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Exit Voice Loyalty: Using an Exit Phone Interview to Mitigate the Silent Departure Phenomenon

Wendy Y. Carter-Veale
Graduate School,
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
Baltimore, MD, 21250

Michelle Beadle Holder
University of Maryland, College Park,
College Park, MD

Lenisa N. Joseph,
Sooner than Later Intervention Services
Trinidad & Tobago, WI

Corresponding Author
Wendy Y. Carter-Veale
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
Administration Building, Rm 205
drcarter@umbc.edu
410-455-2281 or 252-348-2338
Abstract: Move abstract text up to here.

Doctoral student attrition is often referred to as a silent epidemic whereby students tacitly withdraw without ever being given an exit interview or follow-up. While most studies focus on the departing students, few studies focus on the institution’s implicit and explicit policies and practices that encourage silence. Drawing upon the “Exit, Voice, Loyalty” framework, we examined how the pathways to student voice that institutions provide for departing students contribute to the silent departure phenomenon. Campus stakeholders, policymakers, and administrators should solicit critical feedback from departing students and develop instruments to assess their own departure process, rather than relying on national assessments.

Keywords: Exit Phone Interview, Silent Departure, Doctoral Attrition, Exit-Voice-Loyalty, Doctoral Training, Graduate Audience.

In the United States between 40% and 50% of graduate students who begin a doctoral program fail to earn a Ph.D. (Bauer, 2004; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Sowell, Allum, & Okahana, 2015). Doctoral students who prematurely withdraw often do so after completing all, or a significant amount, of their course work, thus gaining significant knowledge (Golde, 2000). They frequently leave the institution silently, that is, without giving formal notice (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001); and sometimes they are laden with significant student loan debt and lingering emotional scars (Lovitts, 2001). This silent departure process is marked by a lack of institutional engagement with departing doctoral students (Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006). It is problematic that doctoral students can simply disappear (Haynes, 2008), without any formal notification and/or engagement with support services. Given the substantial investment necessary for doctoral education (Smallwood, 2004), this occurrence is considered “a waste of
valuable resources" for the individual as well as the institution (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

According to Lovitts (2001), multiple individuals, including university administrators, faculty and even students, contribute to the cultivation of an institutional culture that blames departing students for non-completion. We recognize that not all Ph.D. students will finish—nor should they (Cassuto, 2013), however, when only a little more than half of doctoral students earn a Ph.D., it cannot simply be the fault of students. As part of a seven-year national study, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) asked its 18 institutional research partners in the Ph.D. Completion Project (PCP) to institute Ph.D. exit surveys for all departing doctoral students including those who left the university prematurely. The CGS (Sowell, 2009) found of the 1,856 doctoral students who left a university, its institutional partners were more successful at getting Ph.D. completers (n=1406) than non-completers (n=59) to fill out the Ph.D. exit survey. The small sample size of non-completers precluded CGS from comparing non-completers’ experiences and opinions with those who completed the Ph.D.. While national initiatives to understand doctoral attrition focused on the students’ perspective, to affect positive change and reduce doctoral attrition, educational institutions have to look inward at their own cultures and practices. Tinto (2003) argued that while:

Departure from different institutions may share a number of important functional similarities, the specific individual and institutional roots of departure will necessarily differ. While institutions can and should learn from one another's experience, it remains the case that each institution must assess for itself the particular attributes of student departure from its campus. Only in that manner can institutions identify and accurately target specific forms of actions to the task of student retention. Institutional assessment
is, in this fashion, a necessary beginning step in the formulation of an effective retention program (p.5).

Tinto’s call to action focused on each institution’s need to assess student departure as part of its retention strategy.

Although Tinto did not address doctoral student departure directly, this study focused on the silent departure process of our doctoral students at Mid-Atlantic University (MAU). As research partners in the Ph.D. Completion Project, we administered both a paper and an online version of the Ph.D. Exit survey and also experienced a low response rate among MAU’s Ph.D. non-completers. The low response rate challenged us to reframe our thinking about the role of the institution in the silent departure. Instead of asking, ‘why doctoral students leave MAU?’ we focused on why they leave MAU silently. We argued that solutions to the silent departure phenomenon can only be made after the causes of the problems have been fully identified.

A primary purpose of the study was to examine how the pathways and the type of feedback mechanisms/instruments such as withdrawal forms, exit surveys, or exit interviews (hereafter referred to as student voice mechanisms), that institutions provide for departing students contribute to the silent departure phenomenon. Formal student voice mechanisms generally offer students opportunities to provide feedback to the institution or to express grievances. Given the high rate of doctoral attrition, coupled with silent departure, institutions need systematic and ongoing evaluation of institutional practices that impact the quality of their students’ educational experiences.

Students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their departments, faculty, staff, and administrators. Without fear of retaliation via an exit interview (Golde, 2005), departing students can raise the tough issues, which departments, faculty, staff, and
administrators may have been unaware or unwilling to address. The perspectives of these
students might provide richer and more in-depth insights into the strengths and challenges of a
doctoral program that could potentially inform proactive doctoral retention program practices
(Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 1996; 2001). With these insights departments, faculty,
staff, and administrators would be better able to influence change, prioritize goals, allocate
resources, increase student satisfaction, and possibly improve retention.

Over the past decade several researchers (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000, 2005; Lovitts,
2001), called for more support for graduate students, especially providing someone to talk with
when considering the decision to withdraw and knowing what options are available. Some have
recommended that departments (Golde, 2005) and institutions (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000;
Lovitts, 2001) consider using exit interviews. Despite the widespread recommendation to
implement an exit interview, few studies have examined how they have been adopted or
evaluated this practice. Moreover, the literature fails to provide guidance on the use of exit
interviews at the graduate level.

Similar to Lovitts (1996, 2001) and Golde (2000), we employed Hirschman’s (1970)
Exit-Voice-Loyalty (EVL) framework to evaluate the effectiveness of one Mid-Atlantic
University’s (MAU) departure process for doctoral students. We assess the feasibility of the
institution’s Withdrawal Form (WF) as a formal mechanism for departing doctoral students to
voice the discontent or concerns that led to the decision to withdraw. To follow-up and collect
more in-depth data from students who withdrew using a WF, we pilot tested a follow-up Exit
Phone Interview (EPI) as an additional or alternative mechanism for former doctoral students to
give critical feedback to the institution. We now offer an overview of the literature pertaining to
the exit process of doctoral students and a synopsis of the theoretical framework of EVL. This
explanation is followed by a description of the study we conducted and the results. We then discuss the implications for policy, practice, and future research.

**Literature Review**

**Ph.D. Exit Surveys**

At the graduate level Mid-Atlantic University (MAU) and other institutions administer the *Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED)*, an exit survey for doctoral students who complete their degree. This survey, which is sponsored by six federal agencies including the National Science Foundation (NSF), averages a very high response rate. For example, of the 54,904 individuals who received a research doctorate in 2016, 91.8% completed the *Survey of Earned Doctorates* (National Science Foundation, 2018). At MAU as part of the requirements for graduation doctoral students are invited to participate in the annual *Survey of Earned Doctorates* and a Ph.D. Completion Exit Survey (Sowell, 2009). The link to the Ph.D. Completion Exit Survey is also available on MAU’s webpage for doctoral students who plan to withdraw. For the Ph.D. Completion Exit Survey, MAU experiences a high response rate from Ph.D. completers and a low response rate from non-completers, suggesting that the exit process is different for these two groups. Thus, the feedback mechanisms might need to be different as well. For the Ph.D. completers, filling out an exit survey as part of the graduating process might be seen as a welcomed opportunity to share insight on a successful journey. In contrast, for the Ph.D. non-completer the incentive to fill out the survey appears less obvious. Where an online exit survey might work for Ph.D. completers, a personalized exit interview might be a better alternative for Ph.D. non-completers, to share insights as to why their journey was less successful.
Exit Interviews

Exit interviews have been used extensively for a long time by human resources departments in corporations (Izzo, 2016). Beyond an opportunity to gather important information and knowledge from the employee or customer, an exit interview can also be viewed as an opportunity for personal catharsis or a therapeutic experience. It provides a mechanism for departing individuals to voice their frustrations and discontent with the organization. Also, giving disgruntled employees the opportunity to voice their feelings legitimately may prevent them from excessive cynical behavior and possibly harming the reputation of the organization (Jurkiewicz, Knouse, & Giacalone, 2001). Additionally, exit interviews can provide departing employees with information regarding their retirement accounts, health benefits, and other available resources. The organization’s motivation can, therefore, be interpreted as providing an opportunity to relieve any hostilities or tensions (Hutchinson, 2002). Ultimately, the organization can create a win-win situation by allowing employees a chance to give constructive feedback and to leave on a positive note. In particular, Johns and Gorrick (2016) maintained that an exit interview serves to identify not only the push and pull factors of voluntary termination but also the areas in the organization that need improvement. As in the corporate sphere, an exit interview of Ph.D. non-completers in academia could allow for a fuller understanding of the reasons why students leave and more importantly, the areas in the graduate school that need improvement.

Exit Interviews and Doctoral Attrition

Despite the general consensus regarding the value of exit interviews in academia, scholars disagree about who should administer them. Whereas some studies (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001), recommended that exit interviews be administered at the university level
Golde (2005) focused, on departmental interventions since the policies, practices, and norms at the department level have the strongest impact on graduate students’ lives. Nonetheless, a departmental intervention may prove difficult and insufficient particularly because current studies, including Golde (2005), indicated that students often leave silently for fear of retaliation if they share their discontent. Rather than conducting exit interviews at the department level where the problems might exist, graduate students need a safe and confidential space to express their thoughts. We piloted our exit interview at the institutional level because we believed that at the institutional level, students should be able to talk with administrators who will listen, answer questions, interpret policies/procedures, and provide guidance on the appropriate steps to consider for a resolution if the students disclosed conflict that could be remedied if the student wanted to be reinstated or considered starting over in another doctoral department at MAU.

**Theoretical Framework: Exit Voice Loyalty**

Drawing upon economic theory, the Exit Voice Loyalty (EVL) framework developed by Hirschman (1970) described, three strategies used by customers and citizens to respond to dissatisfaction with organizations. Hirschman suggested that, in a competitive marketplace where people have many options, customers are more likely to leave (exit) and move to another organization rather than express displeasure with prices that are too high or with a decline in product quality. Whereas an exit represented an “escape from” displeasure, the term *voice*, sometimes used as a verb and sometimes as a noun, can be understood as more political and a form of protest, in that, it refers to the verbal expression of discontent to the manager or leader of a business or organization. Be it individual or collective, Hirschman considered *voice* to be “any attempt at all to change… an objectionable state of affairs” (p.30). While voice can bring attention to the problem, O'Donnell (1986) extended the voice concept further by making a
distinction between “vertical” and “horizontal” voice. He suggested that it matters to whom the complaints are voiced; vertical voice involves talking to superiors whereas horizontal voice is talking to peers, friends and neighbors. Although each concept can be studied as distinct and separate, the framework has more analytical power when the concepts are viewed as connected rather than mutually exclusive. Dowding, Mergoupis, John, and Vugt (2000) presented, a comprehensive literature review of EVL, they suggested that the relative costs of voice and exit are crucial to any analysis. They offered insight to the following possibility.

An individual could exit and voice simultaneously—a “noisy exit” in which voice is used to advertise one’s exit decision. Or the decision to exit could be taken at a later date following the failure of voice to raise standards (p.476).

In this study, we considered “student voice” to be analogous to “employee voice”. Lovitts (2001), suggested that graduate students were similar to consumers or members of an organization where they could express "their discontent by either ceasing to purchase the product (i.e., education) or leaving the university (exit) or expressing dissatisfaction to some authority (voice)" (p. 32). Similarly, Mark (2013a) viewed students as customers when he suggested that, “students are only satisfied when they have gotten what they paid for: a quality education in a field of their choice with an accompanying credential that is valued in the labour market” (2013a, p.2). When researchers examined to whom departing graduate students voiced their discontent, Golde (2000) and Lovitts (2001) found more examples where students expressed their discontent and plan to leave with fellow students (horizontal voice) instead of university administrators (vertical voice). In some cases however, Lovitts (2001) found evidence of neither horizontal nor vertical voice. In other words, there was no noisy exit as one would have expected with business.
As with exit and voice, for customers, loyalty is another possible response following disappointment with the quality of a product or service. Hirschman defined loyalty as allegiance to or willingness to stay with an organization despite disappointment with product or service. Dowding et al. (2000) viewed this concept of customer loyalty as “brand loyalty” or the “psychological resistance to change”. Rather than viewing loyalty as “static attachment”, Dowding et al. (2000, p. 477) conceptualized loyalty in two distinct ways—the first includes “one’s identification with the object” and the second pertains to “the amount one has invested in that object.” In addition, Barry (1974, p.48) argued that loyalty is more than a reluctance to exit; it can be “a positive commitment” to an organization to make it better.

EVL and Doctoral Attrition

One of the main ways that higher education uses the EVL model is by focusing on the relationships between exit, loyalty, and voice. According to Golde (2000, p.223) “[graduate] students will either leave (exit), conform to the organization by becoming socialized to its norms (loyalty), or speak out against the problem they see (voice)”. This perspective of EVL presented these three concepts as mutually exclusive and supports a silent departure phenomenon (Lovitts 2001), whereby departing doctoral students were seen as “silent leavers, departing without saying good-bye” (Nettles & Millet, 2006, p. 125).

Unlike exit and voice, the concept of loyalty is minimally discussed in the literature on doctoral attrition. When scholars discussed loyalty, they often focused on the total allegiance to organizational norms and practices, even in the face of dissatisfaction (Lovitts, 1996). Lovitts (1996) argued that expression of dissatisfaction is often viewed as a form of disloyalty in the organizational structure and culture of academia. To express dissatisfaction is perceived as a failure to conform to the disciplinary and departmental norms that are expected of a successful
researcher or scholar. In contrast, loyal doctoral students are those who have been socially integrated into the norms and expectations of the department and would persist eventually to the completion of the Ph.D.

Alternatively, we broadly consider two concepts of loyalty, Dowding et al.’s (2000), loyalty to the organization (brand loyalty) and Barry’s (1974) positive commitment, which we interpret to mean loyalty to self in pursuit of the dream of completing a Ph.D. We argue that when students are loyal to self, they might exit their Ph.D. program and re-enroll in a Ph.D. program at another institution. Hence, the individual might not be loyal to the institution but might be loyal to self by realizing the dream of achieving a Ph.D. For example, a student might have left one doctoral program based on financial concerns and re-enrolled in another institution that fully funds all of its doctoral students. Hence, where financial concerns might be considered an individual problem in one circumstance, it might just be a matter of perspective in terms of who is responsible for funding graduate education (Haynes, 2008; Nettles & Millet, 2006).

Moreover, we argue that it is possible to exit a doctoral program, give voice to the discontent, and still be loyal to the university. Students may exit one program and re-enroll into another program at the same university, even if it means starting over. Hence it is possible to exit a program and still be loyal to the university and loyal to realizing your dream as well. For these reasons, we amend the concept of loyalty to include allegiance to self and other higher education institutions. We believe it is possible that the concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty might not be fully understood and could be extended further.
The Study

Context and Setting

MAU is classified as a medium size Doctoral University with Higher Research Activity by the Carnegie Foundation (2017). It enrolls approximately 10,000 undergraduates and 2,500 graduate students. The university offers 24 doctoral degree programs, 23 of which are in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields.

Before we discuss specific student voice mechanisms used to mitigate the silent departure at MAU, it is necessary to provide an understanding of MAU’s rules and definitions. According to the University’s continuous enrollment policy for graduate students, each student has the obligation to enroll every semester (spring and fall) to maintain good academic standing within their program. Failure to register each semester has important implications for financial aid and comes with some negative consequences, which include lack of access to institutional resources such as libraries, labs, and faculty advisors. Students who wish to continue in a degree program but who cannot study in a particular semester or year are encouraged to notify their advisor, Graduate Program Director, or the Graduate School, preferably in writing via an email or a Withdrawal Form. While a leave of absence is better than complete withdrawal, the number of leaves of absence is limited. The student may only be on leave of absence for up to three consecutive semesters after which the student is considered withdrawn (MAU, n.d.).

Methodology and Research Questions

We used a case study research design to examine doctoral students’ departure process at MAU. According to Yin (2009), a case study research design is used when an investigator is interested in examining a contemporary social phenomenon in the context in which it occurs. We employed a convenient sampling strategy to select the case—MAU, an academic institution that
had only one formal student voice mechanism: an online Withdrawal Form (WF) for doctoral
students who wanted to withdraw formally from their programs and the institution. Because this
is essentially a self-study of student voice in MAU’s departure process, we focused on these
questions:

- Why do doctoral students leave silently?
- Why aren’t our doctoral students speaking up? And when they do, what are they
saying, and to whom?
- In what ways are MAU’s student voice mechanisms contributing to the silent
departure phenomenon in doctoral attrition?

This study formed part of the larger CGS’ Ph.D. Completion Project conducted to
examine doctoral attrition. The research population for that study focused on all doctoral
students who left the institution. The Graduate School at MAU posted the Ph.D. Completion
Exit Survey online and mailed a paper version to all doctoral students who graduated and those
who failed to register for two consecutive semesters including those who had previously filled
out a Withdrawal Form (WF). Prior to participating in the Ph.D. Completion Project, MAU had
an online WF form for departing doctoral students to formally announce their decision and
reason for early withdrawal. After that initiative, MAU continued to administer the online
version of the Ph.D. Completion Exit survey and the WF for all departing doctoral students.

Because of the low response rate among Ph.D. non-completers, MAU pilot-tested an Exit Phone
Interview (EPI) to consider adding another student voice mechanism to see if MAU’s Graduate
School could get more participation from Ph.D. non-completers. This pilot intervention was
covered under the larger project’s Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) human subjects’ approved
protocol.
Data Collection and Definitions

To develop and understand the case, we selected multiple data sources and analytic methods. As an administrator in MAU’s Graduate school, the lead researcher had the ability to gain unrestricted access to MAUs administrative records such as student registration records and transcripts. We collected data mainly from three sources: (a) institutional enrollment and exit data, (b) Withdrawal forms (WF) and a (c) pilot study of an Exit Phone Interview (EPI). In addition to these sources, we also relied on the institution’s website to examine MAU’s written policies on its formal departure process. Thus, we combined these sources to triangulate the institution’s role in the silent departure phenomenon.

Research Assumptions and Procedure

To evaluate the value of MAU’s WF to act as a student voice mechanism in mitigating the silent departure, we began by exploring measures of silent departure in the doctoral attrition literature. In this study, silent departure was characterized by a failure to register coupled with a lack of formal notification via a WF. We suspected that most doctoral withdrawals at MAU occurred without formal notification by the student (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). In addition, we determined a “quiet departure” to be a departure in which the student submitted a notice to withdraw (WF) without providing a written reason for leaving. Moreover, when a student provided a written reason and or participated in the EPI, we considered that a “noisy exit” where students voiced their concerns and the institution was able to garner critical feedback. Several researchers in the doctoral attrition literature recommended an exit interview to mitigate the silent departure phenomenon. We believed that, the EPI would be a better tool to solicit salient information than was or is the WF.
Like previous researchers, we used the words attrition, withdrawal, departure, and dropout interchangeably to refer specifically to leaving a doctoral program (Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), 2008; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Sowell, 2009). We relied on the measure of doctoral attrition used for the Ph.D. Completion Project (CGS, 2008; Sowell, 2009). CGS measured attrition based on enrollment and completion of the same graduate program initially undertaken. Hence, if a Ph.D. student left one program and enrolled in another, even if this is within the same department, it was still considered attrition (CGS, 2008; Sowell, 2009). MAU’s aggregated data on doctoral attrition included doctoral students who voluntarily “transferred” to a different department within MAU, enrolled in another doctoral program at a different institution, withdrew from higher education entirely, or were academically terminated from the program. These multiple definitions helped ground this study.

MAU’s overall doctoral attrition from 1998-2016 was calculated from the enrollment records as of fall 2016. Because some of MAU’s doctoral programs offer enrollment both in the fall and spring semesters, therefore we combined the institution’s fall and spring data to calculate the total number of doctoral students enrolled (n=2628) between 1998 and 2016. Based on MAU’s continuous enrollment policy, a non-completer is defined as a doctoral student having more than two consecutive semesters of non-registration. Using this definition, we calculated the number of non-completers over the same time period. Thus, from 1998 to 2016 the population of interest for this study was 1,029 students identified by MAUs administrative records as being non-completers of doctorate programs.

Data Analysis

First, to examine the scope of MAU’s silent departure, we conducted a descriptive analysis of the informal (silent) and formal (Withdrawal Form) exit pathways. We determined the scope and
context of silent departure at MAU by two components: (a) the number of WFs submitted
compared to the number of students who left and (b) the number of WFs with a written reason
for withdrawal compared to the number with no reason provided.

Second, we conducted a content analysis of the student’s expression of voice—
specifically the extent to which students voiced discontent and/or shared their positive
experiences. Both the WF and EPI were designed to give students the opportunity to state the
reason for their withdrawal from MAU, we wanted to know what they said and to whom. On the
WF, in a blank space, departing students were asked to provide a written “Reason for request”;
during the EPI they were asked the question directly. We conducted a content analysis of the
written answers on the WF and the transcripts of the EPI.

Using the contact information from the WF, we followed up with a telephone call. For
those students with valid phone numbers (n=70), we left a message (n=2) or interviewed them
immediately (n=35). One student returned our call and agreed to be interviewed. Another
departing doctoral student who had not filled out a WF agreed to be interviewed based on a
personal invitation from the lead researcher. Thus, we interviewed a total of 37 students.

Prior to the start of the EPI, each participant was asked to give their informed consent to
participate in the research. All participants were also advised of the confidentiality, voluntary
nature and purpose of the study. Two administrators in the Graduate School served as
interviewers for the EPI. Interviewers referred to the answer written (if one was provided) on the
WF and asked the students, if he or she is willing to provide a more robust understanding of that
written answer (voice). We chose a semi-structured interview format to create a comfortable
atmosphere and to avoid making the student feel like our engagement was an interrogation
(Richards & Morse, 2007).
All interviews were conducted by telephone using a standard list of 10 questions and lasted an average of 20-25 minutes. We asked former doctoral students a series of open-ended questions to elicit both positive and negative information about their graduate experience. Immediately upon completion of the telephone interview, field notes and or recordings were immediately transcribed. The series of open-ended questions included on the interview protocol were informed by the sensitizing concepts of the EVL framework. To explore the concept of voice, the EPI interview process began with the following question; “I see that you have filled out a WF and you listed ‘x’ as your reason for leaving the university, is there any other reason [for] leaving MAU?” This introduction allowed the student to express the most salient aspects of the experience. The next set of questions probed the student about specific themes including institutional fit and expectations, advisor relationship, departmental support, ease of transition to graduate school, and funding.

Unlike the WF, the EPI explored the concept of loyalty, based on the combination of the original version from the EVL framework and Barry’s (1974) extended version presented earlier. The following questions focused on our concept of loyalty. “Did you decide to enroll at another university? ”“What will you do differently?” These questions were designed to give students an opportunity to reflect on alternative pathways that they may or may not have considered at the time of departure. The final set of questions asked the student to describe what she or he liked most and least about the university. A question that directly assesses loyalty to the university asked students if they would recommend the university to others. Following each interview one interviewer took written notes and transcribed them immediately afterward, whereas the other recorded the conversations and transcribed them later.
Both case study research design and content analysis comprised of a multistage iterative process, which involved planning, designing, preparing, collecting and analyzing. First, we read a printed copy of each interview and WF, making preliminary notes in the margins and drafting a summary of each participant’s individual experience. Next, we transferred the transcripts into NVivo qualitative analysis software to create categories, assign descriptive and topical codes to pertinent statements, and identify cross-cutting themes and patterns that emerged from the data (Richards & Morse, 2007). To synthesize data contained in documents such as the MAU’s website, WFs, and the EPI transcripts, we engaged in an inductive iterative process of carefully reading and rereading the documents. Although rather time-consuming, “this process yields data—excerpts, quotations, or entire passages—that are then organized into major themes, categories, and case examples” (Bowen, 2009, p.28).

**Results**

When we examined the scope of the silent departure process at MAU, we began by focusing on the students’ departure process and asking what voice mechanisms departing doctoral students use to withdraw from the institution. According to MAU Graduate School’s written withdrawal policy available on MAU’s website “Written notice of a withdrawal request is required by the Graduate School. Withdrawal Forms are available for download.” Figure 1 is based on institutional data for 19 doctoral cohorts who began doctoral studies between 1998 and 2016. We found that of 1,029 doctoral students who left the university between 1998 and 2016, the majority (n=878) did not use any student voice mechanism; they simply did not register for another semester. This failure to register suggests that the student just left or dropped out of his or her program but it fails to specify the student’s future intentions.
**The Withdrawal Form**

Since we were concerned about the effectiveness of the WF to provide voice to departing students, we focused on the form itself. A small percentage (14.7%) of students filled out MAU’s WF prior to their departure. The WF presents both opportunities and challenges in that it could either be seen as an opportunity for an expression of voice or a suppression of voice or both. When the student made use of the WF the graduate school was notified of the departing student’s intention. However, if the student did not provide a written reason, the institution was unable to determine why. Table 1 lists reasons that 27 Ph.D. non-completers noted on the WF for leaving MAU. Still, the results indicate that of the departing students who filed a WF 123 left the ‘reason for leaving’ section blank. Of the students who provided a written reason for leaving (n=27), wrote short sentences or two words. Based on content analysis of the written reasons we find that the reasons fall into six broad categories that include: Quiet/no reason (n=123), Lost of interest (n=9), Personal, Health, & Family (n=4), Work responsibilities (n=4), Advisor/Committee Challenges (n=3), Transfer (n=3) and Other (n=4). The most common written reason listed was “losing interest” (n=9).

**The Exit Phone Interview**

With respect to the most frequent written answer on the WF “losing interest”, we asked students to elaborate on their answers during the EPI. Despite a common written response, the nine students provided more in-depth answers that pointed to a myriad reasons for leaving. For example, one student who wrote ‘lost interest” mentioned his advisor’s departure from the university as his primary reason for withdrawal. He stated:

I had all the coursework done, and my advisor left the university… but [MAU] had the grant [under which he was funded and working for]. But once the grant finished I got a
lot of roadblocks from him [the advisor] even though another faculty member decided to step in as chair and my old advisor would still be on the committee.

Two more students who also wrote “losing interest” on their WF, referenced their age during the interview as a factor in their decision to leave; both were over 50. After the first semester and more self-reflection, one of the two responded:

The faculty in the program were intrigued by my master’s thesis and thought I should pursue it further to the Ph.D., but I could not do the comprehensive exams. They [the faculty] thought I could produce a quality Ph.D. thesis, but I lacked interest in jumping through hoops.

When compared to the written answers on the WF, the EPI offered more in-depth and precise answers for the student’s premature departure. In addition, we found a lack of shared meaning among the nine individuals who wrote “losing interest” as a reason for withdrawal.

Moreover, interviewers administering the EPI were able to obtain reasons for leaving from ten students who left the WF blank. Although these students did not provide a written reason for leaving they readily volunteered a reason for their premature departure during the interview. One student reported that she failed her compulsory exams and was dismissed.

Another who shared that she left after the first semester said the following:

I didn’t have the heart for it, I thought the program was very good, but I think I wanted to get a Ph.D. to give me something to do, I work in IT. But I didn’t want to do research in Information Systems.

Although the EPI would have been almost impossible without the WF, we did manage to interview one student without it. When asked about the WF, she disclosed a lack of awareness that MAU had a WF and that she had not filled it out. While the WF is readily available on
MAU’s website, part of the silent departure might be due to a lack of awareness about MAU’s formal withdrawal process.

**Vertical and Horizontal Voice**

A content analysis of the EPI transcripts showed that, as a student voice mechanism, the EPI was effective in providing the institution with critical feedback. We learned that slightly more than half (19 of 37) of the departing students had discussed their decision with someone prior to leaving MAU. With this information we were able to distinguish with which type of voice (vertical or horizontal) students had engaged in prior to their withdrawal from MAU. Whereas *vertical voice* involves talking to superiors, *horizontal voice* is talking to peers, friends and neighbors. The greatest number of students had spoken with their advisor (n=7), others with the Graduate Program Directors (n=5), the Graduate Program coordinator (n=2), other administrators (n=2), or people outside MAU, such as a former undergraduate advisor (n=1). Some students had discussed their options with more than one administrator.

Other critical issues uncovered from the transcripts showed that two students lacked a clear understanding of the MAU’s institutional hierarchy. Part of the issue was confusion about with whom they should speak. When discussing which administrator had counseled the student about the decision to leave the institution, these students were unclear about the role of the administrator and the administrator’s position in the university’s hierarchy. For example, during the interview we asked students to reflect on their experience when speaking to someone about the decision to leave and knowing what the options were prior to leaving. From those comments we see clear examples of students’ apparent uncertainty about the institutional hierarchy. One student responded:
I guess, maybe when I tried to get a meeting with the chair and the advisor...the Graduate Program Director was my advisor since I didn’t have an advisor, I called the department because he generally has an open door policy--I realized I needed a mediator.

When the interviewer pointed out the department’s hierarchy of Graduate Program Director (GPD), Chair, and Graduate Program Coordinator (GPC), the student went on to say, “Well I am not sure what I meant... I meant the person who was the chair or the person in charge of my fellowship. It was pretty unclear...” Similarly, another said, “I am not sure what a GPD or GPC is”. When these roles were explained, the student responded “No, I did not discuss it with anyone in the Graduate School”. When the interviewer clarified that these administrators were located in the department, the student confirmed having discussed her situation with two department-level individuals and listed them by name.

Reflecting horizontal voice, three students mentioned that they had discussed the decision to leave with their friends. One student who engaged in both vertical and horizontal voice said, “I talked to my peers and saw that they had a vision for their lives and what they wanted to do with their Ph.D., and [I] realized that wasn’t me… My advisor told me to take a leave of absence first, and I did, and then I decided to totally withdraw.”

**Exit Phone Interview and Loyalty**

A review of the EPI transcripts also disclosed positive factors about the institution. One of those factors was brand loyalty to the institution and to the pursuit of the Ph.D. The results support Dowding et al.’s conceptualization that loyalty and exit were not an all or nothing proposition. We found that, even if some students had decided to give up on pursuing a doctorate entirely, others had just decided to give up on pursuing a Ph.D. at this particular institution. Despite withdrawing, we found that the majority (n=20) departing students were
staunch supporters of the university as a whole, while others (n=5) were less supportive of the
department within the university. When asked directly if they would recommend the university
to their friends, 20 departing students expressed positive sentiments of loyalty to MAU and
identified themselves as staunch supporters of the university. “...I do it all the time; I extol the
virtues of the place....I recommend MAU to people for themselves and for their kids as well.”
Departing students’ loyalty is based on many positive aspects of the university which include a
welcoming environment of inclusion, “What has been done for minority, highly qualified
minorities is interesting;” location, “It was so convenient because it was between work and
home;” and rigor of the coursework, “at MAU you get a very good education. They teach what
you need to know and they are very rigorous with real work situations.” Identifying an
administrator in the Graduate School who had helped her, one student offered her endorsement
by saying, “I would recommend it because I thought the campus was student friendly and woman
friendly. And I would recommend MAU for kids who are interested in math and science. I am
going out with a good feeling about MAU.”

In addition, we found that negative experiences in their doctoral program did not
necessarily affect students’ feelings about MAU. When asked whether they would recommend
the university to other graduate students, thirteen qualified their answer as one student did by
saying, “I would encourage them about the university as a whole, but I would definitely not
recommend anyone to that department.” When asked if the student had decided to enroll at
another university, one expressed loyalty to the university by saying, “No, if it was going to
happen it was going to happen at MAU.” Another suggested that the only reason he would
consider attending another university was “if MAU didn’t offer what I was looking for like a
management degree an M.B.A. or Law degree.”
By examining the institution’s formal withdrawal policies and practices, we believe that this self-study provides a new perspective on the silent departure phenomenon for doctoral students who withdraw without a degree. Drawing upon the framework of Exit, Voice, Loyalty (EVL), we conducted a self-assessment of our formal departure process and asked in what ways our student voice mechanisms contribute to the silent departure of our doctoral students. We explored the effectiveness of the institutional withdrawal form to act as a voice mechanism for students who withdraw, and we pilot tested the feasibility of a follow-up exit phone interview. The results of our analysis of MAU’s doctoral withdrawal process confirmed that a majority of MAU departing doctoral students did not fill out MAU’s online Withdrawal Form. While filling out the WF might be efficient at notifying the graduate school of the student’s departure it is not effective if the departing students do not make use of it. Though, this departure process is flawed, this research is not suggesting that the WF should be eliminated altogether. Beyond posting the WF on line, administrators and departing students should be made aware of the WF. The feasibility of the EPI was tied directly to WF. When and if students fill out a WF silence is mitigated because it provides notification of the student’s departure. This behavioral option of filling out a WF could be considered a quiet departure because many students leave the reason for withdrawal blank. When students provided a written reason, the reasons were often limited to brief, two-word, safe, generic answers. Conversely, the follow-up EPIs provided more in-depth information about former students’ experiences in their respective department. Instead of focusing on the challenges to implementing an EPI, efforts should be focused on improving the departure process. Interacting with students prior to and after their departure can still provide institutions with valuable information and knowledge if the institution wants feedback on how to
bring about change. Given the extent of the phenomenon, the high rate of doctoral attrition, and the increasing accountability demands from state legislatures, we believe efforts to mitigate silent departure have important implications for the future of graduate retention for other institutions as well as ours. We propose that examination of this problem within the context of an individual institution has the potential to shine the light on department- specific systemic problems and departmental successes. Instead of relying on national studies, institutions can develop recruitment and retention strategies that are specific to their environment.

From our participation in the larger Ph.D. Completion project along with the results of this project, we found compelling evidence that asking departing students to complete a Ph.D. Exit Survey or a WF, though sufficient to give formal notice of their departure, is insufficient to help institutions really understand why their students decide to discontinue their doctoral studies. Therefore we suggest that an exit interview is important for understanding issues relating to departure—but even it is not enough. Although these student voice mechanisms are available and rather easy to implement, our descriptive results confirmed previous researchers’ results on the silent departure of doctoral students, i.e., too many students discontinue their studies by simply not registering for the following semester (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005; Lovits, 2001; Nelson & Lovitts, 2001).

With the data we gathered, we realized that our departing graduate students’ experiences provide insight that would be useful for our retention efforts. The reasons for departure imparted in EPIs helped us to better understand the areas in the institution that need our attention. Moreover, the EPI also helped us to evaluate the inadequacy of the WF as the only student voice mechanism to explain the silent departure phenomenon. Drawing a connection between employee voice and employee retention, Spencer (1986) found a positive relationship between
the number of voice mechanisms and the levels of employee’s expectancies for problem resolution and perceived effectiveness of an organization’s procedures for problem resolution.

When viewed through the lens of EVL, Hirschman’s theory (1970) narrows the gap in helping to understand both the institutional and the individual factors that help explain why doctoral students silently leave the university. While the notion of the EVL framework dictates that departing doctoral students have chosen Exit as the main response to their dissatisfaction, Voice and Loyalty still play an active role in the departure process.

Outside of the department, the WF and EPI provide the institution with formal student voice mechanisms for assessing the experiences of departing graduate students. From these interviews, we were able to see that students relied on both vertical and horizontal voice to express their discontent and inform others such as peers, administrators, and advisors, of their plans to depart. That some students had discussed their decision to leave with members of the university suggests that ‘Exit’ was not a decision reached either quickly or without careful consideration. This protracted period of contemplating the exit decision, the time between the student’s decision to leave and the actual departure date, offers a crucial opportunity to gather important information from the student. Knowing how long it takes students to act on their decisions to depart is valuable because retention is still possible. That students communicate with different people before leaving suggests that it might be possible to retain them if we can resolve their issues early enough. For example, “a lack of interest” might be an indication that the institution needed to better market the potential benefits of the degree. Frequent, request for leave of absences and extensions could be an early indicator of attrition.

As in the Spencer (1986), and Johns and Gorrick (2016) studies, this research reveals an important connection between exit and voice. We argue that these constructs are not one-
dimensional. When taken together, we found that the exit process for MAU students can involve all of three behavioral concepts: exit, voice, and loyalty, either individually or collectively.

According to Hirschman, (1992) loyalty does not encourage exit as an option even when an employee has attractive offers. We disagree having found that Hirschman’s concept of loyalty, defined as the allegiance to the organization, can be extended to members who leave. Whereas Dowding et al. (2000) extended Hirschman’s concept of loyalty, they have yet to examine this revised construct empirically. We found no other studies to use this concept of loyalty to mean not merely a commitment to the organization, but also a commitment to self. Moreover, contrary to doctoral attrition literature which views exit, voice, and loyalty in mutually exclusive terms, our findings suggest that doctoral departing students can simultaneously exit, voice their concerns, and still be loyal to the institution and self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that some of the institutional responsibility for mitigating the silent departure phenomenon at any doctoral institution can be successfully tackled. No exit interview intervention can be implemented successfully without a clear institutional commitment to communicate and act upon the findings. The implications of this case are simultaneously encouraging and discouraging. On one hand, the case highlights the potential benefits of examination of the problem at the individual institutional level. On the other hand, the case illustrates the difficulties with a lack of generalizability. Nonetheless, Yin (2009) argued that scientific facts are rarely deduced from a single study; qualitative findings are often confirmed through multiple studies, using a myriad of methods, and in different settings. Hence, Yin might argue that this case study will strengthen generalizability to other institutions wanting to conduct their own examination of the problem and their institutional responses.
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Figure 1  1998-2916 Doctoral departure at MAU
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Written Reasons for Leaving</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Space left blank</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Interest</td>
<td>Losing interest</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, Health &amp; Family</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some family issues</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medical reasons</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health problems in pursuing the degree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Responsibilities</td>
<td>Work responsibilities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=4)</td>
<td>Combined workload/academic workload too much</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Someone at my job quit and had to take over some of his or her responsibilities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military deployment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor/Chair Challenges</td>
<td>Had an issue with an advisor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=3)</td>
<td>I had a bad experience with an advisor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General dissatisfaction with the program and differences with advisor and department chair</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer</td>
<td>Transferring to a different program at a different school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=3)</td>
<td>Received a fellowship award from [name of another university]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leaving to attend another university</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Changes/refocus of professional and academic plans</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=4)</td>
<td>I no longer want to pursue a degree from the university</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leaving the area</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relocate to [name of another state]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>N =150</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>