Should I Stay or Should I Go? Student Descriptions of the Doctoral Attrition Process

Chris M. Golde

Paradoxically, the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system—doctoral students—are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals. Stunningly high rates of doctoral student attrition, which consistently range from 40 to 50%, are one of academia’s well-kept secrets (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 1996). Indeed, so wide-spread and persistent is the norm of attrition and the lack of research about it that Bowen and Rudenstine, authors of a landmark book on doctoral education, say: “The practice has been (for understandable reasons) to concentrate on those students who actually earn doctorates, allowing those who drop out to disappear from sight” (1992, p. 107). Such systematic inattention means that students usually leave quietly, although the occasional student commits suicide or murder, perhaps in an effort to draw attention to problems (Burd, 1996; Hall, 1998). Seldom is any information gleaned from departing students; their reasons for leaving doctoral study and institutional factors that exacerbate attrition remain hidden. This paper explores the process of attrition, by “undisappearing” some

Chris M. Golde is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She presented an earlier version of this paper at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education in 1994 at Tucson, Arizona. She thanks Susan Christopher, Marc Chun, Paul Davis, Julie Duff, Alix Gallagher, Patricia Gumport, Carolyn Kelley, Alan Knox, Derek Miyahara, Lisa Petrides, Dean Pribbenow, Kathleen Quinlan, Doug Toma, Rob Waters, Lori White, Lisa Wolf-Wendel, and the Review’s reviewers. Address inquiries to her at Chris M. Golde, 1025 W. Johnson St. #1188, Madison, WI 53706; telephone: 608-265-6241; e-mail: cmgolde@facstaff.wisc.edu
of those who have left doctoral programs without a degree. Specifically, I present accounts of three people who dropped out of Ph.D. programs, whose stories illustrate and expand current theory. Before describing my study in detail, I briefly summarize the theory on which it rests.

**Socialization and Integration into Graduate Study**

Two compatible sociological theories can help illuminate doctoral student attrition: organizational socialization theory and the integration theory of attrition. Organizational socialization refers to “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211). Important assumptions of the theory are that new organizational members change as they adopt their new role, that change and adoption of a new role take time, and that such change is accompanied by anxiety. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) also elaborate various strategies by which organizational norms and cultures are transmitted to new members.

This theory is often used to describe doctoral education because one important purpose of doctoral education is preparing students for an “ultimate professional role” (Baird, 1990, p. 363); it is the “induction stage” of professional socialization for faculty members and research scholars (Corcoran & Clark, 1984). Thus, students are taught to think and act like scholars by watching faculty, conducting research on their own, attending professional meetings, and the like. But graduate education is not solely a stepping stone; “graduate student” is itself an organizational role. To fully understand the lives of doctoral students, we must recognize that they are learning simultaneously to be professionals and to be successful students (Gerholm, 1990; Golde, 1998). The entirety of doctoral education serves to socialize students into a profession; and simultaneously, students are socialized into, assume, and then leave, the role of graduate student itself. It is with the student role that this paper is concerned.

To explain why students leave their studies, Tinto conceptualizes student persistence (or conversely, attrition) as a reflection of the degree to which students’ experiences serve (or do not serve) “to integrate [them] into the social and intellectual life of the institution” (1993, p. 50). High levels of integration reinforce commitment to the institution and to the goal of completing the degree, which in turn leads to actual degree completion. Absence of integration arises from two sources: “incongruence,” a mismatch between the student and the institution, and, more commonly, “isolation,” the absence of integrating experiences.

While undergraduate persistence and attrition research focuses on how well a student is integrated into overall campus life and its subcultures, the academic department is the relevant community for doctoral students (Berselon, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Geiger, 1997; Tinto, 1993). This community is more restricted than an undergraduate’s community of reference (the whole college), but it is also more global. An academic department is the intersection of a larger institutional community and of a broad discipline, the norms and practices of which powerfully influence practices within the department (Clark, 1984), notably those related to doctoral education (Tinto, 1993, p. 232).

Tinto describes integration into two parallel systems: the academic and the social. The academic system is concerned with the “formal education of students,” with activities centered around “classrooms and laboratories,” and involving faculty members (p. 106). The social system of the college centers on a student’s “daily life and personal needs . . . outside the formal academic domain,” and takes place in residence halls, cafeteria, and the like (p. 107). By extension, “academic integration” for doctoral students refers to becoming part of the work world of the discipline and department: taking classes, developing facility with fundamental theory and research skills, participating in colloquia, writing papers for presentation and publication, and the like. “Social integration” refers to the process of making friends and becoming part of the departmental, and for some, university-wide, community. Activities promoting integration might include attending social events, hanging out in the lounge, and interacting informally with faculty.

Importantly, Tinto suggests that the academic and social integration processes are largely intertwined for doctoral students, especially in the later stages of the program, when a student’s social and work worlds are often virtually inseparable. “Social membership within one’s program becomes part and parcel of academic membership, and social interaction with one’s peers and faculty becomes closely linked not only to one’s intellectual development, but also to the development of important skills required for doctoral completion” (p. 232). This integration is particularly true in disciplines in which research is conducted in teams, like many science fields (Gumpert, 1993).

Nonetheless, those who have sought to distinguish between social and academic integration find that academic integration plays a stronger role in doctoral student persistence than social integration (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Lovitts, 1996). Lovitts (1996) provides a strong rationale for and evidence that academic integration is the primary type of integration, as it directly serves the purpose of the organization. This integration is accomplished by working on academic tasks, including the requirements of the doctoral program. Social integration, on the other hand, is socio-emotional in nature and does not directly relate to the purpose of the organization,
although it supports it. Social integration is, at least for questions of attrition, secondary to academic socialization.

This framework suggests—and the evidence bears out—that the primary agents of socialization and integration are faculty. Relationships with faculty advisors consistently seem more important in doctoral student completion than relationships with peers. Nevertheless, peers are influential (Baird, 1990; Berg & Ferber, 1983; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Green, 1991; Jacks et al., 1983; Weiss, 1981), particularly as a source of tacit knowledge (who to turn to for help, how to look competent, and so forth) that students must acquire to survive and thrive in the culture of the department (Corcoran & Clark, 1984; Egan, 1989; Gerholm, 1990; Gottlieb, 1961; Kleinman, 1983; Sullivan, 1991).

What mechanisms integrate students into their department and discipline? Integration and degree completion are enhanced by the co-location of students in shared office space and formal mentoring between returning and new students (Boyle & Boice, 1998); funding packages that require students to engage in research or teaching work alongside faculty and advanced students (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Ettington & Pisani, 1993; Nerad & Cerny, 1993); early research experiences with faculty members (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Golde, in preparation); and an annual formal evaluation of student progress (Lipschutz, 1993; Nerad & Miller, 1996). Nevertheless, these mechanisms are not a blueprint for student success, as many departments do not do these things, and their students still complete degrees.

To summarize, we have a framework for explaining doctoral student attrition, but the details remain quite fuzzy. Students who leave their doctoral program are likely to be unconnected to the academic and social life of the department. While we have some ideas of mechanisms that connect students to the community, we have neither a good template for identifying students how well students are integrated, nor a way of explaining attrition by students who seem to be well integrated. Such an explanation is necessary, as about a third of doctoral students leave their program after completing the requirements for candidacy (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nerad, 1991).

With this context in mind, I present the experiences of three students who left their doctoral program. Such students had, presumably, been unable to become well integrated. By looking at cases of failure, in this case, attrition, I hope to illuminate the process of doctoral education more clearly.

**Methods**

Most prior research on doctoral student attrition has focused on individual student characteristics to assess which students are more likely to complete their degrees, to improve the admissions process (e.g., Cook & Swanson, 1978). Other studies have sought to analyze the effect of particular institutional policies, such as funding levels, on degree completion rates (e.g., Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Rather than focusing solely on individual characteristics of students or on particular organizational policies, we need to understand how all of these factors link together to form the individual student's experience. By taking the approach of in-depth interviewing to develop detailed case studies, my goal is to illuminate the theory described above. I also hope to influence the usual “who” and “how many” perspective in the literature on doctoral student attrition to also attend “why” and “how.”

Methodologically, this paper rests on the assumption that qualitative techniques are particularly well suited to “soliciting emic (inside) viewpoints” and can “assist in determining the meanings and purposes that people attribute to their actions,” thereby giving those students a voice (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). In this case, I seek to understand the decision to leave a doctoral program. In most settings, doctoral students are competent and capable people. By contrast, in the context of the university, they are relatively voiceless, stemming from their powerless, dependent position. Doctoral students meet the criteria of people “who have not been heard because their points of view are believed to be unimportant or difficult to access by those in power” (McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993, p. 10). Therefore, students' experience with and interpretation of program characteristics and departmental relationships are important sources of data.

**Data Collection**

It was my goal to develop the clearest possible picture of each student's time in graduate school. Thus, I was trying to elicit what Denzin refers to as a narrative “based on personal experience,” with a “narrative structure which details a set of events” (1970, p. 186). I did not attempt to verify the events (dates, conversations, courses taken, etc.) that the individual described. Instead, I used the story told by the interviewee as data—summarizing, editing, and interpreting it to create the case studies presented below. Crowson defines this approach as a life history, “a participant's glance backward at a lifetime of experiences, captured in the participant's own words, with the participant's as well as the researcher's interpretations of these experiences” (1992, p. 35).

In the fall of 1994, I conducted interviews with an opportunistic sample of ten former students who self-identified as having dropped out of their doctoral program. This project served as the pilot study for further research. In the second data collection phase (fall 1995-winter 1996), I interviewed
58 people using the same protocol. The second sample was restricted to one university (here named Midwestern University), to four departments (history, English, biology, and geology), and to interviewees who started their doctoral program between 1984 and 1993.1

All together I interviewed 68 former doctoral students who did not complete their initial program (although 9 transferred to, and 7 completed, other programs). There were 33 men and 35 women who had attended 6 different universities, studying 9 different disciplines. They had spent varying amounts of time in their doctoral programs: 20 spent a year or less, 24 left by the end of the second year, 11 left during the third year, and 11 were enrolled at least four years before leaving.

I tape-recorded the hour-long, semi-structured interviews. I began by asking each person: “Tell me the story of your time in graduate school. Start with how you picked your field and school. Describe your time in school through your decision to leave.” People took from 10 to 30 minutes to complete this narrative. The remainder of the interview was spent clarifying and filling in, with a particular emphasis on understanding departmental policies and relationships with faculty and other students. I concluded with three summary questions: “Do you have any regrets?” “What things do you know now that you wish you had known then?” and “What advice would you give someone considering graduate school?”

The Cases

I selected three of the interviews to present in detail in this paper, in part for features they shared. I chose former students who had spent at least two years in their program on the assumption that these students were likely to be integrated into the department community. Each left for a cluster of reasons (rather than one precipitating event), a profile common in attritors (Gold, 1996; Lovitts, 1996). Finally, each of these three commented on issues of integration into the academic and social community of their department. Beyond these common features, I selected these three cases because of how they differ. Each represents a different disciplinary area—social sciences, humanities, and physical sciences. The outcomes of the attrition decision were different in each case—leaving for a more enticing opportunity, leaving without a specific plan, and transferring to another institution to complete the Ph.D.

Don, a geology student,2 left his program at the end of his second year because he failed his candidacy exam and his advisor told him she would no longer work with him. He transferred to another institution and com-

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pleted his degree. Nathan, an industrial psychologist, left school for an attractive job opportunity after his fourth year in school; after a year, he gave up his plan of writing his dissertation long distance. Jane initially loved her art history program but, after a falling out with her advisor, ultimately chose to pursue interests outside the academy.

The accounts begin with a chronological description of the students’ graduate-school career.3 Two or three sections that illuminate in greater depth some of the central issues in each students’ experience follow these chronologies. I shared an early draft of the text with each of the three whose cases are included here, both to check the accuracy of the account and as an opportunity for feedback to me (Gles & Peshkin, 1992). The three cases are followed by a cross-case interpretive section in which I focus on three themes: academic integration, social integration, and telling others about leaving.

Case 1: Don

After earning his bachelor’s degree in geology, Don completed a master’s degree at Southeastern University. He stayed in the area for two years, working and “doing research with my advisor part time.” During that time, “I went on a number of field trips and was introduced to an interesting research problem that I decided I would be very well suited” to exploring in Ph.D. research. He was accepted at his two top choices of institutions, and selected Midwestern University because Heather, the advisor he would work with, had expertise in “the approach that one would need to take” for his research problem. As is common in elite science departments, Heather and Don agreed during the admissions process to work together. At this unusually early time, he outlined his proposed research project to her:

I knew pretty much what I wanted to do, and where I wanted to do it. And that had seemed fine to her. . . . I wasn’t coming in like many other students saying, “I want to work generally in this subfield and that’s what you do and so what’s a good project to work on?”

Once enrolled at Midwestern, he was able to garner a small amount of external funding to support a summer of fieldwork to refine his research

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1 For a detailed description of the methods, see Golde (1996).

2 I have changed the names of the informants, of institutions, of faculty, and of university offices to reduce the possibility of identifying the university or the student. I have preserved the names of the disciplines to provide additional information but, in some cases, changed the names of disciplinary subspecialties.

3 I edited the quotations for grammatical flow and readability. Ellipses indicate major, rather than stylistic, editing, such as when at least one sentence was removed or the order of the text was rearranged.
project. This process confirmed for him that his project had merit. His first year was filled with course work, both formal courses and independent study projects. Don spent the following summer in the mountains, where he “looked around the whole area, collected a lot of rocks, [and] made notes about what things looked like.” His advisor was on sabbatical in the fall; he sent her an update of his progress, and they met once when she visited campus that fall. He was dismayed by the lack of direction he received from her, because he was writing his dissertation proposal.

I showed her what I was doing and what really disappointed me was that she didn’t really seem to want to work much with the students in terms of giving us assistance or advice on the best approaches to things.

Don took the qualifying examination for candidacy during the spring of his second year. Known as “orals” in the Midwestern Geology Department, students present a written dissertation proposal to the committee of faculty, give an oral presentation on the proposed research (including slides and diagrams of initial work and of the field site), and answer questions on the project and related geology. Don believed that his written proposal was satisfactory, as Heather had never questioned the science in it. Nevertheless, he failed his orals. He chalks this result up partly to problems at the exam itself. One faculty member brought a baby and had to take it out of the room repeatedly. Don also felt unsure of himself, particularly when questioned. “Part of it was simply that by then my self-esteem was pretty low and that can be a real problem when it comes to defending oneself,” he commented. “. . . They felt that the proposal was okay, and I had done well with the presentation, but hadn’t handled the questions very well.” By departmental policy, he had a few months to rewrite the proposal and retake his orals. His advisor, he said, “wanted me to redo my written proposal without really giving me much information on what should be changed.”

A second, and larger, problem emerged at this point. Heather told him that she would no longer serve as his advisor. He emphasized, “No matter what, even if I had redone my orals and passed with flying colors, she would not be my advisor.” He had the option of beginning to work with another faculty member at Midwestern, which did not seem viable.

There really wasn’t anyone else there I felt I could work with, without my completely changing the direction of what I was doing. It just wasn’t worth trying to do at that late stage. Essentially I would have three months to come up with a different project that would interest someone else, who barely knew that I existed—and yet having to come to an agreement with that person about what to work on.

He was allowed to complete the academic year at Midwestern, maintaining his funding, finishing some research work, and completing classes. During this period he contacted his master’s advisor from Southeastern, who encouraged him to apply there. It seemed a good match: “There were a number of people I felt that I could work with who had interests close enough to mine.”

As soon as he transferred to Southeastern, his life improved. One of the faculty members looked at the proposal he had already written and suggested that he apply for NSF funding for it, something Don believes Heather would never have encouraged him to do. He received the funding which paid his tuition and expenses for the duration of his degree. Don had completed his dissertation about a year before our interview. Candidly he said of his now-completed work: “It worked out to be a very nice dissertation. It tied together and then solved some of these controversies. . . . I feel that I made a good contribution.” Furthermore, each of the five chapters, which were written as separate research articles, was accepted for publication.

In retrospect, Don believed that already having his master’s degree created unanticipated problems for two reasons. First, he could not garner a tangible reward for the time spent at Midwestern. “I had to just leave. I couldn’t stay and get my master’s.” Second, he was very clear about the project he wanted to complete and was therefore not very open to being “molded” by the faculty. He explained:

It became clear that what the faculty most wanted to be able to do with graduate students was mold them into the images they really wanted their students to be—how they dealt with data, how they approached problems, what they automatically believed in. Since I’d had training as a master’s student elsewhere, I couldn’t be so easily molded. I also had papers that I was co-authoring with other people. So in that sense I was already an outsider. They couldn’t treat me like the other students who were coming fresh from their bachelor’s degrees.

Once Don decided to leave, he spoke freely with other students about his decision. In particular, he sought information from other students who had worked with Heather. He wanted their stories to inform a letter he intended to write, detailing “the way that I had been treated, mostly by her.” He intended to “send a copy to the ombudsman.” He confessed that he never sent the letter, in part because Heather is “still in my field, and could influence my career,” but concluded that “just trying to write some of it down” had “probably helped me.”

Overall he believed that his time at Midwestern was not wasted:
I learned a lot in terms of geology, not just in terms of life lessons. . . . It would have been nice not to have all that trouble and then have to come back [to Southeastern]. . . . [But] I don't feel that those were two years that were completely wasted.

He concluded: "I don't regret that I went to Midwestern. I regret that things went the way they did."

Problems with Advisor

A prominent theme threading through Don's account was his troubled relationship with his advisor. He confided that he had been warned that she was difficult to work with:

I knew that this woman was one of the hardest people to work with in the field. [But] I figured it was worth the gamble. She is very good at the science she does, and she's very smart, and I liked very much the previous work of hers that I had seen published. I thought it was the kind of approach that I would need to take. She seemed a very good person to try to work for even though I knew that it would be difficult to be her student.

However, Don persistently felt that she was not interested in him or in developing him as a scientist:

It seemed like after a certain time that she didn't care what I was doing. Didn't care if I was around or not. . . . She didn't give the kind of answers or assistance that I felt was owed to me as her student. She was [supposed] to guide me, to advise me, and I really didn't get that. . . . She didn't seem to want to give me the time or the interest that I thought she should have.

In contrast were his observations of his peers and their advisors. Other faculty also had reputations for being "hard to work with." But they were willing to "sit down with students, look at their data and give advice." He sighed, "It seemed like the other things that Heather had to do were so much more important to her that my time with her was very minimal."

Don believed that Heather had little sense of ownership, and consequently little scientific interest, in his research project because he had selected it before enrolling at Midwestern. For example, although it is common for geology students to go into the field with their advisors, he and Heather never did.

She didn't seem to have the interest or the time to ever get out with me and look at what was up there. My advisor [at Southeastern] actually went up into the field with me when I was doing my Ph.D. work, looked around, and was impressed with my area and what I was able to interpret there. I think in most cases you do get out with your advisor, at least once. That may have been my fault in the sense that it was my project, and not hers.

Don explained that "many other people" also had problems with this advisor and recounted a story that I subsequently heard several times.

This student wasn't making enough progress, or she didn't think he was bright enough or something. He actually had come back to his office one day, found a note on his office door from Heather that said, "I think you should find another advisor." . . . She didn't even have the guts to tell him to his face.

Departmental Relationships

Don described good relationships with other members of the Midwestern Geology Department: "I tend to get along well with people." However, the overall sense he gave was of being on the margins of the department. Moving from Southeastern to Midwestern was difficult. "I had trouble feeling that I was in the right place and feeling comfortable there." Overall, he "just didn't feel welcome." Much of this feeling stemmed from his advisor's lack of emotional support. He emphasized, "To essentially have no encouragement—it just felt worse and worse the whole time I was there. Which can be as bad as things actually being worse." He reiterated that this sense of not mattering "was part of my not doing well in the orals. Because I felt that no one there really cared if I did well or not, if I stuck around and did the project or not. And that makes a big difference."

His relationships with other students were collegial: "We read each other's proposals. We had mock orals where people come in and give you comments." Nonetheless, he was not deeply integrated into the social side of student life:

Most people were younger than I was. . . . I was married. Most of the people weren't. So I had someone I needed to go home to at night. I often came back at night to do more work, once my wife was asleep. But I couldn't go after work and have a beer somewhere. . . . In that sense, I wasn't as much a part of the student group as many people were.

Another factor that took Don away from department social life was an interest in creative writing and poetry, which he had nurtured throughout his undergraduate and master's degrees. At Midwestern he was even accepted into an English Department workshop with a noted poet. The contrast in departments was marked:

Things could be terrible in the Geology Department, but I got good advice on what I was writing in the English Department and they were happy to have me there and I was welcome. It was very much a contrast to how I felt things were in the Geology Department. . . . It was really neat to be wanted in the English Department, which I didn't seem to be in my own.
In comparing his experiences at Midwestern and Southeastern, Don perceived an overall sense of encouragement at Southeastern, while at Midwestern:

I never had encouragement from people. I specifically remember the two times that Heather complimented me. . . . She didn’t seem to have an interest in encouraging people, at least most of her students. . . . I wasn’t to bother her with what she called “little problems.” That was so different from how it has been at Southeastern. People’s doors are always open. If I have something I want to talk about, I’m welcome.

CASE 2: NATHAN

Nathan finished his undergraduate degree at one school, got married in the summer, and immediately began a doctoral psychology program at Eastern University. He applied a “very, very focused” strategy in selecting his graduate institution. He applied three rational criteria to his decision: wanting a “strong program,” being “picky” about where he would live, and moving to a place where his wife would be able to find a job. Eastern had another advantage as well.

It was the smallest of the programs, it was probably not the most highly regarded of the programs, but it had this mystical appeal of being in [state], and had this reputation of being this really, really good university. They were anxious to have me come there, gave me a nice fat stipend, and all of those good things. So I was very excited about the program.

Nathan found the first year of school academically challenging—”far from fun.” The school had a “semi-hidden agenda” of “weeding out” students:

You only find out after you get there, that Eastern deliberately created the program so that a certain percentage of the students will leave after the first year. It was very, very, very hard. . . . We all saw that weeding-out process.

For example, of the five students Nathan counted in his cohort, only two ultimately received their doctorates. The faculty’s “high expectations” mindset was: “We make the program very, very hard, and if you can’t cut it, you don’t belong in this program.” In Nathan’s opinion, “they are very tough on people, and I don’t know that that is necessarily a good thing.”

In the first term, Nathan was paired with his advisor to begin a research program. Although he had selected his advisor based on mutual intellectual interests, he was soon disappointed. “I found out I didn’t particularly like him, nor did I particularly like the way he worked and I quickly became a little disenchanted with what I had chosen to do.” But part way through his first year, Nathan “just fell in love” with research on human-computer interaction and decided to focus on this area for his dissertation. Nathan opted to get a master’s degree in the first field where he had begun work with his advisor, while simultaneously moving into the human-computer area. Most of the students in his program also chose to pursue a master’s on the way to the Ph.D. as a strategy for dealing with the uncertainty of graduate life in the department. “It was a prudent step to get your master’s because you never know what will happen down the line. As was the case with me.”

Nathan’s second year was marked by a continued focus on course work and development of his master’s thesis. He was absorbed by the intellectual challenges he faced. In pursuit of his new research focus, Nathan switched advisors, a relationship that prompted another change.

I decided I didn’t want to be an academic, I wanted to go into industry. I started working with this other professor and we started doing consulting research projects. I have to admit that I became a little enamored of the fact that I quickly became the highest paid graduate student in the department. . . . I was being paid by a major software company. . . . It was really lucrative, it went over really well, we got papers out of it and I was completely sucked into this. I really loved it.

Nathan’s relationship with his second advisor was one of the most appealing aspects of these years. Not only did their intellectual interests match, but they developed a strong personal bond. Nathan described him in glowing terms:

He was laid back, casual. . . . He was a typical graduate-student-who-never-stopped-being-a-graduate-student type of professor. . . . Graduate students came over and worked at his house. . . . He was a typical really cool advisor. And very smart. . . . I have never met anyone who had him as an advisor who didn’t really like him and form a good relationship with him. . . . He formed a personal relationship with his students.

Nathan contrasted his first and second advisor as a way of describing the value he placed on the relational component of graduate school.

[My second advisor] knew you, he knew what your life was about, you spent time with him doing things, whether it was working late into the evening, or having dinner. . . . He broke down the faculty-student wall. . . . It yields to the graduate student a greater sense of accomplishment if they are treated as more of a peer. . . . My first advisor kept that wall up. I was a student-person. He had his life, I had mine. He would give me direction and we would meet, and that was it. Whereas my second advisor was someone who understood what was important to me and would spend time with me discussing not only my dissertation but what I wanted to do, what was happening in the
industry... I liked him much better as a person... Work and school [are] more than just producing some product. [They're] about forming relationships with people. And I valued that when I got it from my second advisor.

After three years, Nathan received his master’s degree, timing that he described as “about right.” His academic career was relatively trouble free. By his fourth year, Nathan made concrete plans to pursue his love: “research that has a practical application.” He arranged an extended internship with an alumnus of his program, who was department head in a Silicon Valley company. His boss was “very in favor of my doing research on the job to continue my dissertation,” so Nathan planned to work through the fall, and then return to Eastern to finish his dissertation. At first Nathan was able to “talk weekly” on the phone with his advisor, but two events reduced Nathan’s ties to Eastern. First, a few months before he left for California, Nathan decided to leave his wife. Second, after the summer, Nathan’s boss offered him a full-time job. Matter-of-factly Nathan describes himself as “very, very good at what I do.” At the time Nathan was confident that he could both work and do a dissertation:

[My boss] wanted me to finish my dissertation, but he also wanted me to work for him. I’d been having a lot of fun, being in Silicon Valley, working 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, getting paid tons of money to do it. I said “Sure, I can do this. I can work and do my dissertation and bang-bang-bang it will all be perfect.”

Nathan’s advisor reluctantly supported this new plan. They had a long talk when Nathan traveled back to Eastern to pack his things. “He was mostly in favor of it, but he warned me that something bad may come of it.” Nathan spent another year trying to simultaneously work on his career and his dissertation. At first he was able to juggle work and school, but then work edged out his dissertation because it was “fun,” “interesting,” and he was “pretty good at this stuff.”

Nevertheless, there were still pressures to work on his dissertation from his department and his family. Nathan recalled the decision to leave school:

I was getting pressure at the same time from my family, “Are you going to finish that degree?” It was important to them. So I continued under the increasingly stronger facade of working on my dissertation stuff, when in fact I was spending less and less time working on it, and was having less and less frequent conversations with my advisor, and I was spending more and more time working on my work... The point came, a year or so after I started as a full-time employee, that I said, “Well, I am not going to finish this.”... The department had been sending me increasingly frequent letters saying, “Are you working on this?” “What are you doing?” And I am saying, “Yeah, yeah—oh, maybe—no.” Then I actually withdrew from the program... And they said, “We are really sorry that happened.”

Having Second Thoughts

One theme that threaded through Nathan’s interview was his feeling of—if not regret, then wistfulness—about leaving his graduate program. He described his decision to me matter-of-factly, but with repeated comments like: “I am not bitter at all,” “I don’t feel less smart because I don’t have my Ph.D.” While not regretting his choice, the lack of completion seems to rankle slightly. He explained:

To this day, I still have people, including my [second] wife and my father, who say, “Do you ever think of going back and finishing your dissertation?” and I say “no” now. There is a certain part of me that would like that sense of closure... I do a lot, I have been successful, I have moved up in the ranks, and nobody doesn’t respect me because I only have a master’s degree and I am ABD... and I am pretty happy with that.

In retrospect, Nathan recognizes that his life might be quite similar today if he had followed his original plan, a recognition that came only with hindsight.

I probably would have been equally successful. But at the time you don’t know that. You think, “If I don’t take this opportunity now, when will there be another equally good opportunity?” You try to grab hold, when you are young and foolish.

Nathan had made his peace with his choice, which offered him a large measure of success. Looking back on graduate school, he seemed very happy with the experience. Nonetheless, he expressed uncertainty about “if the faculty considers me a success or a failure... I think some of them probably consider me a success, because I have been successful in the field, and I have found opportunities for other students coming out of the department. And some of them may consider me a failure, because I didn’t finish up what I started there. And I should have done that, so I am really a failure to them.”

Life at Eastern

While Nathan’s decision to leave school was largely rooted in his work life, the four years he spent in the department and university shaped Nathan’s skills, interests, and perception of his options. Nathan characterized the ideal psychology department graduate student as a person focused on academic
achievement. He rattled off a list of attributes: Someone “who whizzed through the classes and did well. Started research early and often. Did an internship, but didn’t let it seduce them. Developed a strong tie with a faculty member and was focused. Focus, focus, focus.”

Despite the academic pressures, Nathan described graduate school as providing a sense of community for students, within both the department and the university. Perhaps the homogenous student body that was “very white American” fostered this. The entering class was “a strong cohort” that the department took pains to integrate into the departmental community.

The department as a whole liked having graduate students around. All graduate students got office space on campus from their first year. They liked students to be on campus. . . . The department had weekly brown bag lunches where everyone after their first year in the department presented a topic for the full length of a lunch. . . . It was a real community and I enjoyed that a lot.

This sense of integration into a larger community was echoed at the university level. Students interacted socially. Nathan described a graduate student bar at which “nary a year went by when there wasn’t a psychology graduate student as a manager or a bartender.” There was also a “strong graduate student association.” He said: “There was a real sense of community over all.”

When I asked what he could have done differently, Nathan drew a blank. Overall his summary was very positive:

I had a pretty good time in graduate school. I was pretty successful, and I got a lot of benefits from it, and then I came out here and I got a job. . . . I would not call it a tale of woe, by any means.

**Case 3: Jane**

Jane came to Midwestern University to study art history after turning down a deferred acceptance to Elite University. After quitting a museum job she had held for four years, she spent several months in Italy, soul searching. She met a colleague in Italy who encouraged her to apply to Midwestern. She confessed:

In all honesty I had some ambivalence about the Ph.D. before I came here, but I thought, “Well, I am just going to do the degree and be a professor.” I am going to do the degree because I want what is at the end of the road.

At first the school exceeded her expectations. “I loved my first year and a half.” Her relationships with faculty were “fun and comfortable.” She enjoyed her fellow students as well: “We all got along . . . It really was one of

the best things about the program.” In particular, the classes gave her new tools, which continue to serve her well:

I learned to think in a more analytical and theoretical way than I ever had. . . . I don’t regret it at all, because I have learned to think. It became a part of my identity that I learned to be this pretty good thinker. And that is big. So, I got some good stuff out of here.

She had an instant connection with her advisor through a mutual friend, and he accepted her into his inner circle. She described their relationship as “really great at the beginning.”

He treated me wonderfully. He thought I did well, he gave me the highest grades. . . . He was like the guy I had as an advisor at [undergraduate institution] at the beginning. . . . A real looking-out-for-us kind of thing. . . . When he thinks you are going to be doing his kind of work, he really makes opportunities appear for you. Meeting pretty important area artists. Making sure there is money in the summer, that kind of thing. Opening his files to you. It was pretty major. He pulls a lot of weight. And he tries to do for you.

Jane passed the initial hurdles with ease, but tensions began to emerge as she struggled to formulate a dissertation proposal, a major milestone in her department. Her advisor supplied her topic. When I expressed interest in that development during the interview, she snorted, “A big red flag should go up at that point.” Although the topic initially interested her, she “struggled” to write her proposal. She began to write about selected artists “as women,” although overall she could not see “how this would come together.” Jane’s advisor did not agree with her gendered analysis of the artists. Ultimately, this disagreement escalated into an altercation in his office, which she calls their “mutual falling out.”

We had a meeting where he basically said, “I don’t think you have the capacity to do this kind of work. I don’t think you can actually do a dissertation. . . . This is the man who was giving me A+++. . . . and really developing me as a scholar, and suddenly he told me in this meeting that he didn’t think I was capable. . . . It was horrible. I was just sitting there going, “Huh?” And the reason I said it was a mutual falling out is that, at the same point, I was thinking: “This guy—he is a man. I am not stupid. I know I can do a dissertation. It’s just that she doesn’t think one can think if they start doing women’s stuff.” Basically. So that was that.

The next two months Jane spent in a “funk” in which she “sat at home and did nothing.” In addition to the argument with her adviser, she was suffering residual physical pain from a bad car accident as well as...
dumped by a boyfriend. . . . It just sucked,” she concluded. It helped when she met with a therapist at campus Psychological Services.

By January, Jane began to regroup. She shared a new dissertation topic idea with another professor who “thought it was great.” Simultaneously, she was “getting incredible pressure” from faculty in her department to turn in a proposal, since she was perceived as “behind” the standard timeline. During the spring of her second year, she began to write a proposal on this new topic with this new advisor. Then Jane abruptly decided to leave school:

Before I was quite finished with the proposal, I just decided I didn’t want the whole thing. It was really weird. It’s like, I am going to get it all the way I want it to be. I am going to get my own dissertation topic, a good advisor, and then, when it is all set, when all the ducks are in a row, I make the decision not to do it . . . I quit and I have never regretted it at all.

Although she initially described her decision as a sudden one, Jane later told me that, in addition to the therapist at Psychological Services, she talked with a counselor in the Career Planning Office:

I started talking with this woman, because I was starting to think about future careers, and between her and the Psychological Services person, I actually was the one who said, “I am just going to quit this thing.” But I felt like they were there [for me].

In a conversation with her new advisor, she broached the idea of leaving school temporarily. Jane’s advisor was unconvinced by Jane’s story of wanting “to go out and work for a women’s organization,” a reason Jane admitted was “made up.”

She might have heard in my voice that it didn’t sound like I had any definite plan to come back . . . I don’t think I even believed I was going to come back. . . . She wasn’t convinced. . . . Well, I was just saying this because it sounded good. But I wanted out.

Jane also talked to other faculty. The chair was “noncommittal.” The department made no “attempt to follow up and find out what happened.” Only one other faculty member offered her support. He told her that “it is the department’s responsibility that they lost me.” She suspects that his sympathy stemmed in part from “personal reasons,” as he “was kind of kicked around the department, too.” Furthermore, it was painfully evident that Jane felt cut off from other students:

This was the other bad thing. My friends in the department didn’t want to deal with this. Because they didn’t want to hear about their colleague who was this high-powered student, starting to quit. I think it was a very bad time, they distanced themselves from me, and I probably distanced myself from them, because it is threatening. I remember needing to talk to someone, and people just weren’t around. I think it was too dark.

With hindsight, Jane acknowledged that if she had attended to her early ambivalent feelings, she might have “made the decision not do art history any more . . . back in 1986 or ’87 [before Midwestern].” Without regret, but with a tone of honest self-reflection, she commented, “I would have done all the work that I now have had to go through—soul searching—back then.”

Flourishing in Academia

Toward the end of our interview, Jane summarized her main reasons for leaving the department and an academic career: “the advisor thing,” “the car thing,” and not having “a support network.” “I don’t know if I can say there is one overriding force,” she concluded. “So I think it was a bigger thing about deciding not to dedicate myself to this field.” Her eroding interest and confidence in academia thus played a pivotal role in her decision to leave school. Jane expressed strong opinions about how to flourish in academia. Jane’s perceptions of academic life were formed early. Her father was a professor and a dean. She describes him as “very personable, warm, and friendly.”

[But] I think what it means to be a professor has changed over time. I think it is publish or perish, whereas I really am a teacher-oriented type of person. . . . I don’t want to be sitting in a library doing research. I decided that wasn’t me. . . . I also decided art history was too inwardly turned on itself for me. I wanted to do something more socially applicable. . . . I decided I didn’t want to be a professor and I didn’t want the field. . . . I don’t know how much of what I feel about the Art History Department is actually about academia and getting a Ph.D.

When I asked her what she knew now that she wished she had known then, she highlighted the importance of a positive advisor relationship and a love of independent research.

I think the advisor is 80% of the deal. If you get along really well, and that person is there to support you and you exchange ideas well, I think it can be the driving force. . . . And I think that you have to have a love of being on your own and just digging. I am really a people-oriented person, and I start talking to the books, and they weren’t talking back. It seems like something you should know, but I just didn’t realize how intensely isolated it is.
Departmental Life

While the bare bones of Jane’s chronological story focused on academia and on her advisor, further probing revealed some deeply held negative attitudes towards her department. The departmental context had reshaped Jane’s views about academia and influenced her decision to withdraw. Two years after leaving, Jane still felt a bitterness and disappointment with the department that emerged over and over in the interview, in dry comments like: “I could write a book” and “Let me put it this way: the ombudsperson is very familiar with our department.” When I asked her to describe the department, she responded with one word, accompanied by sardonic laughter, “Hellacious.”

When I asked for an example of faculty behavior that disillusioned her, she told this story. She observed that in art history every faculty member reads and votes on every student’s dissertation proposal. Only proposals with majority approval are approved. One student sitting in the lobby of the department heard Jane’s first advisor going from office to office, trying to persuade his colleagues not to approve the student’s proposal. Jane summarized her disappointment in the department: “I am not so sure there is a lot of interest in graduate students [in the Art History Department]. And that is a terrible thing to say.” I asked her where faculty interests lie instead. She responded:

Their own research, I’ve even had a professor say to me, about undergrads, that she just wished they’d get out of her face, so she could do her work. I don’t think it is a very nurturing place. I don’t know if any graduate program is . . . . I just see it as a really unhealthy place.

Discussion

Together the cases presented above help illustrate doctoral attrition theory and remind us of the complexity of doctoral students’ lives and of the attrition decision. Often faculty members and deans attribute attrition to a single factor, such as lack of money, talent, or commitment. Instead, we need to recognize the shared responsibility of student and department. These cases also suggest modifications in both theory and practice, as discussed below. However, these conclusions should be taken with caution as they are circumscribed by the limitations of this study. My emphasis has been on full-time students in the traditional arts and science fields. It remains to be seen if practices that benefit these students would also benefit other groups of doctoral students, particularly those attending part time and those in applied fields. In parallel, further research must be done to confirm or extend the theories when applied to other populations of doctoral students.

Next, I present three interpretive themes that emerge from these narratives and discuss their implications for the policy and research literature.

Academic Integration: Relationships with Faculty

Academic reasons were central in the attrition stories of each of these three cases. Don’s case is a good example of how inability to become academically integrated leads to attrition; the case fits the Tinto model well. Don never felt at home at Midwestern; he described feeling “unwelcome” and perceived his advisor as a person who “didn’t care if I was around or not.” His contrasting experiences in the Southeastern Geology Department and in the Midwestern English Department allowed him to evaluate his experience in the Midwestern Geology Department. Nevertheless, he was deeply committed to completing his Ph.D. and elected to transfer to Southeastern as the most expedient route to the degree. Thus, we might see Don’s story as an example of incongruence (lack of institutional fit) (Tinto, 1993), which might describe many doctoral students who transfer to other institutions.

However, lack of integration does not adequately characterize the other students’ experiences. Jane was well integrated into the department as long as she was in her advisor’s favor; she did well in class, made timely progress, and participated in larger art history networks. Then the falling out with her advisor left her relatively adrift, like Don. Although she was able to frame a new topic and find a new advisor (a strategy Don did not attempt), the experience was the catalyst for a deeper reevaluation of her commitment to earning her Ph.D.

Nathan was also poised to finish. He had also switched advisors but had a very positive relationship with his new advisor, had approval for his proposal, and was seemingly unstoppable. It was not lack of integration into the department that changed his path; rather, it was another opportunity that captured his attention. Both Jane and Nathan became disconnected from their programs and departments.

Pivotal in each story, and confirming previous research findings, was the importance of a supportive advising relationship in helping students make progress toward their degree. Conversely, a problematic advising relationship was implicated in the attrition decision. As these cases show, the rupture of the advising relationship, when it is not replaced with another relationship, can derail a student’s degree aspirations. As a result, Jane called her assumptions about academia into question. Don, since he was in a field in which advisors and students work together on closely related topics, was unable to find another faculty member at Midwestern who could direct his

*No data on the prevalence of transfer for doctoral students are available.*
research. Transferring was the simplest solution. Nathan provides an example of how switching advisors can be positive. This action yielded an excellent and supportive relationship with his new advisor. Indeed, his advisor strongly advised him against taking the job in Silicon Valley. Advisors appear to be critical to academic integration.

The accounts also reveal some of the characteristics of a good advising relationship. The amount of time spent, the quality of the interactions, and a sense of care from advisor to student were all important. For Nathan, two strengths of the relationship were that his advisor was interested in all aspects of his life and that their discussions ranged far and wide. This advisor spent extensive time with his students, all of whom reportedly liked him very much. During the period in which Jane’s advisor was taking a deep interest in her professional growth and development, she described his style as “a real looking-out-for-us kind of thing” and affirmed that “he really makes opportunities appear for you.” In her retrospective assessment of graduate school, she suggested that an advisor with whom “you get along really well” is “80% of the deal.” Don also explicitly articulated an expectation that advisors and faculty care about their students. “She’s [supposed] to guide me, to advise me.” He also expects faculty to meet students halfway. Don cited a norm in the discipline that students go with their advisor into the field to look at rocks and discuss their interpretations of what they see.

Although media reports focus on exploitation and abuse of students, these interview subjects contrasted caring with indifference. Don emphasized access and time, contrasting Heather’s behavior with that of faculty at Southeastern. Of the former he said, “It seemed like the other things that Heather had to do were so much more important to her that my time with her was very minimal.” Of the latter he reported, “People’s doors here are always open.” Jane described faculty indifference as “terrible” and equated the lack of nurturing with an “unhealthy” environment. Perhaps this inattention seemed even worse because she initially felt support from her advisor and because caring is a trait she values in her father. She believed that indifference toward students is in part a function of larger forces in higher education. In particular she attributed indifference to a change in faculty roles over time, with an overemphasis on research and an underemphasis on teaching and mentoring.

Another component of caring described by these former students was meeting the needs of students, based on an understanding of who they are as individuals. Jane and Nathan both believed that faculty prefer students to be “focused,” which can deprive students of the opportunity to explore their interests as they emerge over time. Nathan and Don both described the importance to faculty of students whose interests were closely allied with their own. Certainly the norms of the physical science disciplines, like geology, are that students conduct research under the close supervision of a faculty advisor whose research grants are funding the student’s work. Don emphasized that faculty wanted students who were “moldable” into the faculty member’s intellectual image. His resistance to this process made him an “outsider.”

These findings suggest a needed refinement in Tinto’s (1993) theoretical formulation of doctoral student attrition. Here we have seen, as Tinto suggests, that students can fail to become integrated into the department. In other cases, however, well-integrated students experience a break that is equally disruptive. Two of the cases here detailed situations in which the advisor rather abruptly (at least in the eyes of the student) terminated the relationship. Similarly, Nathan took a full-time job away from campus, a decision that rather suddenly took him away from his studies. This severing of a previously integrated student is a needed modification to doctoral attrition theory. Tinto foregrounds the advisor-student relationship primarily in the final dissertation stage, but advisors clearly play a role for many students from the outset of the program. Furthermore, relationships with advisors need to take center stage in a formulation of academic integration for doctoral students. Students expect and appreciate a committed, caring advisor.

Social Integration: The Student Community

Social integration is difficult to tease out as a component of the doctoral experience that is separate from academic integration, as these cases illustrate. Peer interactions blend social and academic components, and peer relationships clearly are part of both social and academic systems of the departments. All three interviewees described the student community positively, although it did not play an appreciable role in attrition. As Lovitts (1996) suggests, the student community can either enhance experience or accelerate disengagement. Nathan described an active and inclusive community, in which even new students are participants in research colloquia. Jane contrasted her early academic period, in which students socialized and studied together, with the stark isolation of her research efforts: “I started talking to the books, and they weren’t talking back.” Don described how students would prepare one another for their orals and was aware of many opportunities for socializing with other students, although he chose not to participate as frequently as other students.

Don’s story illustrates how multiple roles or interests—in Don’s case being a husband and pursuing his creative writing—can compete with full integration into the department’s social systems. Tinto likewise observes that students may need to resolve or minimize conflicting demands on their
time and energy (1993, p. 233). While Don recognized that he had fewer ties with other students than his cohorts, his lack of social integration did not seem to impact his attrition decision. On the contrary, his positive experiences in the English Department highlighted his unhappiness in his own department.

This finding also has theoretical implications. Taken with the finding about academic integration, it bolsters other research described earlier that absence of academic integration contributes more to doctoral student attrition than absence of social integration. This is not to say that social integration, especially because it is closely linked with academic integration, is unimportant. The absence of social integration can have a negative effect on the quality of the student’s experience, but it is not a precipitator of attrition. Problems with academic integration, on the other hand, do lead to doctoral student attrition.

**Telling Others about Leaving**

A third theme, not mentioned in previous research, emerged from the data. This finding is an example of the surprises that qualitative data can yield. Each of the students prevaricated in telling their departments why they were leaving, though each used a different strategy. Jane, who was in the process of making sense of her decision to leave, created face-saving stories: “I was just saying this because it sounded good.” Although she sensed that her advisor wasn’t convinced, she seemed to expect her rationalizations to be more palatable than the blunt announcement that she was renouncing academic life. It is unclear to what extent she was trying to mislead the faculty and to what extent she was still trying to fool herself. Jane recognized the psychological complexity of her story: first, she acknowledged that she could have done the “soul searching” earlier—when she was also experiencing ambivalence; and second, she suggested that having an academic parent may be an unexamined issue.

Nathan tried to avoid the question of his future by initially telling his department what they wanted to hear and what he wanted to believe. He responded to written departmental queries with a confident “yes, it’s going well,” which shifted to “maybe,” and ultimately became the acknowledgment, both to the department and to himself, that he would not finish his degree. Both Nathan and Jane were in a sense “thinking out loud” to their faculty, coming to terms with their decisions to leave while simultaneously testing the proposal on the faculty.

Don described talking to others only after he had made the decision to leave. At that point, he spent a good deal of time collecting stories from other students to incorporate in a letter to Heather and the university’s ombudsperson, although he never sent it. Jane told me she considered writ-
Conclusion

These three case studies provide nuanced data to reveal student experiences with attrition from doctoral programs. They confirm previous research findings that integration into the academic systems of the department plays a critical role in doctoral student persistence. However, here we learn that even the well-integrated student may experience a sudden breach. Furthermore, seemingly integrated students may lose their commitment to complete the degree because other opportunities take precedence. These findings help refine the predominant theory of doctoral student attrition, outlined by Tinto (1993) and largely based on socialization theory. These cases also point to the possible value of incorporating developmental models into attrition theory. While student development theory generally implies that undergraduates are developed into fully functioning adults at the completion of the bachelor’s degree, adult development theory reminds us that all people continue to struggle and change throughout their lifespan. Thus, as doctoral students’ self-concept and goals change, their commitment to completing their doctoral program may change as well (e.g., Lefèvre, 1972). Such a change might precede and precipitate the decision to leave a doctoral program, as in Nathan’s case, or it might be instigated by other events, as in Jane’s case.

I began this paper by describing the hidden nature of doctoral student attrition. These cases illuminate some reasons why so little is known about why students drop out of Ph.D. programs. Other students, whether they leave or complete, may be as reluctant as Jane to share their deep ambivalence about the academic life with the very faculty who have chosen this life. Indeed, other research findings suggest that many students who complete degrees find the academic life highly distasteful based on their observations of faculty (Golde & Dore, 1997; Golde & Fiske, 1997). Many departments might behave like Nathan’s, focusing on whether, not why, a student plans to leave the degree program. Thus, the lack of information may be attributed to both students and faculty.

Closely tied to the willingness to attend to attrition are the concepts of success and failure. The normative stance is that completing students are “successes” while those who leave are “failures.” Consequently, attrition is often hidden or downplayed. Attrition rates are rarely computed and publicized. Departments and schools rarely keep track of students who leave; departments seldom tout the accomplishments of nongraduates. As Lovitts (1996) persuasively argues, this attribution relieves the faculty and university of responsibility for attrition by locating it principally with the student. As discussed earlier, there was no evidence that students who were dropping out routinely received exit interviews nor that departments were interested in learning from these students’ experiences. While exit interviews

are now widespread at the undergraduate level, they have not yet penetrated graduate education.

These case studies suggest that these simplistic definitions of success and failure fail to capture the lived experience of students. Nathan succinctly summarized this dilemma: “I am not sure if the faculty considers me a success or a failure.” From Nathan’s perspective, he is a success, and graduate school contributed to his success.

Jane’s story is quite different. She created a viable life in a system which she then completely rejected. After a series of blows, most notably being abandoned by her advisor, she struggled to get “the ducks in a row.” Once back on track, she reevaluated her decision to pursue an academic life. While this decision might seem inexplicable, it is understandable for someone who is used to accomplishing what she undertakes. By not dropping out until she herself was convinced that she could do the necessary work, she asserted her mastery of the process. She believes that she could have completed the degree had she chosen to do so. Furthermore, she eloquently described the benefits she received from her studies: “I have learned to think... I got some good stuff out of here.” She pulled success out of apparent failure.

Finally, Don’s story might also be seen as one of failure—at least from the perspective of Midwestern University. However, from the point of view of the discipline, his is the greatest success in the group. He completed a Ph.D., is publishing in his field, and, at our last contact, was completing his second postdoctoral fellowship.

Perhaps it is time to rethink how academic success and failure are defined. Currently ours is a credential-based society, in which completion of a degree is accorded status. Perhaps universities are doing themselves and their students a disservice by categorizing people who leave a Ph.D. program as failures and sweeping them under the rug.

References


5Some undergraduate institutions consider every matriculant as a member of the community, which has advantages for fund raising and public relations efforts. This is not a widespread practice in graduate education.


