in the same boat. We would consistently tell each other that we can do this. We knew some sacrifices had to be made, we made the sacrifices. So yeah, we had to motivate each other, like accountability partners for one another. I was very fortunate and blessed.

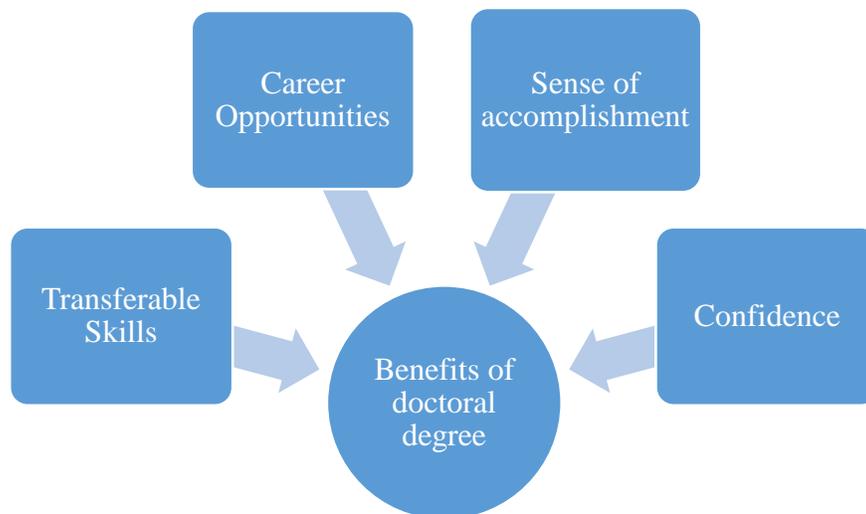
Samantha made the point that her “circle of support” has been the most important factor in her succeeding in her doctoral studies. She went on to say that “we have a strong cohort.” She gave examples of how her cohort would write together on Zoom sessions or meet in the library. She found the writing sessions very motivating. She stated, “the number one advice that I will give to future Ph.D. students is to establish a strong group. You’re going to need it.”

### **Research Question Three**

*What is the benefit(s) for current students and alumni who pursue a doctoral degree?*

This research question explored the benefits of pursuing a doctoral degree. Questions 17-21 were

used to answer Research Question 3. Within this set of questions, participants were asked about their career goals and if pursuing or earning a doctoral degree benefited them. When analyzing and coding the transcripts, common themes developed among participants, regardless of whether they had completed their doctoral degree or were pursuing their doctoral degree. As a result, four themes emerged to answer Research Question 3. The four themes that emerged from the data addressing research question three were transferable skills, career opportunities, a sense of accomplishment, and gaining confidence (see Figure 5).



*Figure 5.* Benefits of pursuing or obtaining a doctoral degree.

### **Transferable Skills**

Participants shared that pursuing their Ph.D. played to their advantage. Several participants implied that they were able to apply the skills learned in the classroom into their profession. For example, Samantha stated that “analysis, research, project management, writing, teaching, and communication” are some skills that she learned while pursuing her doctorate and now “use in my career.” She further expressed, “what attracted me to this program is just how transferable and how applicable this field is.” Denise also stated,

I like the fact that with some of the courses, I can apply the information directly to my job since I work with online learning. It's really taught me to become more analytical, and how to look at sources of information. And that's really helpful in my job. So that's been really helpful, like for my career.

Joshua shared that “a lot of skills I use in my work are skills I learned from my academics.” He went on to talk about learning a lot of project management skills, which he uses daily. Joshua ended his interview by saying, “I would say I'm better at my job, having gone through the program because my job is very similar in nature to what the program is.”

Kelsey, who works as a consultant on the side indicated that she incorporates her “planning and strategies” skills when designing training material for companies. She went on to say,

I think that the things that I learned in my program helped me to be better at my job as an instructor. So it benefits my students. I think my lessons are better organized. Now I understand learning objectives and how to match assessments with those learning objectives.

Amy discussed how applicable the field of instructional technology is in any field. She said,

What I appreciate about instructional technology is that it is very applicable to my day-to-day work. I think instructional technology applies to anybody because of its content. In our cohort, we have individuals with different careers, so there's a lot of applicability for instructional technology knowledge in any of those topic areas. One skill that I would say, I don't know if it's tied specifically to our program, but just dissertation journey in general. The writing. That is a skill that I would say I wasn't good at. I'm not sure if I'm a better writer, but I know the process and understand the process more. And, it's not as scary, if I have to develop a 10 or 20-page paper, it's very doable. And before those things were kind of crippling to me. So that is what I appreciate about the program.

Tori explained that she learned how to “collaborate and work with others virtually.” This helps in her everyday job duties as she collaborates virtually with her team members and coworkers.

Sally added that “a doctorate is not necessary for my job but the skills learned has allowed me to implement different strategies to make my job more efficient and effective.”

As participants further elaborated on the benefits of pursuing their doctoral degree, many shared stories of how they were able to apply the knowledge and skills learned in their courses to adjust to the pandemic. Heather stated, “it prepared us for what happened in March.” In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak COVID-19 (coronavirus) a pandemic. The pandemic consisted of social distancing, travel restrictions, lockdowns, workplace hazard controls, and facility closures. Many workplaces moved to remote work and schools moved to remote learning. Samantha shared how she was able to use her skills to transition her classes from face-to-face to virtual delivery. She said,

During spring break, I was notified that when I come back all four of my classes needed to be online. I can imagine how scary that had to be for someone who didn't have the knowledge or skills to transition to an online format. I mean we spent three years learning about online pedagogy and tools and what not to do and what to do. So having that foundation. I was like, alright, let's do this. And sure, it was challenging, but I can only imagine, without going through this program, how much more challenging and how less of a quality product I would have put out there switching to an online format on such short notice.

Sara expressed how she was able to assist other faculty with designing online courses as well as share best practices techniques.

### **Career Opportunities**

As participants reflected on their goals, career opportunities emerged as a benefit of earning and pursuing a doctoral degree. Many of the participants talked about how earning a Ph.D. makes them good candidates for career opportunities. They were very vocal in expressing their experience the opportunities provided for them. Tori shared the following story:

If you told me I would be in this position today, I would have laughed at you. It was never my goal to be where I am today. But I'm here because of my Ph.D. I'm doing what I love which is working with people. Long story short, I attended a conference. I network a lot at conferences. I was hesitant to take the offer because I was still trying to finish my Ph.D. I decided to take the job and I've been here now for over four years. I said all that to say, I was offered the job and other different opportunities because of my degree. Because of it, I am where I am today.

Heather implied that her doctoral degree “is the reason I was promoted.” Michael, who had a goal in mind, stated that “earning your Ph.D. makes you a good candidate.” He added that he had plans of expanding in his career and that having a Ph.D. has allowed him to do so. Sally noted, “that a Ph.D. provides a lot more career opportunities.” Kelsey also stated that earning her doctoral degree has paid off. She stated, “I have the credentials and it has provided me with a wide range of opportunities. Not to mention financial gains.” Joshua stated, “a doctoral degree has opened up avenues to other career possibilities that I wouldn't have if I didn't pursue it.”

Samantha spoke about her long-term goal of being a professor and that her doctoral degree would make her considered for a promotion and other opportunities. Samantha stated,

There are a lot of positions in higher ed where you're not under consideration unless you have a Ph.D. Those with a Ph.D. will be given preference because not only did they work harder for it but they finished. So you are going to receive more opportunities with it.

Corey shared his end career goal is to be a professor. He explained that having a Ph.D. will help him accomplish that goal. He went on to say,

I didn't care about the status, title, or anything like that. Being a professor is just a goal of mine and that's what I want to end my career as. In the meantime, my Ph.D. has allowed me to advance in my current career. I have received promotions and several job offers. I can say that the sacrifice and commitment to getting my Ph.D. have paid off tremendously.

Kandace stated that at some point in her career, she wants to become a tenured professor. She stated, “My doctoral degree has gotten me one step closer to achieving that goal.” Sally shared,

I've been offered a lot of jobs. And I have not been offered a lot of jobs because I didn't have a terminal degree yet. So, I think a Ph.D. will not only add a really shiny tool belt but it makes me more valuable.

Amy noted the following:

My goal is to be a director one day. To get there, I know I will need a Ph.D. So I look at it like this. A Ph.D. is for strangers. Your degrees aren't for people who know you, but

more so for people who don't know you. So a Ph.D. opens doors for people who don't know you to loan you some credibility until they get to know you.

### **Sense of Accomplishment**

Several participants mentioned a sense of accomplishment as a benefit of participating in the program. Sally summed up what many participants felt when she said it offered, “a stronger sense of what I can accomplish.” For example, Samantha explained that it was “a sense of accomplishment.” She went on to say that “there’s a reason it’s hard, expensive, and time-consuming but it’s rewarding.” Like many others, Kelsey explained the feeling of what the *end* feels like:

You finally have that title and you’re done. You have the title for the rest of your career. What you can and will do with it is up to you. It’s a big achievement. Proud is the best way to explain that moment. You go through a lot to get to that one moment. It’s unexplainable.

Michael added that “it’s a feeling that you just don’t want to ever go away. It’s called accomplishment.”

Sara implied that pursuing a doctoral degree is challenging but it has also “shaped me into believing in my abilities. Just knowing that I accomplished something as challenging as a Ph.D. tops any other story I could tell.” I remember hearing the sound of excitement in Heather’s voice when asked about her takeaway from her doctoral journey, she simply replied,

Just the sense of accomplishment and just knowing that I’m setting a good example for my son. He can see that even if your circumstances are not what you wanted them to be or what you thought they would be that as long as you're willing to put in the work, anything is possible.

When I asked Corey about how his doctoral degree has benefited him, he replied, “It was a personal discovery experience that has left me in awe.” He talked about how he has learned different things about himself throughout the entire process. He said that “it was a path that led me to accomplish something great.” He further went on to say,

I struggled a bit in the program but I finished. And that's what I'm most appreciative of. I feel good knowing I didn't give up. In that moment of being introduced as a doctor, nothing before that moment matters anymore. You're excited, emotional, and most of all you feel accomplished.

## **Confidence**

Another theme that emerged was confidence. During the interviews, the word confidence was repeated several times throughout the discussions. This theme was represented as a benefit of having pursued or earned a doctoral degree. Feelings of *confidence* were expressed in terms of describing the benefits of earning or pursuing a doctoral degree.

Participants reported increased levels of confidence as a benefit to pursuing or earning a doctoral degree. Some said they have developed the confidence "to do anything." For example, Amy stated, "I got bruised up and you know, a little thinner or a little heavier through the process, but I made it through. For that reason, I have gained a lot of confidence in myself." Sally commented, "The entire doctoral process has given me confidence. The confidence to complete any task or goal I set for myself." Michael said the doctoral experience has helped him to "believe in me." He talked about how he felt that he could accomplish anything going forward because of his success in the doctoral program. He mentioned that "I was just more confident going forward."

Heather shared how her doctoral journey shaped her belief and mindset. She talked about her feelings shortly after earning her doctorate. She mentioned being "emotional, excited, amazed, and full of confidence." Heather further elaborated,

I feel like there's this kind of impression that people that get doctoral degrees have to be smart. People think you have to have this insane level of academic achievement to do this. And while you need a little bit of that but what you actually need is determination, and you have to be willing to put in the work. It's a lot. That's why the feeling you have when you're done is so priceless. It gave me the confidence to know that I can do anything because I was able to accomplish something that just seems so unattainable to so many people.

Additionally, other participants also expressed how a doctoral degree gave them the confidence to apply for jobs that they felt they were “not qualified for.” Sally stated,

I used to be reluctant to apply for certain jobs because I didn't feel qualified. Now after getting my doctorate, I go in with a little more confidence that I could get the job. It just feels good knowing you are qualified for the job you want, even if you don't get it.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the analysis of data collected from a qualitative bounded case study research design. Interviews were conducted to help understand the factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctoral degree, the experiences of pursuing a doctoral degree, and the benefits of pursuing or obtaining a doctoral degree. After the data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed, eleven themes emerged.

It was determined that the constructs identified in the Social Cognitive Career Theory have an impact on an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree and their decision to continue to pursue a doctoral degree despite challenges. The study revealed that self-efficacy beliefs played a vital part in the doctoral process. Self-efficacy beliefs were increased from the encouragement and support of faculty and friends or by an individual's own accomplishment. It was found that self-efficacy and outcome expectations were motivating factors for students' desire to not quit, despite the challenges and obstacles they encountered during their doctoral studies. Last, the benefit of pursuing or earning a doctoral degree as shared by many of the participants contributed and helped them achieve their career goal(s). Overall, the interviews indicated that there is a connection between the doctoral experience and the SCCT.

The next chapter includes a discussion of how the results addressed the research questions, conclusion, implications this study has for doctoral studies, and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER V:

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to researchers (McFarland et al., 2019), there an increase in doctoral student enrollment (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Also, Golde and Dore (2001) have indicated that college students do not clearly understand what the doctoral process entails, nor how the process works in order to navigate through it effectively. Therefore, this dissertation study explored the factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctoral degree and the doctoral experience.

#### **Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this qualitative bounded case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, the study's intent was to explore the experiences that are associated with the process of pursuing a doctoral degree. A total of 16 interviews were conducted.

#### **Discussion of the Findings**

##### **Research Question One**

*How do current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program describe their decision to pursue a doctoral degree?* The first research question was to examine what influenced individuals to pursue a doctoral degree, specifically in instructional technology. Four themes emerged from the data addressing the question: faculty and friends' recruitment and encouragement, career advancement, program flexibility, and self-satisfaction. Some of these findings are supported by the findings from the participants in Golde and Dore's (2001) study.

These findings suggest that individuals are positively influenced to pursue a doctoral degree through faculty encouragement and recruitment and career exposure. Also, these findings are consistent with existing literature that identified self-satisfaction, career advancement, and program structure as factors that influence an individual decision to pursue a doctoral degree (Ng et al., 2011; Rudd, 1986; Tzanakou, 2014).

### **Research Question Two**

*How do current students and alumni of the Instructional Technology doctoral program describe their experiences in pursuit of a doctoral degree?* This research question asked participants to share their experiences. The question explored the journey of pursuing a doctoral degree. Three themes emerged surrounding the second research question: time commitment, imposter syndrome, and support. These results suggested that the doctoral experience consists of time management, self-doubt, and establishing a support system. These findings are supported by previous research. There have been numerous studies investigating the challenges students face in pursuit of a doctoral degree. Time management has been identified as a hindrance to students completing their doctoral program (Breckner, 2012; Dyk, 1987; Longfield et al., 2006; Protivnak & Foss, 2011).

Researchers have found students to experience self-doubt during their doctoral journey (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hyun et al., 2006; Longfield et al., 2006, McAlpine et al., 2009; Protivnak & Foss, 2011). Other studies also support the findings in the present study that support systems have a positive impact on students' success in doctoral studies (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2010; Rigler et al., 2017).

### **Research Question Three**

*What is the benefit(s) for current students and alumni who pursue a doctoral degree?* The question examined if and how a doctoral degree benefits individuals who pursue or earn a doctoral degree. Four themes emerged based on the third research question: transferable skills, career opportunities, a sense of accomplishment, and confidence. These findings align with the results from other studies. Participants in Tzanakou's (2014) study reported transferable skills to be a benefit of earning a doctorate. As found in this study, a doctoral degree provides opportunities for more career options. This finding is consistent with the findings of Golde and Dore (2001) and Teowkul et al. (2009) who found that a doctoral degree also provides employment opportunities within the current job or department.

Participants stated that pursuing or earning a doctoral degree gave them a sense of accomplishment. The findings in Rudd's (1986) study reported a sense of accomplishment to be one of the most satisfying benefits of receiving a doctoral degree. Last, several participants stated that pursuing or earning a doctoral degree gave them confidence. Participants expressed the pursuit and completion of a doctoral degree increased their confidence with regard to accomplishing future tasks. According to Bandura (1997), one's personal self-efficacy experiences give one confidence to accomplish a task in order to produce the desired outcome; however, this finding was not reported in previous literature.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusions for this study were made as a result of the findings of this study. Lent et al.'s (2002) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is supported by the responses of the participants in this study. The themes that emerged during this study fit into one of the following SCCT constructs: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. The constructs individually could

not lead to an understanding of any one research question. Each construct is connected. There were 11 themes found in this study; each one provides an answer to one of the three research questions.

The themes that emerged from this study revealed the impact that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals have on an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree, the doctoral experience, and the benefits of a doctoral degree. The participants in this study confirmed the importance that social interaction has on one's self-efficacy. The majority of the participants in the study indicated that they were influenced to pursue a doctoral degree by the encouragement of faculty and friends. It was important for participants to enroll in a program that provides convenience and flexibility. They needed a structured format that would not complicate their already busy lives. The participants perceived these factors contributed to their success and completion in the doctoral program. The participants in this study were also influenced to pursue a doctoral degree because of self-satisfaction and career advancement. Lent et al.'s (1994) theory stated that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be tied to outcome expectations. The narratives of the participants in this study confirmed that the factors that influence an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree contribute to one's sense of self-efficacy and outcome expectations according to Lent et al.'s (2002) social cognitive career theory.

While the factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctoral degree are important, the experiences encountered throughout the pursuit of a doctoral degree are also important. The relationship between the SCCT and the doctoral journey is further revealed in the narratives as the students recount their doctoral experience. According to Lent et al.'s (2002) SCCT, outcome expectations, combined with self-efficacy, can determine the consequence of behavior. Students admitted to having feelings of self-doubt and imposter syndrome during their doctoral journey.

Most participants reported the process at times got overwhelming, but they were able to overcome the challenges through support provided by peers or faculty. The participants also indicated that the doctoral process was time-consuming. There were times that they had to miss a family or friend event due to coursework. Although the doctoral journey was difficult at times, the participants emphasized that they had a goal in mind to achieve. That motivated them more to complete their doctoral degree. Goals, according to Lent et al. (1994), are a task someone chooses to pursue to receive something in return. As a result of the narratives of the participants and based on the emergent themes, more insights are gained on the doctoral experience of students.

The majority of participants said they gained many transferable skills as a doctoral student. For the participants, the skills learned were beneficial in their current and future careers. Several participants emphasized career opportunities during their interviews. Earning or pursuing a doctoral degree resulted in career opportunities. However, the results of this study aligned with Carrico and Tendhar's (2012) findings that outcome expectations do not dictate goals. Several participants indicated that they just wanted to finish. They did not have any specific goals concerning postdoctoral studies, while other participants shared career goals after completion of their doctoral degree. This reveals that outcome expectations do not encourage or impact participants' decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Participants that were either pursuing or had completed their doctorate reported that a doctoral degree improved their confidence. As indicated by SCCT, one's personal self-efficacy experiences give one confidence to accomplish a task in order to produce the desired outcome (Lent et al., 1994). Many of the participants indicated that earning their doctoral degree gave them a sense of accomplishment. The SCCT

suggests that self-efficacy beliefs are formed during psychological and emotional states; it can intensify a sense of accomplishment (Bandura, 1994).

In summary, the themes that emerged from this study revealed the impact that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals have on an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree, overcoming challenges, and the doctoral experience. Bandura (1986) noted that self-efficacy influences the choices people make, the effort they put forth, and how long they persist when facing challenging situations, obstacles, and failure. Lent et al. (1994) stated that there is a connection between past performance, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in determining performance outcomes. This study confirmed this conclusion.

### **Implications of the Study**

The results of this case study can aid graduate program directors, administrators, educators, and program recruiters in helping programs increase their enrollment. More individuals are pursuing a doctoral degree for different reasons. Educators and administrators need to be aware of why individuals decide to pursue a doctoral degree. These reasons need to be taken into account when developing recruiting strategies, creating the curriculum, and developing course content. Knowing that individuals are influenced heavily by faculty and friends to pursue a doctoral degree, administrators and educators should continue to recruit individuals and encourage recruitment from current students.

The study indicated that individuals are attracted by how programs are structured. This suggests that universities should strive to maintain programs and instructions that are flexible and convenient for students. Furthermore, the findings from the current study are consistent with previous research that individuals pursue a doctoral degree for career advancement. Graduate programs and educators should restructure or design content to equip students with soft skills

that will prepare them for employment. Administrators and educators should make students aware of job opportunities or opportunities that will enhance and build on-the-job skills.

The findings revealed that students indicated support to be a factor in succeeding in doctoral studies. As a result of this finding, advisors should consider maintaining positive and supportive relationships when assisting doctoral students; especially during their dissertation process. Jairam and Kahl (2012) indicated that support from dissertation advisors was related to a successful dissertation process. Advisors could consider monitoring doctoral students' progress and providing them with supportive resources. Additionally, graduate program directors and administrators could check with their students annually to assess the students' attitudes toward their programs, advisors, and professors. Also, these findings could encourage other doctoral programs to examine their curriculum and program structure to better support their program and doctoral students.

Prospective and current doctoral students can also benefit from this research by gaining an understanding of what students experience during their doctoral journey. The advice and stories shared by participants in this study can enlighten students of the doctoral experience. It can also help students overcome obstacles that they may encounter during their doctoral journey. Also, the findings cited career opportunities as a benefit of pursuing or completing a doctoral degree. This information can be of importance to students who have questions regarding whether or not a doctoral degree or program supports doctoral students' career plans, specifically in instructional technology.

Last, the findings in the study support the need to update studies associated with the benefits of a doctoral degree. The participants Tzanakou's (2014) study shared that earning a doctoral degree positively benefited their transferable skills, social skills, and personal

development (Tzanakou, 2014). Also, this study found an increase in confidence to be a benefit of pursuing or completing a doctoral degree. This can contribute to current studies on doctoral experience and the benefits of a doctoral degree.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are a number of potential areas for future research suggested by the results reported here. First, future research could replicate this study to gain a deeper understanding of the benefits of pursuing and earning a doctoral degree. More research on doctoral students' postdoctoral studies is needed. Since this study has identified additional benefits of pursuing and earning a doctoral degree, it is recommended that future research concentrate on the benefits of a doctoral degree post-graduation. It could shed more light on the impact that a doctoral degree has on one's career.

More research studies on doctoral students' experiences need to be done. Future researchers can conduct a study on doctoral experience using a research design that has not been used in previous studies. It would help to further explore the experiences of doctoral students. More specific interview questions related to the doctoral journey could be asked to better understand the doctoral experience. It would be helpful for stakeholders to know if the responses shared by students in this study are consistent with other students in their doctoral program.

This study was restricted to only participants who were students in one Instructional Technology doctoral program at a university located in the southeast part of the US. Future research could replicate the research using participants in a different doctoral program or doctoral students in general, regardless of program. It will help strengthen findings on doctoral experience.

## Summary

The purpose of this bounded case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, the study explored the experiences that are associated with the process of pursuing a doctoral degree. The constructs of the social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 2002) fit well for exploring the doctoral journey. This theory has been well-supported in the literature, and the present study successfully applied the theory to factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctoral degree, doctoral experience, and the benefits of a doctoral degree.

This study demonstrates that there is a relationship between the sources of self-efficacy and an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree and the doctoral experience. Several factors, both internal and external factors, were revealed as taking part in the development of one's self-efficacy. An increase in self-efficacy is important because it deals with one's own belief in the ability to succeed in a doctoral program. Research has shown that when individuals have self-efficacy, it has a significant influence on their career and academic outcomes (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). The results of this study showed various types of factors that contributed to the development of one's self-efficacy. Encouragement from faculty and friends to pursue a doctoral degree was identified in this study as influencing one's self-efficacy. Participants also shared how support plays a huge role in pursuing a doctoral degree. Support helps individuals overcome obstacles and strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs about themselves and expectations about their future. Also, pursuing or completing something as difficult as a doctoral degree is likely to lead to greater self-efficacy. These findings were aligned with several sources of self-efficacy as identified by Lent et al.'s (2002) SCCT, such as social persuasion, and psychological and emotional states, and vicarious experiences.

The present study also showed that there is little relationship between the benefits of pursuing and earning a doctoral degree and outcome expectations and goals. The participants highlighted that the opportunities that a doctoral degree would provide and their career goals were their motivation to continue in doctoral studies despite the challenges and obstacles. Participants also shared other ways in which pursuing and earning a doctoral degree benefited them. They believed that some of their career and personal skills were developed due to pursuing a doctoral degree.

Many students are not aware of the doctoral experience and process. By focusing on the experiences of the 16 participants in this study, we have insights into the positives and negatives of pursuing and earning a doctoral degree. The findings showed many different reasons students pursue a doctoral degree. By understanding the reasons students pursue a doctoral degree, institutions can improve their curriculum and recruitment process to benefit the program and the students.

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APPENDIX A:  
RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Potential Research Participant,

Hello, my name is Lavasha Sherman. I am a doctoral student at The University of Alabama in the Educational Leadership, Policy, & Technology Studies department. I am currently pursuing my Ph.D. in Instructional Leadership with a concentration in Instructional Technology. I am writing asking if you would agree to be interviewed for my research study entitled “Why did we choose to pursue a doctoral degree? Insights from students of one Instructional Technology doctoral program”. This research seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, the study will explore the experiences that are associated with the process of pursuing a doctoral degree.

Participation in this research includes interviewing about your doctoral decision and experience, which will take approximately 60 minutes. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. During the interview, you will be asked questions about factors that influenced your decision to pursue a doctoral degree, as well as what will be or was your specific goal(s) for earning a doctorate. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used and interview documents will only be accessible by the researcher.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, please call me on my phone at 662-648-8548 or via email at [REDACTED] lavasha.sherman@ua.edu.

Sincerely,

Lavasha Sherman

APPENDIX B:  
PARTICIPANT EMAIL

Dear Research Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study about understanding why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, exploring the experiences of doctoral students. I appreciate your help in answering what are sometimes uncomfortable or awkward questions. Your contribution to this research is valuable to understanding the journey of pursuing a doctoral degree.

The goal of this research is to understand the factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctoral degree. Research indicates that several factors contribute to an individual's decision to pursue a doctoral degree. I hope that this research will provide information to potential students that plan to pursue a doctoral degree. More importantly, I hope that this research will help recruit more individuals to pursue a doctoral degree in Instructional Technology. The entire interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interview will be digitally recorded and the researcher will take notes.

Attached is an informed consent form that will explain to you the purpose and procedures in the study, describe possible discomforts and risks that may occur, and describe any other important information related to the study. Please review the document carefully. Please sign and return the form along with your availability.

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research. Feel free to ask any questions you may have about the research study. I can be reached via phone at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Lavasha Sherman

APPENDIX C:  
NON-PARTICIPANT EMAIL

Dear [*insert name*],

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study about understanding why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, exploring the experiences of doctoral students. Unfortunately, you were not selected to participate in the study due to [*insert reason*].

Again, I am pleased that you considered taking part in this study and wish you every success in your career.

Sincerely,

Lavasha Sherman

APPENDIX D:  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## **Questions that will guide the interview**

Welcome, [interviewee name]! Thank you for coming today. I am a doctoral student at The University of Alabama in the Educational Leadership, Policy, & Technology Studies department. I am currently pursuing my Ph.D. in Instructional Leadership with a concentration in Instructional Technology. In this interview, I am interested in gaining an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, get insight on the experiences that are associated with the process of pursuing a doctoral degree.

Over the next 45-60 minutes, I will ask you some questions about your decision to pursue a doctoral degree and doctoral experience. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you are welcome to pass on the question. If you need a break, please let me know. I am using an audio recorder and phone to record this interview. Do you have any questions? If there are no questions, let's get started!

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How did you hear about this program?
3. What attracted you to this program?
4. What made you decide to pursue a doctorate in this specific field?
5. Tell me what it was like to make the decision to pursue a doctorate?
6. What was your biggest concern(s) for pursuing a doctorate?
7. What would you say was the most influential factor in your decision to pursue a doctorate?
8. Tell me about your overall experience in the program.
9. What skills did you gain throughout the program?
10. Give me an example of a time that you had doubts throughout the program. How did you deal with it?

11. What was your biggest challenge in pursuing a doctorate?
12. What was your least favorite thing about pursuing a doctorate?
13. What was your most favorite thing about pursuing a doctorate?
14. Are there any changes you would like to see in the program?
15. How did you balance work, family, and being a student?
16. What advice would you give to future scholars?
17. What was/is your plan after the completion of your doctorate?
18. What is your end goal in your career?
19. How did earning/pursuing a doctoral degree open the door for your future goals?
20. What was/is the benefit(s) of pursuing a doctorate?
21. What things did you take away from pursuing/completing a doctorate?

APPENDIX E:  
IRB APPROVAL

December 14, 2020

Lavasha Sherman  
Department of ELPTS  
College of Education  
The University of Alabama  
Box 870302

Re: IRB # EX-20-CM-042-R1 "Why did we choose to pursue a doctoral degree? Insights from students of one Instructional Technology doctoral program"

Dear Ms. Sherman:

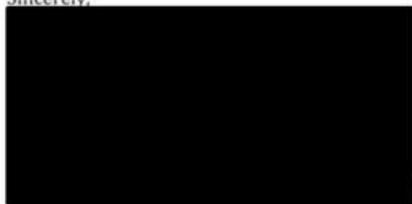
The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your renewal application. Your renewal application has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 46.101(b)(2) as outlined below:

*(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).*

The approval for your application will lapse on December 13, 2021. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the annual report to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



27 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127  
37189 | Toll Free 1-877-820-3066

APPENDIX F:  
INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

## WHY DID WE CHOOSE TO PURSUE A DOCTORAL DEGREE? INSIGHTS FROM STUDENTS OF ONE INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY DOCTORAL PROGRAM

**Please read this informed consent carefully before you decide to participate in the study.**

- Participate in a 45-60 minute study about factors that influence students' decision to pursue a doctoral degree.
- Provide insights on doctoral experience.
- No information collected that will connect identity with responses.

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of why students decide to pursue a doctoral degree in instructional technology. In addition, the study will explore the experiences that are associated with the process of pursuing a doctoral degree.

**What you will do in the study:** Each participant will interview with the investigator one-on-one. The interviews will be co Each participant will interview with the investigator one-on-one. The interviews will be conducted in a private, quiet room, or via WebEx. Each participant will be interviewed in an isolated and quiet environment, free from as many distractions as possible. Participants will be interviewed individually and information, responses, and observations from other participants will not be shared. Each participant will be interviewed at a room on the university campus at a time convenient to their schedule. As for WebEx interviews, they will be conducted via the videoconferencing software Zoom from the principal investigator's private account.

After each interview is completed, the digital recorder will be stored and kept locked away in a safe location. As for visual recordings, transcriptions, and word documents, the files will be kept on UA+Box behind the researcher's personal, password-protected account to ensure confidentiality. The participants will be asked questions on topics related to (a) the reason(s) for

pursuing a doctoral degree, (b) attraction to the doctoral program, (c) external and internal factors that influence doctoral degree pursuit, (d) experiences of the doctoral journey, and (e) personal and career goals after doctoral degree completion. Interviews will either be digitally or visually recorded, depending on the interview method.

Once the study is completed, all digital files will be deleted and paper documents will be disposed of via paper shredder.

**Time required:** Your participation in this study will last no longer than one hour.

**Risks:** While participating in the interview, it is possible that you will be uncomfortable responding to some questions. In order to minimize risks, no unnecessary questions will be asked. It is possible that some people may find some of the questions offensive. Please be aware that you are free to decline to answer particular questions within the interview. Although the interview does ask for personal information, all responses are confidential and there will be no potential legal or disciplinary consequences for you. Collected data will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the investigator administering the interview.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help the researcher better understand the factors that influence individuals to pursue a doctorate, which leads to graduate programs improving their recruiting strategies.

**Confidentiality:** The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your name and other information that could be used to identify you will not be collected or linked to the data.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part, you may choose to skip questions, or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any consequence.

**Right to withdraw from the study:** You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw from the study, your data will not be used as part of the study and it will be destroyed.

**How to withdraw from the study:** If you want to withdraw from the study, you can tell the interviewer to stop the interview and leave the room or exit the WebEx. There is no penalty for withdrawing.

**Compensation/Reimbursement:** You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

If you have questions about the study or need to report a study related issue please contact, Lavash [REDACTED] (662) 648-8548 or by email at lss93.state@gmail.com.

**If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, would like to make suggestions or file complaints and concerns about the research study, please contact:**

Ms. Tanta Myles, the University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer at (205)-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at <http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/>. You may email the Office for Research Compliance at [rscompliance@research.ua.edu](mailto:rscompliance@research.ua.edu)

**Agreement:**

- I agree to participate in the research study described above.
- I do not agree to participate in the research study described above.
- I agree to video (audio, photograph) in the research study described above.
- I do not agree to video (audio, photograph) in the research study described above.

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Signature of Research Participant

Date

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Print Name of Research Participant

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Signature of Investigator or Other Person Obtaining Consent

Date

---

Print Name of Investigator or Other Person Obtaining Consent

APPENDIX G:  
SAMPLE OF CODING SPREADSHEET

<b>Location</b>	<b>Textual Data</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Coder</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
Page: 1/Line: 29	Because Dr. had been encouraging me to join her program for a while	Faculty recruitment	Sherman, Lavasha	20- Jun-20	Mason
Page: 4/Line: 6	I still have concerns, do I have time for this.	Time commitment	Sherman, Lavasha	2-Sep- 20	Arnold
Page: 2/Line: 12	Also, there was a convenience factor.	Convenience/Program Flexibility	Sherman, Lavasha	6-Sep- 20	Corey
Page: 2/Line: 24	Some of the jobs that I'm looking at, for my next role all kind of require a Ph.D., or asking for at least a terminal degree. So it was for that reason.	Compensation/Career Advancement	Sherman, Lavasha	6-Sep- 20	Amy
Page: 4/Line: 28	And then also I like the fact that with some of the courses, I can apply that information directly to my job since I work with online learning. So that's been helpful, like for my career.	Skills transferable	Sherman, Lavasha	6-Sep- 20	Denise
Page: 4/Line: 7	I had good relationships with all the faculty. I had a lot of good friends, you know, people that were in my cohort. I still keep up with them today.	Friendships	Sherman, Lavasha	6-Sep- 20	Joshua